

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98 (97); Hebrews 1:1-6; John 1:1-18

The Word became flesh

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. 15 (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") 16 From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

All four gospels open with a key to understanding Jesus' deep identity before the story of the ministry proper begins. Even Mark 1:1 fulfils this function: *the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*. The writer of the Fourth

Gospel takes up the challenge of the word "beginning" and fills it with deeper meaning for all those born again.

KIND OF WRITING

These verses adapt an early Jewish Christian hymn to Wisdom, thus:

1 In the beginning was Wisdom and Wisdom was with God and God (divine) was Wisdom [read: Wisdom was divine]
2 The same (she) was in the beginning with God
3a All things through her became
4 What became in her was life
And the life was the light of men
5 And the light in the darkness shines
And the darkness did not extinguish it
10 In the world she was
and the world through her became
And the world did not know her.
11 Unto her own she came,
And her own did not receive her
12a But as many as received her,
12b She gave them authority
children of God to become
14a/b And Wisdom tabernacled among us

It is likely that the final editor (i) changed the language from "wisdom" to "word" and (ii) inserted the prose additions putting John the Baptist firmly in his theological place (thus interrupting the poetry). (iii) Before that again, someone added elements in vv. 16-18 which have a Pauline feel to them. So, there is quite a bit of history behind the present text. The change from wisdom to word entailed the loss of the feminine imagery, alas. It brought with it the advantage that logos serves to unite important themes: creation (by word), prophecy (word), gospel (the word) and incarnation in the person of Jesus (the word made flesh). It mirrors the shift from Jesus in his words proclaiming the kingdom to the early Christians proclaiming Jesus as the Word and as king, God's revelation in a human person.

Scholars have also found a concentric pattern across this carefully constructed

Thought for the day

There is on-going research into how certain animals manage to communicate, establishing some commonality with human beings. Such investigation makes it clear, however, that language, in its complexity and depth, is distinctively human, a mark of who we are. When we speak, something of who we are goes out from us, so to speak. Words are personal, mysterious, powerful (cf. *a soft tongue can break a bone*. Prov 25:15). God, too, discloses himself: in the "word" of creation, in the words of the prophets and, now, in the Word made flesh, God's deepest and most personal disclosure. We give thanks for God's "eloquence" in Jesus of Nazareth, as we mark his birth.

Prayer

You have spoken, O God, and shattered our deafness and we can hear you in one like ourselves. Let celebrate the feast, then, in love and great joy. Through Christ our Lord.

text. D gives the benefits of faith in the Word made flesh.

- A. (1-5) God, creation, humans
- B. (6-8) John the Baptist
- C. (9-11) The light; his rejection
- D. (12-13) Faith in the Word
- C'. (14) The word; his rejection
- B'. (15) John the Baptist
- A'. (16-18) God, creation, humans.

NB: Note the error in the JB version in the lectionary. In vv. 12-13, "who *was* born" ought to read "who *were* born." The difference is considerable.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Read Proverbs 8:22-31.

Divine wisdom had long served as one of the most important bridge concepts for a Judaism seeking to present itself intelligibly and appealingly within the context of the wider religious and philosophical thought of the time. Within Judaism itself, Wisdom (along with Spirit and Word) was one important way of

speaking of God in his creative, revelatory, and redemptive imminence (Proverbs, Sirach, Wisdom, Philo of Alexandria). At the same time, the language was able to negotiate the “beyond” of God. Judaism’s (later) distinctive claim was that this wisdom was now embodied in the Torah (Sir 24:23; Bar 4:1). The language of “word” (*logos*) was used by the Stoic philosophers to express the presence of God penetrating all that is (cf. Act 17). Both the Hebrew and the Greek traditions were negotiating, so to speak, the transcendence and the imminence of God. Good examples of this kind of writing can be found in Prov 8 and Wis 7. Genesis 1:1-2:4a is also very much in the mind of the writer.)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

New creation across the Fourth Gospel—beginning, finished, first day of the week (John 1; 20; 21). Cf. Gen 1:1-2:4a.

