

What Child is This?

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson on the second Sunday after Christmas, January 5, 1986 at Knox Presbyterian Church, Kenmore, NY. Lectionary Lessons: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 147:12-20; Ephesians 1:3-6; 15-18; John 1:1-18.

I overheard my boys having a deep theological discussion in the back seat of the car on our way to Kay's parents on Christmas day. They were talking about Jesus and who he was and is. The conversation went something like this.

"Jesus is the Son of God".

"No! Jesus is God."

"How can Jesus be God if he's the Son of God? God is his father."

The discussion continued for a couple of minutes and became heated at times. Brothers were calling one another stupid. Each had a part of the truth but they couldn't see the truth in what their brothers were saying.

Then I heard one of the boys saying, "Ask daddy. Daddy is a minister and he knows everything there is to know about Jesus."

I thought, "Wait a second, I'm your papa not the pope."

No sooner had this been said then a budding Martin Luther protested, "Daddy does *not* know everything there is to know about Jesus".

I was beginning to think, "I don't have a family I have a theological seminary."

They did however agree on asking me to try to explain how Jesus could be the Son of God and God at the same time. I wish they hadn't asked. I found myself rambling on abstractly about how they are my sons but they share my nature and how Jesus is God's son and therefore shares God's nature. I was discourteously interrupted in my explanation when one of the boys saw a horse in field and the conversation took a markedly different direction. *which all found far more interesting than my explanation.*

That remarkable theological conversation was like overhearing the sometimes bitter and heated theological discussions of the Christian church over the centuries as it has struggled to understand and define for the world and for itself who Jesus is. Just who was this person born on the first Christmas? What was he? Was he God? Was he a man? Was he half and half? Or was he both?

The Gospel of John helps us to answer those questions. It was the last Gospel to be written. When you compare the four Gospels it's interesting to see where each of them begin the story of Jesus. Mark, the earliest Gospel, begins the story with the preaching of John the Baptist, when Jesus was about 30 years old. Matthew, the next Gospel, begins the story of Jesus with a genealogy that traces his ancestry back several thousand years to Abraham. Luke, the third Gospel to be written, traces the genealogy of Jesus all the way back to Adam. Years later, John wrote the fourth Gospel. Although inspired by the Holy Spirit, nevertheless he wrote out of decades of theological reflection and Christian experience concerning who Jesus is. In those decades, his relationship to the risen Christ deepened through prayer, through worship, through witness, and through theological reflection and meditation. John could not adequately explain to us who Jesus was and is without going all the way back to the beginning.

John came to understand Jesus as the eternal Word of God, the *Logos*. To the Greek world that meant that Jesus was that which gave meaning and reason to the world. Long before the Word became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, the Word, or *the Logos* was at work bringing order out of chaos, bringing light out of darkness, creating the world, holding it together, giving everything meaning and purpose. Wherever people

followed the light of reason and found meaning and purpose they were in contact with and receiving the One who became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth.

To the Jew the Word is that by which God had made himself known to Israel. In the words of our Psalm,

And yet this very word of His
 To Jacob He makes known,
 His judgments and His code of laws
 To Israel has shown.
 Not so to any nation round
 Did He His grace accord,
 In that His judgments they've not known.

The heathen nations had the *Lagos* at work in them through the light of reason and conscience. But the Jews had the Word of God in the form of a special revelation of who God is and what his laws are. For thousands of years the Jews had learned to recognize the voice of God in the words of prophets and prophetesses like Moses, Deborah, Isaiah, and Hulda. They could recognize the voice of God but no one had ever seen God.

It was kind of like listening to the old time radio programs before television. When I was a boy growing up in Wilmington, Delaware there was a radio personality by the name of Mr. Goodwill. I heard the voice of Mr. Goodwill every day. I could recognize his voice and I began to wonder what he looked like. I imagined a tall strong handsome man with golden wavy hair. One Christmas Mr. Goodwill appeared in person, in all his glory, in a Wilmington theatre. My mother and I went down-town to see him. What a disappointment Mr. Goodwill was. He looked nothing like what his voice sounded. I was expecting a Kirk Douglas and all I got was a Mr. Whipple.

It was with the same kind of shock that John came to discover that the Word of God that thundered forth on Mt. Sinai, that spoke through the

^{and no whole human have}
 prophets, that enlightened the Greek philosophers[^] became flesh in the person of a baby, a carpenter, Jesus of Nazareth. God appeared in all his glory and it was the glory of a baby, the glory of Palestinian carpenter, the glory of a crucified Jew. The shock was so great for so many that most of his compatriots would not receive Christ. "He came unto his own but his own received him not. But to as many as did receive him, to them gave he power to become the children of God."

Jesus still gives us the power to become the children of God when we receive him. As we receive Christ into our lives we grow to know him better and better. But how do we receive Christ? Jesus said that if we receive a little child in his name we receive him. He said that when we receive the word of those whom he has sent to preach his Word, we receive him. ~~He said that when we minister to one of the least of his brothers,~~ we're ministering to him.

I have a good friend who is also an minister. He was telling me about a woman he'd been counseling. He met this woman, by chance, in a dentist's office where she was a dental hygienist. He happened to come in at a bad time in her life. She was going through a divorce. She was not very religious but she found she could talk with my friend. She began attending his church. My friend and his wife invited her over for dinner from time to time and they'd talk about what she was going through. She wanted to know what God had to do with all this. She wanted to know what Jesus had to do with all this. She began reading her Bible and asking questions. All the time she was being drawn further and further into the life and worship of the church.

^{Slowly she was coming to see Jesus, not as merely a good man, but the One who could create for her a new life & bring light into her darkness.}
 I asked my minister friend, "Have you ever asked her if she has received Christ as her Savior?" He looked at me in surprize and said, "I think if I

were to ask her that question she would say, 'I thought that's what I've been doing all this time'".

And I believe she would have been right. Receiving Christ is not some formal thing you go through. Receiving Christ is a dynamic thing. He comes to us through other people, members of his Body, the Church. We let those people into our lives. We let the Word of God in Scripture into our lives. We read it, think about it, argue with it, ask questions. We come to worship services, perhaps at first on the periphery. But you are drawn further in. Christ begins to mean more and more to you. You begin to realise that as you let him into your life and trust him and obey him he gives you power, through the means of grace he has given to the church, to be the kind of person God wants you to be. All the time you are receiving Christ.

In Holy Communion we also receive Christ sacramentally. Holy Communion is a sacrament in which Jesus Christ comes to us and asks Christians to let him into our lives again to strengthen us and reform us. This is something Christians need to do every week. Every day. As we come to the Lord's Table today, may it be for you a time of receiving Christ anew because you want the power to become a child of God.

Let us pray...