

I Christmas Year C 2018

This Sunday the lectionary gurus move us out of the Gospel of Luke, and they assign to us a reading from the Gospel of John... Not just any reading. This is the prologue... the famous prologue that lays out in poetic form, in imaginative reverie, the overarching theology of this Gospel. Throughout the three year cycle of the lectionary year we read principally from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These are the so-called the synoptic Gospels, synoptic meaning "same lens." You may remember that Matthew and Luke are using Mark's narrative, mark being the oldest Gospel, as a guide for their gospels... These synoptic gospels are Aristotelean rhetoric... Rhetoric, that is, their purpose is to persuade their audience to action. That's what rhetoric does. In particular they are written to persuade their audience to a renewed practice of Torah... how to live their lives according to their faith; their faith embodied in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

John's Gospel is not rhetoric. It is a genre unto itself. I would call it a 'poetic theological treatise'. Where the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke seek to encourage their hearers to imitate the life and ministry of Jesus by a telling of what Jesus does.... John's energy is all about who Jesus is.... Where he stands in the theological pantheon over the course of history; his philosophical pedigree, as

it were. John's Gospel, as I have told you, was not received without controversy. It was the last of the four Gospels to be accepted into the official canon of scripture. Some scholars suggest that the early church fathers cast a suspicious eye on this gospel because the community which produced it was considered borderline gnostic, that is, it seemed a secret and an exclusive group, a cult, claiming to have exclusive insight into the Jesus phenomenon. Other scholars argue that this Gospel was highly docetic, that is, it privileged Jesus' purported divinity over his humanity. I think the controversy centered on the fact that this gospel was considered by the early church authorities as outside the Semitic, Jewish tradition. Early on the followers of Jesus were Jews, practicing Judaism. Early on, the Jesus movement was a re-articulation of the liberation theology that so characterized the Jewish faith over biblical history. But John's Gospel is a departure from that venerable tradition. Indeed, there is a not so subtle tension depicted in this gospel between the community following Jesus and the Jewish authorities....John was written later than the decidedly Jewish Synoptic Gospels,... and this gospel was much more cosmopolitan; more intellectual. It arose from the Greek academy, the orthodox means of education throughout the Roman Empire, inherited from the erstwhile conquering Greeks who preceded Roman occupation. John's theology is formulated by classical Greek thought. Ironically, it

was the Gospel of John that put Christianity on the map of the Mediterranean world. It is John's Gospel that gave rise to the Christian theology that was made the theology of the Empire, and thus made a religion out of a social and economic movement sprung from a lone outpost in a corner of the Empire in Palestine.

So today I want to reflect on the prologue of this gospel (I'm going to go all English major on you!)...perhaps make some theological sense of it; or at least offer you something to think about... We've had plenty of narrative action over the past six months in Mark: Healings, miracles, preaching, and teaching. But today we're going to reflect theologically. There are only two Sundays in the entire Church year in which theology per se is the subject matter. The first is Trinity Sunday, the first Sunday after Pentecost; and the second is today, the first Sunday of Christmas, when we read the prologue to John's treatise on the theological significance of the Christ. There's an old joke among clergy that if one preaches on either of these two topics for more than two minutes then one is bound to commit heresy. So here goes.

I said this Gospel was formed by Greek thought... and to be specific, it is a re-articulation of Platonic thought. Plato's premise, at the risk of over-simplifying, is that the things of heaven may be known by observing things in earth; that

earthly things are outward and visible signs of things eternal. Earth is a reflection of heaven. And not just observing, but experiencing; that experience is itself an outward sign of the divine experience. The premise is that we know something of the divine life by experiencing human life. Plato's consummate example is the polis, the city-state. The egalitarian order of the democratic city-state for Plato is a reflection of the order of heaven. Humankind for Plato has the capacity to enact God's will on earth; to order the chaos, as it were. And the principal means for Plato is justice. In fact, that was the original title to Plato's Republic... Ta Dika.... Justice. So justice enacted on earth for Plato and his followers is a reflection of the justice that rules the cosmos.

