

Sermon - the Word dwelling among us

Based on Sirach 24.1-12, Wisdom 10.15-21, Ephesians 1.3-14, and John 1.10-18 (NRSV)

John's divine perspective of Christmas

- Today's Gospel passage is taken from the first chapter of John, which the Church associates with the Christmas story.
- Luke provides us with the rich dramas of the conception and birth of both John the Baptist and his cousin Jesus, with their respective parents - Elizabeth and Zechariah, and Mary and Joseph - with visitations by angels and shepherds.
- Matthew adds to this with the story told from Joseph's perspective, and the visitation by the magi, and the flight to Egypt.
- John, on the other hand, gives us some evocative metaphors of the Light of God, and the Word of God, coming into the world, and which provide a divine perspective of the significance of Jesus as both son of Mary and Son of God.
- And it is some of this wonderful poetry of John's that we are invited to explore today.
- As we engage with it, we are given some other Scripture passages that provide some context and explanation.
- The first two are from Deuterocanonical wisdom literature: Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach, and - instead of a psalm - a passage from the Wisdom of Solomon.
- In both of these the focus is on *sophia* - the Wisdom of God.

Sophia, or Logos?

- Now in John chapter 1, he does not refer to the Wisdom of God but instead talks about the Word of God - the *logos*.
- And yet, as I will point out in a moment, John is directly referencing the Sirach passage.
- So why does John refer to the Word of God, *logos*, instead of the Wisdom of God, *sophia*?
- The writers of scripture were quite comfortable with referring to the Wisdom of God in feminine terms - all translations into Greek used the feminine *sophia*.
- The personification of Wisdom as a woman was quite acceptable - presumably because this was understood as a metaphor.
- The Word of God - *logos* - was also well known, but had not been personified in metaphorical terms.
- God speaks his Word - the *logos* - and creation comes into being.
- That Word was spoken *in* Wisdom, and spoken *through* Wisdom, and here we can just as easily use trinitarian symbols to show the interrelatedness of YHWH, *sophia*, and *logos*.
- (I know I'm mixing up Hebrew and Greek, but I trust you get the idea.)
- So why does John use the masculine *logos* instead of the feminine *sophia*?
- Scholars suggest that it was precisely because Jesus - as God incarnate: made flesh, as one of us, as a real person who was born and later died - was physically a man.
- So it made sense to John to refer to Jesus with a masculine term rather than a feminine term: *logos* instead of *sophia*.
- This doesn't imply that Jesus does not embody the wisdom of God.
- Indeed, in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul refers to Jesus: '*Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*' (1.24), and then says further on: '*Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God*' (1.30).
- And in the Gospel passage John makes a direct reference to the first reading we heard, from Sirach, which refers to *sophia*.
- John references the Wisdom passage and merely replaces the term *sophia* with the term *logos*.

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Pitching the tent

- Let us now look at that passage directly:

*'Over waves of the sea, over all the earth,
and over every people and nation I have held sway [- this is Wisdom speaking.]
Among all these I sought a resting-place;
in whose territory should I abide?*

*'Then the Creator of all things gave me a command,
and my Creator chose the place for my tent.
He said, "Make your dwelling in Jacob,
and in Israel receive your inheritance."*

...

*In the holy tent I ministered before him,
and so I was established in Zion.
Thus in the beloved city he gave me a resting-place,
and in Jerusalem was my domain.
I took root in an honoured people,
in the portion of the Lord, his heritage.' (Sirach 24.6-8, 10-12)*

- Here we have a story about God's Wisdom searching for a resting-place, a people among which to abide.
- And God tells Wisdom to pitch her tent amongst the people of Israel - amongst God's people - in Zion.
- The name Zion is a synonym for both the city of Jerusalem and the land of Israel.
- And Wisdom dwells among the people of the Lord, 'his heritage'.
- This dwelling among them is not transitory, but - like a tree - takes root there and so becomes embedded amongst God's people.
- If we turn back to verse 14 from the Gospel passage we read: *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory.*
- The Greek word *eskēnōsen* is used in both passages, and means 'to dwell'.
- But translated literally it means 'to pitch one's tent'.
- So a more literal rendition of the beginning of this verse is '*And the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us*'.
- In the same way that Wisdom '*came forth from the mouth of the Most High*' (Sirach 24.3) - that is, from heaven - to dwell amongst God's people, so the Lord speaks the Word, and the Word enters the world from heaven to dwell amongst God's people as one of us.

Born of God rather than a descendant of the chosen

- The other aspect of today's Gospel passage that I want to highlight is spelled out in the first few verses.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. (1.10)

- We already understand the first phrase - '*he was in the world*' - that is, that the Word of God pitched his tent among us.
- And John had previously stated that '*all things came into being through him*' (1.3).

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- In spite of this, *'the world did not know him'* - and here the word *know* means not just head knowledge, but rather being in an intimate relationship.
- John repeats this:

He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. (1.11)
- And then John makes the claim that is central to his whole Gospel account:

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 or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. (1.12-13)
- John is making a comparison with those people whose ancestors God had chosen to be his people - people who were born through the natural process of conception as it was understood at the time (born of the blood), or born as a result of natural human desire (the will of the flesh), or born in order to continue the patriarchal family line (of the will of man) - all those who were children of God as a result of their physical, biological ancestry.
- And John makes the distinction that Paul so often makes - it's no longer about being a Jew, an Israelite.
- Rather, it's about entering into that intimate relationship with God - receiving our Lord, believing in his name that names him for who and what he is, and thereby being empowered by him to becoming a child of God - being born of God -
- being born of God rather than being born as a descendant of someone chosen by God.

A fundamental theme of John's Gospel

- Just a couple of chapters later, John describes the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, where Jesus explains this very concept:

Jesus answered [Nicodemus], 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." ... 'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.' (John 3.5-7, 11-15)
- This theme, that John summarises in chapter 1, verses 12 and 13, provides the fundamental context for the whole of his Gospel account:

to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born ... of God.

Affirmed by Paul in Ephesians

- So, as we continue to observe the last few days of the liturgical season of Christmas, we are reminded that the nativity stories of Luke, complemented by those of Matthew, are a tangible, literal description of the Word of God, born as one of us to enable us - in turn - to be born of God.
- As we heard Paul write in his letter to the Ephesians:

God destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ ... In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance ... so that we ... might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth ... and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of

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the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1.3-14)

- Jesus, the Wisdom of God, born of Mary, born of God, pitches his tent among us to be one of us, so that we can be one with him.
- To whom be praise and glory, for ever. Amen.