

Gospel of John: Close Encounters of the First Kind

Session #1: Prologue

Thursday, October 2, 2008

This little “series” on the gospel of John is a modest exploration of the mystery of Jesus through the text of this fourth gospel.

We are not looking to explore the text *as text*, that is to say, to determine when and where it was written, if in fact John wrote it, etc.

There are surely many important textual questions, and I am not proposing that we be naïvely ignore them, and simply say that the Holy Spirit led John, and that is that.

I am proposing that we approach the gospel of John, aware that there are veritable textual questions, as *believers*, trusting that the Holy Spirit will speak to us through it, today, in Clarksville, Maryland, in October of 2008.

The textual questions are legitimate, important questions, but they are a different level of interrogation.

Our hope is to “hear” the Holy Spirit, to hear Jesus. We want to come close to Jesus.

And we can trust that,

with/despite all the complexity of the composition of the text of Scripture, the Lord speaks, for he had made a covenant with us, the Church.

This little series has been called

“Gospel of John: Close Encounters of the First Kind”.

Why?

Because one of the awesome features of the Gospel of John, one of the things that John so wonderfully grants us to explore, is many encounters between Jesus and various, quite varied people.

We will explore a couple of them.

We will do so by simply breaking open the Scripture passage
and praying that light shine forth.

We will do so by simply breaking open the Scripture passage
and seeing what comes forth.

John was the last of the apostles to die.

He kept Mary and, thanks to her, kept all these things in his heart.

He and his “Johannine” tradition thus shed the final light, give the final revelation.

Let us, therefore, explore with a sense of awe...

Before looking at any of the encounters in the gospel of John,
this evening we will begin by exploring the Prologue, which is more than an encounter.

This unusual passage precedes any of the “stories”.

It is clearly beyond story.

The Prologue of John is a “place” of contemplation.

It is here that we are invited to gaze in loving faith in a unique way.

The Prologue reveals to us the secret of God, the secret life of God.

It is contemplative, i.e. it turns us towards God in Himself,

- beyond us
- beyond our concerns about what God will do for us.

Contemplation is to be distinguished from *meditation*.

Meditation is to “think about”.

Contemplation entails turning towards someone.

We are not being invited to think about

(even though there is inevitably some “thinking about” involved)

We are being invited to turn towards, to turn towards the mystery of God.

Contemplation is love at its deepest.

Contemplation at its deepest is about God,

and thus entails a movement *out* of ourselves, “ecstasy”.

Contemplation is *other*-centered, regarding *the* Other, God,
in whom we find ourselves.

As we explore the mystery of Christ, *The Word made flesh*, we will ‘find ourselves’.

In the Prologue, John reveals to us the eternal generation of the Word.

John opens for us the mystery of the Trinity,

Theology, by the way, in the fullest sense,

consists in seeing all things in the light of the Trinity, is a Trinitarian gaze on all things.

What better place then to become theologians than the Prologue of John?

Let us be theologians.

Let us begin our probing: put on your thinking caps; this is the prologue, and it is deep...

“In the beginning was the Word” (1:1)

What an amazing expression.

What a surprising use of words.

The “Word”?

Why did John (or whoever wrote in his name, his spirit) use the term “Word”?

One might have expected that John use the term “Son”

(especially since he was most probably with Mary at the time he wrote,

or at least spent an extended period of time with Mary prior to writing the Gospel).

One perhaps might have expected John use the term “Wisdom”

(especially since he was familiar with the Old Testament use of this term).

And so we could have had:

“In the beginning was the Son”

or

“In the beginning was Wisdom.”

Why “Word”?

It is probably not because John was dealing with self esteem issues

and had a need to be noticed and thus chose to be original in his terminology.

John is the beloved disciple—entirely content and safe in his relativity to Jesus.

“Word”, as we use it here, translates the original Greek term “logos”
which is very difficult to translate.

It is difficult for *me* to translate, because it’s all Greek to me!

It’s even difficult for Bible scholars to translate (one of which I am not).

Greek was one of the languages spoken in the territories Jesus frequented.

From what I have read, it is very likely that Jesus spoke Greek in Jerusalem.

John, whose mother tongue was Aramaic, wrote his gospel in Greek,

probably to be as faithful as possible to the words of Christ.

The term “logos” can be found in the writings of many Greek philosophers of the time.

What does “logos” mean?

Some have translated it “discourse” or “speech” or—guess what (!)—“*word*”.

We find the term *logos* having made its way into the English language.

For example:

Theology (theo-logos): “discourse on the divine”

or

Psychology (psyche-logos): “discourse on the psyche”

Discourse” or “word”, however, is a rather exterior translation

when it comes to the use of *logos* here, regarding God.

