

"AND THE WORD BECAME FLESH"
December 24, 1991

TEXT: John 1:14 "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father."

To the best of my knowledge, I have used these same Scripture readings every Christmas Eve for as long as I can remember. And why not? Not only are we creatures of habit, but symbolic ones as well. And, although Christ, Himself, is the essence of Christmas, how empty our celebration would seem without the inn, and the angel, and the shepherds.

I suppose I could have read Matthew's Gospel with its familiar story of the star and the Magi. Many people associated these Wise Men with Christmas. But not always accurately. I remember, for instance, reading about a Sunday School teacher down in Georgia, who was asking her class about the Magi. "What do we call the three wise men?" she asked. "The three maggots," replied a bright 5-year-old. "What gift did the Magi bring baby Jesus?" she asked, correcting him gently. And the child replied, "Gold, Frankensteins and smurfs!" We could talk about the Magi, but most scholars think they came later. So we shall let them wait till January when we celebrate Epiphany.

Mark, of course, does not even mention the birth of Jesus. For him, the "Good News" began with Jesus' baptism. But there is another Christmas story. One so abstract, and so lacking in visible symbols, that we often overlook it altogether. I am referring, of course, to John's Gospel and to these majestic words: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men." (John 1:1-4)

And again "The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father." (John 1:9-14)

Most of us have heard those words many times before. We admire their beauty, but we may not think about them much,

certainly not at Christmas. But tonight I would like us to think of them, and especially about the first part of that last verse, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth"

One reason we do not think about these words very much is probably because they do not contain any of the traditional symbols we have all come to associate with Christmas. No shepherds, no star, no angels. Not even "maggots." But, more than that, we are not quite sure what it means when it says, "And the Word became flesh."

Why does John call Christ the Word? And what does all that have to do with us? It does not help us much to learn that the concept of the "Word" or Divine Logos was a very familiar theme to Greek philosophers, and especially the Stoics. It is not familiar to us, and most of us prefer to stick with those shepherds and angels we have come to know and love.

But recently, as I was doing some reading on the Gospel of John, I came across a passage which made the whole thing much clearer to me. It was in a series of volumes called The Speaker's Bible, and I would like to share it with you now. It says:

". . . We might render it thus: From the beginning there was with God an Intention, which . . . was as Divine as the Mind that conceived it. In accordance with this Intention all things were created, and sustained. Yet things could not fully disclose that Intention because they could not themselves be aware of it. So the Intention became life, and in the mind of man this life became light, that light that lighteth all human reason, rational and moral. Even yet the Intention was not fully disclosed, for human reason worked darkly and could not comprehend the light. Then, at last, the Intention became flesh, was disclosed through a human personality, and flashed forth its glory in the activities of a human life."

That helps me. Intention makes much more sense than "Word." But what was that Intention? Well, certainly part of it was love. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

But not just any kind of love. What all of us need, what God clearly intends for us, is an unconditional love. A love we do not have to earn and yet can never lose. Unfortunately, most of us grew up receiving mostly what psychologists call "conditional strokes." We were praised and made to feel good about ourselves only when we did something that pleased our parents, our teachers, our friends.

But, in Christ, we find a love that transcends what we do. Is that not the point of that wonderful story in the eighth chapter of John where the scribes and pharisees brought to him a

woman caught in the very act of adultery. They wanted him to condemn her as a bad person. But, instead, he saw her as a very unhappy person who had done a bad thing.

And he said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." And when her accusers had all gone away, Jesus looked up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" And she said, "No one, Lord." And then Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again." (John 8:10-11)

That is the kind of love, the kind of acceptance, all of us need but few of us find in the world around us. Is it any wonder that Jesus made such an indelible impression? Is it any wonder that people saw in him something more than just an ordinary man? They dared to see in him the Incarnate Love of God, a love God not only offers to us, but also intended for us to offer one another?

And we can believe in that Intention because it became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. We read about that Intention, not only in the Gospel of John, but all throughout the New Testament.

But we do not often believe it just because we have read about it. Sometimes it happens that way I suppose. Some poor struggling person picks up a Bible and begins to read, and suddenly he or she becomes transformed, changed into a new person, a person of faith, a person able to give and receive love. Sometimes it happens that way. But I do not think it happens very often.

More often we are able to believe only because we, too, have seen that Intention in the face of someone we know. It may be a parent, or a Church School teacher, or a friend. It may be a sweetheart or someone with whom we work. It could be almost anyone. But most of the time we are not impressed by mere words. We have to see it to believe it.

Things can not disclose that Intention because they are not themselves aware of it. Even words can not disclose it because our poor human reason works darkly and can not comprehend the light. So today, as always, that Intention has to become flesh, has to be disclosed in and through some other human being. Only then can we "behold its glory, full of grace and truth."

If you would see it now, look at those around you. And when you get home, look at yourself in a mirror. On Christmas Eve, we will almost certainly see it in our own faces. And if we can only keep it there --tomorrow, and the next day, and all the days after that, then we may truly sing, "Joy to the World, the Lord is Come."