Jesus for the Platonist writers of John's Gospel is the outward and visible sign of who God is. He is a man, but a man who bears the image of God, since the beginning of time... He is God-ness in the flesh. And for John Jesus is the symbol of all humanity... that humanity bears God's image, since the beginning; that humankind has the capacity to act on behalf of God. The prologue of this Gospel begins the same way the creation story begins. "In the beginning." That phrase wouldn't be lost on the audience... So the gospel of Jesus Christ according to John is at its heart a creation story. "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. All things came into being through him, and

without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.”

The implication is that we humans bear the light of God; and that we humans are an intimate part of the process of creation. In other words the world is still being created, and we have a say in it. Think on that.... That is why any and all issues that affect our common life are our responsibility as people of faith. We don't have the luxury of living apart from the world's struggles. We are duty bound as co-creators no less to be a creative and imaginative voice in the world's becoming.

So I'm getting to my point, I think. A deeply held belief of mine. I used the word 'Imaginative'. Could it be that the light of humanity to which John refers is the human imagination? And could it be that the imagination is what we share in common with God: the creative impulse; the capability of seeing the Truth; the life force of the universe? Some might call it conscience or consciousness. I call it imagination. There is warrant for such a premise throughout literature: It is the resourceful imagination that propels Odysseus along his journey home. It is his imagination that forms his identity, clarifies his values; gives him insight and perspective, and endurance. It is his imagination that brings him to his true self.

Dante describes the cosmic battle between heaven and hell as taking place in the every day: Heaven, Hell, and purgatory all the same place; and it is the imagination that gives orientation to the journey into the depths of hell and then into paradise. It is the imagination that guides his journey, a journey common to our humanity.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the great English poet of the Romantic period, and a formidable theologian, argued that the imagination is one and the same as the Holy Spirit. That sounds like John's Gospel, right?... The light and life of the world is the light of humankind; the imagination, the light of humankind. At its heart imagination is about possibility; and God is all about possibility; not a planner, not a plan, but possibility. And if life is all about improvisation in the midst of possibility, then imagination is essential. In his apology to the puritans, the fundamentalists of his day, Coleridge argued that it is not scripture that animates the imagination. It is the reverse. It is the imagination that gives life to scripture. In other words, even God's Holy word without the engaged imagination, the inspiration of the Spirit, as it were... even our sacred writings are dead without the imagination. But Coleridge goes much further. In his poetry he claims that it is the imagination that is our salvation and our sustenance. It is the basis of our hope and our determination. It is the source of perception and knowledge and

beauty and truth. Without it the world around us is lifeless and void. Harold Bloom calls Coleridge's poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, a hymn to the imagination. Imagination, Spirit... the life force; and it is resilient, and it perseveres.

Hear the words of Wallace Stevens, perhaps the greatest of American poets from the poem *The Idea of Order at Key West*.... He's describing a woman singing by the seashore: "She sang beyond the genius of the sea.... It was her voice that made the sky acutest at its vanishing. She measured to the hour its solitude. She was the single artificer of the world in which she sang. And when she sang, the sea, whatever self it had, became the self that was her song, for she was the maker. Then we, as we beheld her striding there alone, knew that there was never a world for her except the one she sang, and singing made." For Stevens it is the song, human artifice, that orders the sea. The sea in all of its terror and beauty is formless without the song. Artists know this. Prophets know this.

In the beginning was the imagination of God.... And God made us in God's image to bear that light to the world, and so create it. Brothers and sisters, the engine of the imagination is Love.... And it is our song of Love that will create the world according to God's dream for it; a dream being improvised still. Crafting a

song takes hard work, and persistence, and courage. It requires vision and revisions; but love is the particular song we sing, as best we can carry the tune....

Love is our song, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever.