

“Grace Upon Grace” – John 1:14-18 – Christmas 2 – Jan 2, 2011

What an interesting Sunday this is! Not because it's the day after New Years Day, at the end of a confusing week. Neither is it interesting because it's some particular high and holy Sunday. Today is interesting because it is one of those rare occasions when the Lectionary – the suggested readings for the church year – calls for “The Second Sunday after Christmas.” Usually we would be celebrating Epiphany on this particular Sunday in the church year, but because the actual day of Epiphany – Jan 6 – comes late in the week, there is some disagreement among people who claim to be printing the Revised Common Lectionary about which Sunday will be used for which particular church festival. Since I have the option to choose, this year we will be using the readings today for the Second Sunday after Christmas.

Having this particular Sunday included in the church year is, I believe, a good thing. By doing so we have an opportunity to reflect just a little bit longer and deeper about the meaning of Christmas – about the foundations of our faith in Christ and what those events mean for us.

Over the past few weeks, during the Advent and Christmas seasons we have heard the classic Christmas narratives of the trip to Bethlehem, the birth in the stable, and about angels and shepherds. This extra Sunday gives us the occasion to hear John's version of the birth of Christ. Although people often believe that John has no birth story in his gospel, he does. It is not the same kind of birth story that we see in Luke and Matthew; indeed it is only half a verse. Nevertheless John gives perhaps the most powerfully succinct summary of that birth and what it means for us all in one short phrase: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” This declaration has such radical and profound implications for our faith that we should take a moment or two to consider it in some depth.

Just as a quick review, we need to do a little comparison here of the openings to the four gospels. Recall that Mark's gospel – the earliest of the four – begins abruptly with John the Baptist bursting out of the wilderness. No birth story, no family history, no clue as to who Jesus was other than the acclamation from John the Baptist. Both Matthew and Luke seem to have felt compelled to answer some questions about Jesus' earthly origins – where he was born, who his family was, where he grew up, and address a few other developing concerns such as how could Jesus be both Son of Man and Son of God at the same time. Both Matthew and Luke provide a genealogy for Jesus: Matthew links him back to Abraham, providing a solid connection with the Israelite faith; Luke links Jesus back to Adam, linking him with the entire human race.

John addresses similar faith problems in the early church in a similar and yet distinctly different way, taking Jesus' genealogy back to beyond the beginning of time, right to the very beginning with God. For John the link with humanity was truly a miracle and yet as real as our own existence: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us.”

All four gospel authors did deal with other questions as well, and one of the big questions was over the relative supremacy between Jesus and John the Baptist. For example, part of the evidence revealing those problems is the insertion by John not once but three times that John the Baptizer was most definitely NOT the messiah, NOT the one foretold in Jewish scripture. There would, of course, be no reason for him to insert these negative affirmations unless there was a significant competing movement that saw John the Baptizer as the messiah instead of Jesus.

A more subtle issue of conflict or contention that John seems to address with his radical statement of the Word becoming flesh would be the questions relating to how it could be possible that Jesus was indeed “God's only Son”, of just how someone could claim to be both fully holy (“one with God”) and fully human at the same time. For example, one of the variations of these questions was “did Jesus start out being human, and was elevated or raised to

being the Son of God through a kind of holy adoption?” It should be clear that John was attempting to forestall this particular question by affirming that Jesus was one with God long before he was even born (“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” – John 1:1) So why then, not even a hundred years after the events of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, did John feel it necessary to begin his account of the meaning of those events with an unequivocal declaration of the oneness of Jesus with God?

To answer that question it is really only necessary to look around today at the logical (or illogical?) extensions of some of those early significant questions. Outside the church of course we see skepticism ranging from mildly uncaring to rabidly antagonistic, from amused tolerance to outright hostility. Many within the church claim sadly that this represents a unique-in-history falling away from the beliefs of the church, while others within the church claim it is a natural progression resulting from the church having lost its original purpose and call, mistakenly equating a “Christian” nation or society as the man-made implementation of the Kingdom.

Even within the church the questions of the relationship between the divinity and the humanity of Jesus have resulted in widely differing understandings, and worse yet, divisions. On the one hand there are groups of people within the church – whole denominations, even – who understand Jesus as really only human. Mind you, a really, REALLY good human, sort of a super-Ghandi, or a benevolent Buddha, but only human nonetheless. It is hard for me at least to see how they can find God’s grace in such an answer. A model for behaviour? Perhaps, but not offering the kind of radical grace that makes everything ok between me and God, the kind of grace Jesus proclaimed.

On the other hand, there are those who elevate Jesus to such a position of holiness that there is no room for his humanity. This is the position of much of the ultra-conservative part of the church, who from a kind of cherry-picking bibliolatry have derived a Jesus whom they could not imagine as burping or carrying out any of the other normal human indelicacies! It is as difficult to find God’s grace in this answer, for such an understanding of Jesus as total divine and in no way merely human presents us with a ghostly figure that is little more than a smoke-and-mirrors trick of a capricious god. No radical grace of complete reconciliation there, either.

That is why this anchor-point proclamation by John as he opens his gospel is so important, so profound. The Word, the Logos, the life-force that the Greeks and Gnostics recognized as divine, Yahweh that the Jews recognized as God, became flesh – and lived among us. In this outlandish, radical affirmation John reminds us that Jesus was at one and the same time both fully divine – one with God – and fully human – in the sweaty, painful, tempted, carnal flesh that we all know too well. This is the linchpin of our Christian faith. This is the proclamation that affirms that God has acted in a way in Jesus the Christ as in no other person. This is the foundation upon which all of the rest of our faith is built. When we hear Jesus quoted as saying “I have come that you might have life, and life abundant” we are assured that he was making this statement not as a merely a good person nor as merely a remote and detached voice from heaven. In Jesus’ declaration that he would ask the Father to send the Comforter, the Holy Spirit we are assured that we are left with more than a comforting memory and model of a really good man. In the affirmation of the Pentecost event in Acts we see that promise fulfilled.

So what difference does this – or should this – understanding of John’s profound declaration of Jesus’ total divinity and total humanity make in our lives? John also gives us a clue here. “and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” he concludes the pivotal affirmation. But John goes on, to also declare, “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” Aha! We have received grace upon grace. What is this

“grace” that we have received? It’s a term we toss around with great abandon, but I suspect few can define it clearly. Within a Christian context we understand grace to be the infinite love, mercy, favour, and goodwill shown to humankind by God. More specifically, it is the reconciliation between us and God in and through Christ, offered freely by God simply because God chose to do so. You may be familiar with the “assurance of pardon” that I proclaim following our prayers of approach – praise and confession – near the beginning of our worship service. This is not a statement that “I hope God hears us and he’s ok with it” but instead an affirmation made in the full assurance that what John said about Jesus, and what Jesus declared about God, were true.

So here we stand, or sit, as the case may be, full of grace – full of love and forgiveness, mercy and favour. Does this not suggest then what impact John’s statements should have on our lives? Filled with an assurance that we are forgiven by God in Christ we are energized to forgive ourselves and others. Called to follow by the one we recognize as being one with God and yet one with us also, we are encouraged to heed his call and offer ourselves in loving service to others, showing through practical human activities – such as feeding the hungry, healing the sick, comforting the lonely – showing the divine love of God active in us. Filled with grace, we may in turn make Christ known to others, that they may also find the Father made known in him.

“The Word became flesh and lived among us.” Thank God for such a radical, carnal grace upon grace that gave us life and life abundant, in and through Jesus Christ, our Lord, and Saviour.