To see this, it suffices but to consider “word” or “words”

in the realm of human experience.

A word is an exterior or external expression of something else.

What does a word or words presuppose and express?

Words express thoughts or concepts.

In the act of knowing, we have thoughts, the intellect produces concepts

which are, in turn, expressed in words—more or less well!

Thoughts and words are distinct.

The distinction is all the more obvious to us

- when we have difficulty expressing what we are things
- when we have difficulty expressing our thoughts.

Now, let us go a step further.

When the knowledge we have is loving knowledge,
when the knowledge we have is that which we have of a loved one,
what we carry inside is no longer a concept

but something else, something very particular.

We call it a *secret*—in the deep sense of the term.

When we love someone, we bear or carry them inside.

We have a loving knowledge of the person we love
—a quasi-presence, if you will, deep inside

Thomas Aquinas speaks of *verbum cordis*—*logos* of the heart.

And so we are talking about an interior fruit when we speak of *logos*.

It is interesting to compare and contrast “Logos” with “Son”.

“Son” is the other comparison used in Scripture

to speak of the Second Person of the Trinity.

A *son* is an *exterior* fruit.

Logos is an *interior* fruit.

Hence, *logos* is more intimate

even though it may seem abstract to us because we can not envision it.

Logos reveals something even more intimate about the relationship

between the Second and the First Person of the Trinity.

Note that the three Divine Persons are always revealed to us

in the terms of their *relationship* with one another.

This is the only way they can be revealed so that we not end with 3 distinct beings,
and thus 3 gods.

Logos is a relationship.

Son is a relationship.

Paraclete is a relationship.

It is revealed to us here in the Prologue that in God there is

- an eternal interior procession
- an eternal interior coming forth

one Person proceeding from an *other* Person

and, from these two Persons, an *other* Person proceeds,

all within the perfect simplicity of God, a simplicity which is beyond our imagination.

Let us come back then to the question of secrets, *Logos* being like a secret.

A true secret is deep and rich and holds our heart together.

Secret in the unfortunate National Enquirer sense of the term

(i.e. unknown information about someone) is not a true secret.

We call it “dirt”, a rather significant qualification.

When you read at the check-out counter that Wayne Newton had a face-lift: *not a secret!*

In the Prologue, we are not getting dirt about God.

The *secret of the Father* is revealed, that is, *given* to us.

Thomas Aquinas says (somewhere!)

that friendship is characterized by the sharing of secrets.

Friends share secrets.

Friends share aspects of themselves with one another which they carry as secrets.

Friends become for one another secrets.

And only love enables us to bear a secret.

Secrets breed interior silence.

The more we bear true secrets, the more interior silence there is.

As we will further underscore, Jesus is *the* secret of our life

whose presence breeds interior silence.

(Note: if what Thomas Aquinas says is true, that is, if friendship is characterized by the sharing of secrets, then the Incarnation, the *Logos* being given to us, is the most amazing expression of friendship ever!

The Father shares His secret with us.)

Logos means secret: how amazing...

Consider, then, the distance then between *secret* and *word*.

“In the beginning was the Secret.”

“In the beginning was the Word.”

With all due respect “word” can be a misleading translation.

Oh well, they tried!

Let us, however, for the most part, stay with the common translation, keeping in mind what we have just said.

verse 1: “In the beginning was the Word.”

“In the *beginning*...”

Which beginning?

Most of us, upon hearing or reading “in the beginning was the Word” in all likelihood think “Oh, right, the first thing that was ever said”

Are we speaking of the beginning of time?

If so, are we essentially saying

“The Word was hanging around at the time of creation.”

or

“At the threshold of history, there stood the Word.” ???

Upon first reading, we would likely say “Yes”

This is *not* a revelation of the divine activity

or of what was articulated at the dawn of history.

The Greek—and the Latin translation of the Greek—suggests otherwise.

“Beginning” is not a reference to time, as we might think.

The Greek suggests “source” or, more specifically, the One who is the source.

Consequently, a clearer translation would be

“In the Source, in the One who is the source, is the Secret, is the Word.”

In other words,

“In the Second Person is in the First Person ...like a secret.”

“In the Source was (*is*: Greek includes both notions) the *Logos*.

And the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

This second part of verse 1 is very mysterious

and surely obliged much prayer and reflection for the early Church:

“with God” and “was God”

Hmmm: we are told that there is:

- distinction and identity
- two and one

There is a mysterious interior fruitfulness in God

which in no way affects the oneness of God.

This is called a *mystery*!

There are three Persons (well, here revealed *two*) within the perfect oneness of God:

- oneness of being
- oneness of life
- oneness of love
- oneness of light

There is distinction of Persons (distinction does not mean *separation*) in one God.