Life—the Lazarus story—I am the Resurrection and the Life (John 11)

Light—the Blind Man—I am the Light of the world (John 9)

The Baptist—important early on the Gospel (John 1-3)

Not know him—the rejection by most Jews (John 5 and 18-19).

Children and being born – Nicodemus (John 3).

Flesh—cf. Thomas and Tiberias (John 20-21)

Glory—throughout this Gospel, glory and glorification are used to refer to the revelation of God’s deep self in the single event of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Father’s only Son—see the long discourses in John 13-17 which express and “unpack” the relationship.

Truth—Pilate and often elsewhere; I am the truth (John 19)

“He was before me”—Before Abraham was, I am (John 8:58 – but throughout in the well-known I am pronouncements in this Gospel).

Made him known—revealed through actions and speech, seen especially in the long meditations in the Fourth Gospel (most likely not the words of the historical Jesus, but late first-century meditations).

ST PAUL

For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:6)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The context is the original cre-

ation and the new creation in Christ; the Word expresses and articulates the deep being of God.

Verse 2 The New Testament writers slowly became aware of Jesus’ identity with God. This is one of strongest statements.

Verse 3 Cf. Col 1:15-20 and Eph 1:3-14.

Verse 4 The images of light and life recur throughout this Gospel.

Verse 5 The writer states the victory of Jesus over death before coming to the tragic rejection of the Word by God’s first chosen people.

Verse 6-9 Anxiety about John makes the writer clarify the relationship with Jesus. This is most likely on account of the continued existence of disciples of John the Baptist, who might claim a certain superiority. Cf. *Mandaeans* of today.

Verses 10-11 Paradoxical and tragic.

Verses 12-13 The literary and theological anticipation of the effects of incarnation may be seen here.

Verse 14 An echo of both wisdom and God’s presence (*shekinah*) in the ark of the covenant; at the time, highly paradoxical because of the juxtaposition of word (*logos*) and flesh (*sarx*). Grace and truth = love and faithfulness, God’s covenant qualities in the Old Testament, coming to personal expression in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Verse 15 Prose interruption again to “locate” John the Baptist.

Verse 16 God’s prodigal gift of love in the Son.

Verse 17 The contrast of Law and grace sounds Pauline at this point.

Verse 18 Cf. 1 John 4:12. “Made him known” = lit. to relate in detail, to expound or, perhaps, to tell the story.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. “In the beginning” takes me back to my own new creation in Christ—back to significant moments—perhaps even to a single moment which stands out as the beginning of my own belonging in Christ. A prayer of praise.

2. Life—what makes me alive, taking hold of my imagination and energy? How is my life in Christ? Prayer of gratitude.

3. Light—a fabulous imagery. It may be that some particular land or seascape stands out in my memory as having an especially beautiful light. Prayer of enlightenment.

4. The dark side of refusal and rejection—in my life I probably have said both yes and no to grace. Where am I now in my life? Prayer of pilgrimage.

5. Wisdom was God’s presence—a feminine presence, because (to use Biblical language) just as a man is “incomplete” without the love and companionship of a woman, the human person needs to be complemented by God’s wisdom.

6. The power of language in my experience as an entry point to appreciating the Word made flesh. What word am I hearing especially today?

PRAYER

We praise you, gracious God, for the glad tidings of peace, the good news of salvation: your Word became flesh and we have seen his glory. Let the radiance of that glory enlighten the lives of those who celebrate his birth.

Reveal to all the world the light no darkness can extinguish, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, in the splendour of eternal light, God for ever and ever. Amen.

FIRST READING

Isaiah 52:7-10

This thrilling reading portrays not only the gift of God but the joy we should/could have as believers. Here is a really good reason to celebrate!

SECOND READING

Hebrew 1:1-6

This is not an easy reading, but it does say astonishing things about the preacher from Galilee whose birth we mark. It does “put it up” to us: what do we really believe today and why and so what?

