

The opening hymn of the fourth gospel is a magnificent statement of faith in the incarnation. It reminds us of the attention paid by the early Christian poets to contemplation of the mystery of the incarnation. It describes in summary the stages in the 'biography' of the Word of God, before, during and with creation, in God. In Jesus of Nazareth God became part of human history and human life. The Word became flesh and made it possible for us to contemplate the glory of God. Nothing is alien to God who is within reach of the believer. He has come to dwell in our world and nothing of him is foreign to us. Contemplation of God is possible only by listening to his Word. This is the only way to become the friend of God, who has set up his tent among us. Accepting his Word is the way to become a son of God.

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 were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light. 9 The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. 11 He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. 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 nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. 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. 15 (John bore witness to him, and cried, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me.'") 16 And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.

I. Read: understand what the text says, focusing on how it says it

Instead of 'narrating' what happened, today's Gospel 'contemplates' the mystery. Instead of speaking about the mystery of God, it enters into the mystery. The incarnation is not recorded as an event of the past, or as something seen from outside. It is celebrated as something that is happening now and it is accepted in faith. This hymn expresses in depth what is awakened in the author when he hears and accepts the mystery, in other words when he adores the Word with his mind and receives it in his heart. By introducing his Gospel with this hymn, which is an authentic 'biography' of the Word incarnate, John

indicates the basic attitude his readers should adopt – adoration of an incomprehensible mystery which is grasped, however, by those who contemplate it in gratitude.

To make it fit in better with his account, John modifies the original poem with some additions of his own. The most obvious of these, easily identified by its prosaic style, is the passage about John the Baptist (1,6-8.15), who is subordinate to the Word as his witness. Less obvious additions are verses 12-13 in which he explains how men become children of God, verse 16 which comments on the superabundance of grace, and also verses 17-18.

The hymn begins at the absolute beginning reserved exclusively to God, at the threshold where there is neither time nor space (1,1-3). The Word existed before everything else, and then everything else exists through the Word. After placing the beginning of the story of Jesus in God, before all creation, the canticle passes to contemplation of the relationship between the Word and the world of mankind, the most important part of creation, the reason for the incarnation and the place where the Word becomes incarnate (1,4-5). A first insertion (1,6-8) places the revelation of the Word in a precise historical context. John the Baptist was not the light but he came to bear witness on behalf of the Word. The canticle takes up again the theme of incarnation and speaks of the 'acceptance' of the Word on the part of men (1,9-13). In verse 14 the canticle reaches its climax: the divine Word made flesh, who exists in God, came to dwell among men so that they could 'see' his glory as the Son of the Father. The canticle quotes in his favour the testimony of the Baptist, his spokesperson (1,15), and a profession of faith of the community (1,16-18) which confirms the historicity of the manifestation of the Word incarnate and the saving power which is his alone. The summary could not be more dense nor more complete. These are truths that are proclaimed better by prayer than by speculation.

II. Meditate: apply what the text say to life

We, the believers of today, need to rediscover the reasons for celebrating the incarnation. We do not have to search too hard to realize that many today do not know very well why we celebrate the birth of Jesus. Do we ourselves know? We are talking about something that happened two thousand years ago. If our Christmas celebrations do not give us one more reason to be better, to become better people, then we have not really celebrated the nativity, and have not understood its true meaning. If recalling with wonder that our God has become one of us, does not enlighten us and encourage us to become more like him, then our feast and the happy moments we enjoy are of no benefit to us. It means we have celebrated the birth of Jesus like pagans, like so many of our contemporaries who do not know or have forgotten the real reason for their joy.

We are coming to the end of a year which may not have lived up to our highest expectations. Still, it is easier for us at this time of the year to be filled with good intentions, to feel more love for our families and to be less demanding of others. We all regret that we have not become better than we are. But it is also true, unfortunately, that much of what we see around us, in our families, in our world and in our hearts, does not give us great reason to hope for that improvement.

Celebrating Christmas should help us to understand that we have no right to lose trust in a better family, a better world, in ourselves and in the possibility of our getting better. If God

trusted us enough to become one of us, a child, a man like us, a citizen of our world, how can we fail to appreciate the way that God chose to come to meet us? If we gave God sufficient motive to become like us in our humanity, why should we not have confidence in ourselves? We have good reason to urge us to become more human, more like God. When God became man, he restored our faith in humanity, in the world and in ourselves, not because we are good, but because God came into our world as a man to make it possible for us to be good and to be happy.

There is no reason for us to go against God's decision. If we lose hope in mankind, and renounce the world or ourselves, we are losing hope in God and refusing to recognise him as man. If he did not hesitate to become man in order to come close to us, then his humanity cannot be an excuse or an obstacle that hinders us from finding him. If living in this world was the way God chose to be among us, this world, just as it is, should not take from us the joy of being with the Lord. If the human heart was not an obstacle to God's becoming man, neither should it be for any of us who are believers. Surely this is reason for wonder and amazement, for contemplation and celebration. God has come so close to us that everything in the world and everything of man is a way of access to him. We do not have to stop being human to possess God, or to live like God. This is, indeed, good reason for joy and hope.

Contemplating God's incarnation gives us another reason for hope. The very fact that God has become human like us, should make us understand in our hearts, with those reasons that only the heart can comprehend, that to be human is to be a sharer in the divine, to defend mankind is to defend God, that to encounter man can mean encountering God. If we do not succeed, is it not because it is impossible, but, rather, because we are not ready to look for God in man, who is the only true image of God. There is no reason why we who believe in the incarnation can be insensitive to our neighbour or, worse still, in some way inhuman. We know only too well that not all people are worthy of trust, but the fact remains that, despite everything, God has put his trust in humanity – and that includes us, obviously! If we reflect more on this truth, we will marvel at the wonder of God and we will have good reason to make ourselves better people and make our world a better world.

Christians can do more to change the world by promoting trust among people and openness to others, by combating indifference or fear of the unknown, than civil authorities can do by making and enforcing laws, or religious authorities by teaching. Sadly we have changed our world, the world into which God was born as a child, into a world of distrust, coldness, even envy and terror. We have done this whenever we have allowed the attitudes of Cain to grow in our hearts, attitudes of mistrust, fear of our neighbour, disowning our brother. If we fail to see our neighbour as a brother, it is logical to consider him an enemy and want him to disappear from our lives or to silence him. We do not need to kill him. It is enough to treat him with indifference.

The way to resist these tendencies is by making space in our lives for God who is coming into our world. We should have a bit more trust in other people. In this way we make God more visible, nearer to us and more accessible to others. This is another good reason to thank God for the incarnation and to celebrate it. It is reason enough for us to live the whole of our lives as our Christmas, our continual encounter with God. The gospel hymn reminds

us that those who accepted the Word accepted a man, and in doing so they received power to become children of God.

Nevertheless, it is easy for us to make the mistake of finding our happiness in the gifts we receive or in the family relationships we enjoy. This kind of happiness does not last very long. The happiness we enjoy when we discover God, when we find him in this world, among men, is a happiness that can never end. It is renewed day by day, for it is the happiness given to us by God when he became one of us. This is the happiness we receive when we no longer look upon our neighbour as a possible rival, but look into his heart and see there the image of God. This is what makes it possible for us to celebrate the incarnation as believers – being reconciled with others and contemplating God who became reconciled with mankind by becoming one of us. God's incarnation can be fittingly celebrated by people who know the reason for their joy and put their hope in becoming more human, more like our God.