

Christmas Day 2009

As one looks at the lessons set for the Christmas services one is struck by their diversity. I can understand why the Isaiah readings – both at this morning's service and at the midnight service – were chosen. But the NT reading – last night we heard from the letter to Titus – which is never read on any Sunday during the year and then this morning that strange rather long and decidedly theological reading from Hebrews which seems to suck all the tinsel out of Christmas. And the Gospel readings... Well, last night we heard the birth narrative as told by Luke and that is fine, and as it should be, after all we are celebrating the birth of Jesus. That reading is filled with all the images of Christmas – Mary and Joseph, the baby in the manger, the sheep and the shepherds, the angels and angel's choirs. But this morning's reading from John chapter 1; appears to be pure philosophy and when you consider that the majority of people who never normally come to Church come on Christmas Day, is it wise for the Church to get theological and all philosophical on a day like today?

What we must remember is that these two readers are both "prefaces". They set the scene for the rest of the book that follows them. And Christmas must be seen as a "preface" for the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. Christmas must not only be seen as the birth of Jesus but rather a preface to his life, mission and ministry.

The preface in the Hebrews reading starts out by saying:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things ... He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being... When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs."

It is very appropriate that we leap from the birth narratives of the Christmas Midnight service to the full, exalted maturity of the Hebrews passage overnight! It is a pity that so few of us attend both services, thus we miss out on sermons both following the birth narrative (last night) **and** (today) delving into the mysteries and wonders of the Letter to the Hebrews. This magnificent theological treatise is not studied frequently enough but maybe because it is so profound that it is not easy to preach on its riches in short 10 minute homilies we normal have each Sunday at the Eucharist.

But something remarkable happens in the prologue to this letter. Over the weeks of Advent, we have been almost lulled by the sweetness of anticipation and the tenderness of Luke's and Matthew's narratives, into thinking of Jesus the infant; Jesus, born among the poor and homeless; born of a woman. We are sensitive and emotional and longing to give gifts of love not only to those who are close to us, but also to those we have never met but only heard about. We are overflowing with generosity, food, and images of angels.

And here comes this remarkable, brilliant writer to remind us that it is the Christ of God we should be thinking of and worshipping, not a child in a manger. With breathtaking beauty of poetic language, the writer opens his letter to remind us in one very long sentence that the one whom we have been anticipating through Advent and adoring on Christmas Eve is God's heir, a reflection of God's glory, God's exact imprint, sustainer and redeemer. We have been singing about angels, but this writer assures us that the Christ is superior to the angels.

At the crib, the manger scene below me here, we have been kneeling before a mother looking adoringly at a baby in a manger. But we must realize that we must now kneel before the One who was at the beginning of creation with God the Creator.

We have no way of knowing whether or not this writer knew the prologue to John's gospel which was our Gospel this morning, but the two converge here. These two prologues in all their earth-shaking faith and profound thinking encompass the grand theology of the Incarnation – God with us. They are not concerned with the earthly Jesus but with Christ the Son of God.

Reading these two prologues, as we have done this morning, we leave the comfortable realm of storytelling as found in the birth narratives and enter the complex realm of intricate theology. These writers have already moved from Jesus to Christ. It is the glorified Christ that matters to them, the same one who appeared to Paul and changed him and changed the history of humankind forever.

The one who emptied himself to take on human form is on this day the One who was at the beginning with the Father, the one whose word creates with the Father and sustains all things. The writer of Hebrews sees the Christ as the one who, after he has made "purification from sin," is sitting "at the right hand of the Majesty on high," both in control and in touch with those he has created.

We feel a tremendous sense of connectedness as this magnificent prologue and the one that opens the Gospel of John takes us to the beginning of creation and leads us to this moment of acknowledgment – that the one who came as a helpless infant is the one who is superior to the angels, superior to the prophets and superior to Moses. He is the *Logos* of God, the expression of God or as another writer says, the mind of God; but above all he is the one who gave us power to become children of God.

Knowing all this, why should we be afraid? Knowing all this, why should we worry about what is going on out there in the world?

"The Word became flesh and lived among us." What is more important than this reality that we are urged to grasp onto on this Christmas morning? Nothing! The eyewitness of John's gospel assures us: "We have seen his glory as of a father's only son full of grace and truth." Let us then rejoice and be glad. .

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