GOSPEL

John 1:1-18

We speak all the time, but perhaps we don’t often reflect on the fact of being able to communicate and the power of words. The right word at the right time is truly creative...this is the kind of experience which may help us enter into the opening words of John’s Gospel.

He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's being

Heb 1:1 Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. 3 He is the reflection (*apaūgasma*) of God's glory and the exact imprint (*charactēr*) of God's very being (*hypothesis*), and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Heb 1:5 For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you"? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"? 6 And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him."

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The stately opening of Hebrews, sonorous even in English, makes this an ideal reading for Christmas day—poetic, dignified, intriguing. Even here, however, something of the puzzle of Hebrews come to the fore. Who wrote it? To whom? When? In what circumstances? Much remains speculative, although the implied context can be inferred (see next section). Today, scholars would claim this is not a letter but a homily in which the author wants to show that Jesus' death *both* fulfils *and* abolishes the Temple service. This deep understanding of Jesus' death and resurrection is built upon the foundation of Jesus as the final and complete disclosure of God (Son, heir, "reflection" and "imprint").

KIND OF WRITING

This early Christian homily is written in the best Greek of the NT, using all the techniques of ancient rhetoric, "the art of speaking well." In particular, we note the sustained use of comparison (*synkrisis*): prophets, angels, Moses, Aaron and the temple cult. Our reading is part of the introduction to the opening section, 1:1-4; 1:5-4:13. The four opening verses form an introduction (*exordium*) while vv. 5-6 initiate the first comparison with the angels. As an *exordium*, the opening verses attract the attention and good will of the audience and lay out the themes to be treated in the course of the whole

homily.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

A careful reading of the letter allows a tentative reconstruction of the context of writing. (i) The community, after initial conversion and enthusiasm, encountered considerable opposition from the surrounding culture. (ii) Within the group, some fell away because of the gap between Christian claims and reality. (iii) The many exhortations reveal the anxiety of the author that more will fall away. (iv) The teaching that "Jesus can help us because he is like us" reveals the context of suffering and trials and a sense of alienation. The author addresses the context in two ways: theology (really Christology) and much practical exhortation/*paraenesis*. Our verses focus on the Christology of Hebrews.

RELATED PASSAGES

Many NT passages echo the high Christology of Hebrews.

All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. (John 1:3)

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. (Rom 11:36)

Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Cor 8:5-6)

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. (Col 1:15-16)

For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor 4:6)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 Already the tone of comparison is established, within an affirmation

of continuity (*our* ancestors...*but*).

Verse 2 Notice how comprehensive the claims are: the present (Son), the end / future (heir), the beginning /past (creation). As believers, we become accustomed to such claims but, as Raymond Brown remarked many years ago, these *are* extraordinary claims about a Galilean peasant prophet who was put to death ignominiously by the Romans.

Verse 3a The imagery here (given in Greek above) comes not only from the wisdom tradition of the Bible but also from philosophical speculation in the works Philo of Alexandria, for example.

Verse 3b Thus the writer announces the main argument of Hebrews: Jesus fulfils, transcends and abolishes the Temple priesthood. The challenge is acute because the *historical* Jesus was a prophet and a layman, not a priest.

Verse 4 The final sentence of the introduction acts as a bridge to the next section, the comparison with the angels.

Verse 5 The rhetorical questions make use of Psalm 2 found elsewhere (Acts 13:23; Heb 5:5). At the time, Psalm 2 was widely read in a messianic manner.

Verse 6 The verse cited is from the Septuagint of Deut 32:43: *Be glad, O nations, with his people, and let all the angels of God prevail (= worship in Hebrews) for him.*

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Can I go back to my own times of "disclosure," when I was aware of God's word to me in a special way?

2. Christians don't just say things *about* Jesus; instead, we encounter him as God's living word in our world. Building on such personal experience, we become more and more aware of the depth and mystery of the identity of Jesus.

