

More Sermon Notes for Christmas (St. John)

In the beginning was the word (gospel)

Strictly, this Sunday we should be keeping John the Evangelist. Where else should we begin but as he begins his Gospel? I think that as John shows no sign of knowing Greek philosophy anywhere else, we should assume the mental equipment he brought to the opening of the gospel was Hebrew, albeit expressed in a fairly simple Greek. The strongest reason for this is that he echoes the opening of Genesis “in the beginning God made heaven and earth” (at least as the Greek translation rendered it – there are problems with the Hebrew). And another reference is to psalm 33.6: “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made”. The psalm incidentally continues to associate the uttering of the word with the making of the earth: “he spake and it was done, he commanded and it stood fast.”

The difficult word, if anything, is “beginning”. The Hebrew of Genesis is a derivative of the word for “head”; Paul in Colossians 1.15-20 plays with possible senses of the word. Beginning in time is only one of those meanings; in Genesis, time as we know it (measured by sun, moon and stars) only starts on the fourth “day”. That is when time was made. So the Word was active before time and is logically prior to it. And, says John, not just to time but to “anything made that was made”, for “all things were made by him”. Now neither John nor Paul regarded the creation as the starting point of their faith. Nor did the Jews. Because God has imposed himself on the created order in the Old Covenant at Sinai, making that covenant with Israel (and giving words of teaching) it is an inference that he is Lord over the created order and so gave it being and sustains it (and will also judge and ultimately destroy it, as we learn in Advent). Because God has imposed himself on the created order in the New Covenant in Jesus, who is the Word of God uttered among us, it is an inference that he is that same Word which spoke the heavens and the earth into being. (And that is why his words of teaching matter to us, incidentally.)

“And the word was with God, and the word was God”. Both John and Paul were firm Jewish believers in the One God. John might perhaps have stopped at “with God”, which is true of many faithful servants of God. But he did not. (The Greek might be rendered “towards God” rather than “with God”, but I suspect John did not map Hebrew and Greek prepositions as tidily as the pedantic translator would wish. The relationship is much the same.) He might have said the word was godlike (only one more letter in Greek!) but he did not. For these lesser assertions would only be a continuation of the Old Covenant, as if the work of Jesus were merely reminding us of what had already been given. No, there is the promise of a New Covenant, and it is effectively a new creation. If we benefit from the new heart of flesh to replace in us the old heart of stone, as was promised in Ezekiel, this is much more than a reminder. It is a bigger irruption than before, and indeed a permanent one. Rabbinic Judaism tried to avoid confessing God quite coming to earth on Sinai, or the elders quite encountering him in heaven; but there is no holding back this time.

“And the word became flesh and pitched his tent among us”. I have translated rather literally, but the idea of the “tent” is that of the Tabernacle in the Old Covenant, the outward sign of God's presence with his people, the tent of meeting. (I follow William Temple here.) Let there be no doubt, Jesus was palpable. Compare 1 John 1.1: “That which was from the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we beheld, and our hands handled, concerning the Word of life.” John has all the evidence one could need for the entire humanity of Jesus. John occasionally hints that he knows of the nativity stories, but for him, if you appreciate the imperfection and the promises of the Old Covenant (and incidentally but secondarily the books in which these are described) which suggest what this birth means, then how it happened is secondary edifying detail. Jesus was human; therefore he was born. (I do not know whether John knew the gospels of Matthew and Luke; they might not even have been written at the time he was writing. Their nativity stories too are theology not reportage.)

Jesus was entirely human; and yet in him God (and nothing less than God) has visited his people. But not in the way of a brief encounter; God has in Christ set up a relationship with man which endures. In heaven, as an eternal relationship. On earth, for as long as he finds faith on earth.

The start of John's gospel is one of the places in the New Testament where the key issues of who Jesus was, how he relates to his Father, so how we are saved and why Christianity should matter to anybody are made visible. We should not try to avoid these issues.