Christianity is still a monotheistic religion ...and yet more!

verse 2: He was in the beginning with God.”

This suggests in the Greek (supposedly!) “turned towards”.

Interestingly, being “turned towards” is what characterized love relationships.

Love *turns us towards* the one we love.

The Second Person of the Trinity proceeds from the First Person of the Trinity—*eternally*
and is turned towards the First Person of the Trinity—*eternally*.

And, as we will hopefully be able to explore at some point,

the mystery of the Cross associates us to this “turning towards”.

In supreme fashion, on the Cross, Jesus turns towards the father, offering himself—*eternally*.

verse 3: “All things came to be through him and without him nothing came to be.”

The Word, the Logos, the Secret, being God, is Creator.

The Triune God is creator and so “all things came to be through him.”

Notice that we have gone from fruitfulness in God (*ad intra*)

to fruitfulness *from* God or *coming forth from* God (*ad extra*).

It is as though we are being given the opportunity, in faith,
to peek at all things from within the mystery of God.

Notice also how, regarding the latter, that is,

- regarding creation
- regarding all things other than God,

John uses the expression “came to be” as distinguished from “was”,
which he uses when he speaks of the Word.

When it comes to creation, there is a “becoming”.

All that exists *came to be* (and came to be *thanks to God*).

The Word simply *is*: “I am”.

It is very reassuring that God simply is, and that we came to be thanks to God.

This means that all that exists—insofar as that it exists—is in the hands of God.

verse 4: “What came to be through him was life
and this life was the light of the human race.”

In this verse, John obliges important distinctions, which reveal a hierarchy of beings.

God creates all that exists.

To some of these beings, to some of these realities, God communicates life.

And so we have *living* beings: flowers, birds, elephants, humans, etc.

And to one of these species, one of these living beings,

God communicates, in a particular way, light, that is, the capacity to know, intelligence.

“This life was the light of the human race.”

There is a hierarchy of beings, all wondrous but varying in perfection.

This verse suggests, by the way, that we are most ourselves and most alive in our minds (of course, in conjunction with our hearts)

This verse also obliges us to make another distinction within our very selves:
the distinction between

- being and life
- existence and aliveness
- ourselves insofar as we *exist* and ourselves insofar as we are *alive*, a living being.

In the order of existence *per se*, we depend upon the creator.

In the order of life or aliveness, we have a certain autonomy.

verse 5: “The light shines in the darkness. The darkness has not overcome it.”

Creation occurred in a certain struggle.

It was not that God had to wrestle

because the task of Creation proved to be a little bigger than anticipated.

We must keep in mind that, prior to the creation of our Cosmos and of humanity,

there was the creation of angels, of the heavenly host.

And as we read in Genesis, and as the Christian Tradition has come to believe,

that some of these angelic creatures, opted for their own glory and fell.

Pride killed love for them—love which, regarding the Creator, always implies obedience.

And so, in the midst of, despite the darkness of the fallen angels, God creates.

And the darkness does not overcome it.

Nothing stops creation.

And nothing stops re-creation.

The latter is important for us to keep in mind.

The darkness of whatever is unloving in our lives, in our world,

will not stop the Redeemer.

verse 6-8: “A man named John was sent from God.

He came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.

He was not the light, but came to testify to the light.”

These verses seem to fall—as we say in French—like a hair in the soup.

It is an unexpected, odd note.

We go from a contemplative vision to John the Baptist.

There is nothing wrong with John the Baptist, but it is a bit of a drop

(pent-house to first floor).

Perhaps what we are to discover is how personal God is.

Verses 1-5 may seem somewhat lofty, and thus abstract.

In suddenly zeroing in on John the Baptist,

we discover that this mysterious God is personal, that is, that He gazes personally
—upon John the Baptist and upon each one of us

We also discover that God’s most perfect creatures, i.e. humans,
cooperate in His work—by divine design.

John the Baptist is “sent by God”.

The Triune God sends.

We are all sent by God.

We are all witnesses to the light, to the One who is the light.

John the Baptist is sent and a witness, and thus totally relative to the light
(recall what he says when asked who he is)

finding in that relativity his grandeur.

verse 9: “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. “

This is an amazing, seemingly overlooked verse.

What is revealed is the first of three covenants (all in the Prologue)
between the Word (and thus God) and humanity.

A covenant is a special point of contact, a special place of “bonding”

The true light enlightens *every* one.

Beyond the simple rapport of creation,
every human mind has been touched by the Logos.

Every human mind is thus made for God, its source.

Every human mind has an appetite for God, and will only rest in God,
in the Beatific Vision.

Our minds are sacred.

Tell yourself this when you are getting headache reading the instructions on how to assemble the new remote-controlled blender.

“Be still dear mind; know that you are destined for so much more.”