PRAYER

In your words to us, O God, you have disclosed yourself and guided our steps. In the Word made flesh, you have done something even more wonderful: we see the very imprint of your being, as you speak to us from within our fractured humanity. Help us to come to you through Jesus, our Lord and brother who can help us because he is one of us and knows our lives from the inside out. Through the same Christ, our Lord. Amen

All the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God

Isa 52:7 How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." 8 Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the LORD to Zion. 9 Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. 10 The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

As you can see, this reading is very suitable for the third mass of Christmas Day. It has an energetic, uplifting tone and the words touch on the important themes of the feast (peace, good news, salvation, joy, etc.).

KIND OF WRITING

Once again, this is poetry, showing the usual marks of parallelism. Part of the imagery includes reference to the Holy City (Zion, Jerusalem, sentinels on the look out). We see also the language of proclamation (announces, brings good news), the language of response (sing, joy, singing), and the language of God's gifts (peace, good news, salvation, return, comforted, redeemed, holy arm, salvation of our God). The pleasure of biblical parallelism can be noted here:

7 who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." 8 Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; 9 for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.

It is said once more that God will be returning with them, because in Exile God was with them all along. It shares that vision with Is 40:3-5 (see below). It may well be that the exhilaration found here comes from some who returned early and felt the relief and joy.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

As we have seen regularly in Advent, Isaiah is almost a fifth gospel for early Christianity, so widely was it used. It does come from a difficult time, that is, during the Babylonian Exile (587-539 bc). The whole section runs from our v.

7 as far as v.12. It is, in effect, a prophecy of restoration, offering the exiles an ecstatic vision of hope and renewal. It comes as a response to v. 6 just before, which reads: *Therefore my people shall know my name; therefore in that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here am I.* (Isaiah 52:6)

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." (Isaiah 40:3-5)

Then the watcher called out: "Upon a watchtower I stand, O Lord, continually by day, and at my post I am stationed throughout the night. (Isaiah 21:8)

Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in. Who is the King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory. (Psalms 24:7-10) Cf. Psalm 47:1-9.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 7 In a striking rhetorical figure, even the (presumably humble, even pedestrian!) feet of the messengers are praised for their beauty! The message is peace, *shalom*, i.e. a gift of wholeness, affecting the whole person within a network of relationships. It includes the healing of wound of the exile for one and for all.

The imagery echoes that of a victorious monarch returning. "Bringing good news" is a verb in the Hebrew Bible ("goodnewsing" or something like that—in any case an action). The New Testament noun gospel or good news comes precisely from Isaiah. The psalms often speak of universal salvation (Ps 96:10; 97:1; 99:1).

Verse 8 This verse voices the longing of those in the city who are on the alert for God's return. There is a contrast with Is



21:8, where one sentinel is alone. Here, they are united in their reaction to the "second exodus" of God's return to Zion.

Verse 9 This captures the context of the Exile—the ruin of Jerusalem. God comforts by means of redemption or salvation. Poetically, it is the very stones of Jerusalem which cry out.

Verse 10 The arm is a standard image in the bible for the power of God and to bare the arm is to let God's power be seen or felt. In the eyes of the poet, this is an international event, taking place in sight of all the nations, all the ends of the earth. See Psalm 98.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. To hear good news is a wonderful thing. Go back to some experience of your own which brought you particular delight. When did you first come to appreciate the good news of kingdom of God?

2. Peace is also a wonderful word, particularly in the Bible, where it means health, prosperity, good relationships. Thank God for the well-being you enjoy!

3. The joy which Christmas brings comes to delightful expression in today's first reading. Let the happiness of the feast touch your own heart today, so that you are renewed in Christ and have cause for singing.

4. Salvation for all is the great message of Christmas: this is our God and we extoll him. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. (John 1:18) Let us rejoice and be glad!

PRAYER

God so close to us that we can hardly believe it, draw us into the circle of your love so that our celebration of the birth of Christ will bring us new life and true joy as we continue on the way of your salvation. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.