

Jeremiah 31:7-14

Psalm 147:12-20

Ephesians 1:3-14

John 1:1-18

Sermon for 1/03/21

SEEING WITH GOD'S EYES

By Rev. r. Don Algeo

Summary: Jesus is the image of the invisible God

I can remember years ago visiting friends who had just had a baby. The husband brought it out and pulled the cover off its head and proudly held it out for my inspection, and I remember thinking: "That is one ugly baby."

And then I looked up at the new father and over at the new mother, and I saw the love in their eyes, and I looked back at the baby lying there in her father's arms, and I thought: That's still an ugly baby...but I bet she'll do great things in life.

Why did I have those thoughts? I had my first thought because I was looking at the baby with human eyes. That thought was my own responsibility. I had the second thought, I realized later, because, by a special grace, I was looking at the baby with the eyes of God. Instead of seeing the low forehead and bulging eyes and misshapen ears, what I was seeing was her parents, and the love of her parents, and their obvious intention to do their part, with whatever sacrifices that might involve, in securing a good and productive life for their newborn daughter.

My point is, we can see things around us in either of two ways. We can see them as creatures of a Godless world might see them, or we can see them as children of God might see them.

Our Gospel reading for this morning gives a good example of the difference,

In the decades following the death of Christ, as the actual historical life of Jesus receded into the past, many of his followers began to attempt to understand it by seeing it through human eyes, by arguing that Jesus must have been either a man or a spirit, either a divinely inspired man like one of the prophets of old, or perhaps one of the spirit angels of God that God sent to earth. (As an aside, these attempts resurfaced with great effect among theologians in the last century, and continue to be very influential.)

John, writing 60-70 years after the death of Jesus, made it one of his primary goals to rebut those conceptions, and make sure the new Christian church retained a full appreciation for who Jesus really was. He wanted to make sure we saw Jesus through divine, and not human eyes.

But there was another problem John had to cope with.

The gospel of John was written around the year 100 A.D., so about seventy years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the very earliest years, Christianity was strictly a small Jewish religion, and literally all followers of Christ were Jews. But by 100 A.D., the young religion called Christianity had spread out well beyond the borders of Palestine and into the gentile, that is, the non-Jewish world, reaching as far as Western Europe. In fact, by the year 100 A.D., there were literally thousands of non-Jewish adherents outside Israel for every one Jewish believer.

One of the great problems that faced the leaders of the Christian church by this time was how to introduce the religion to those who were not of the Jewish faith. These Gentile peoples, after all, didn't share any of the cultural or historical background that the earliest followers of Jesus shared. They'd never heard of Adam and Eve, or Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They'd never read the great Jewish prophets or any of the Hebrew Scriptures. They didn't celebrate the great Exodus from Egypt as a national memory, they didn't share any of the religious holidays like Passover.

Perhaps most importantly, the expectation of a Messiah meant nothing to them. Whereas for the early Jewish converts, proclaiming that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah would have had a powerful emotional and intellectual appeal and would have been of momentous importance, to a non-Jew, it would have been meaningless. If you went up to a typical non-Jew living, say, in Italy, and said: I can prove to you from the Hebrew Scriptures that this man Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, the answer would probably be: What are Hebrew Scriptures and what is a Messiah?

You see the problem?

So John came up with a way of talking about Jesus that relied on a notion with which his Greek-speaking audience would have been familiar, and which would have allowed them to appreciate the true magnitude and wonder of who Jesus was, far more than could have been done by referring to him as the Messiah, or even as the Son of God. John used that concept to introduce his Gospel, to introduce Jesus to his non-Jewish audience in a way that would allow them to at least begin to understand. Writing his gospel in Greek, he used the Greek word *logos*, which is the Greek word for word.

And so he starts his gospel in this way, and I'll read it substituting *logos* for word: In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God.

What was this *logos*?

Logos meant not only “word”, but also “reason.” For the Greeks it was literally the power that brought order out of chaos, and that held all things together. What holds the stars in their regular courses? We would say gravity, but that just pushes the question back farther. What is gravity, and why does it exist? The Greek answer was “*Logos*.” And not just for physical matter, but also for the spiritual core of our humanity: our standards of right and wrong, and of truth and of beauty. The *Logos* was literally the reason, the mind, of God, creating the world and holding it together.

With that in mind, let's look again at that opening verse, and see what it's telling us.

The verse has three parts. We'll talk a little about each.

In the beginning was the Word...

What this tells us is that Jesus was there before creation. This is a very difficult thought to grasp, perhaps an impossible thought. But it does mean one very simple, very practical, and very tremendous thing. If Jesus was with God before time began, if God's Son is part of the eternal structure of things, it means that God was always like Jesus.

Sometimes when we read the Old Testament, and listen to a lot of preachers, for that matter, we get a picture of God as stern and avenging, as well as just and holy. And that can lead to an understanding of Jesus, on the cross, as having accomplished something that somehow changed God, that changed God's wrath into love, that altered God's attitude towards humanity. But what this passage of John tells us is that that's absolutely false. God has always been like Jesus, from the beginning. Jesus shows us the eternal and unchanging nature of God.

But we may then ask, What about all those passages in the Old Testament where God destroys whole cities, men, women, children, babies and animals. What about the anger and jealousy and vindictiveness of God that are so often portrayed in the older parts of scripture?

John's answer, and our answer, is this: it is not God who has changed; it is our knowledge of God that has grown. Men wrote those things about God because they didn't know any better. They could only see God through a glass darkly, with human eyes. But now that Jesus has come, we can see and know fully what God has always been like.

...and the Word was with God.....

What does that mean? It means that there has always been the most intimate and loving connection between Jesus and God. And what that means is that there is no one who can tell us what God's thoughts are, what God's values are, what God's will is, what God's heart and mind and soul are, the way Jesus can.

A little later in his first chapter, John expands on this point: *“No one has ever seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, he has shown what God is like.”* And in the 6th chapter of his gospel, John quotes Jesus himself making the point:

Not that anyone has seen the Father, except He who is from God; He has seen the Father. (v. 46)

And Jesus puts it perhaps even more clearly and forcefully in chapter 14: *I am the way, the truth, and the life, Jesus said. No one comes to the father except through me.* This is usually taken to have reference to the one way to salvation being through belief in Jesus, but surely Jesus is saying something much more than that. What Jesus is saying is that God has provided one way, and only one way, of knowing who God is, and that is through knowing Jesus, because only Jesus knows God through and through. Why? Because he's been with God, since the beginning.

And that brings us to the third part of the verse. ...*and the word was God...*

That is certainly an extraordinary thing to say, and something very difficult to understand. But part of that difficulty is because John wrote in Greek. When Greek uses a noun, it almost always uses a definite article with it. The Greek word for God is *theos*, and the definite article 'the' is *ho*. So if John had wanted to say that the word was identical with God, he would have written: the word was *ho theos*. The word was the God.

But he doesn't write that. He omits the definite article, and simply says the word was God. And when someone writing in Greek does that, it means he's using the noun much more like an adjective: and adjective describing the character, the quality of whatever is named by the noun.

When John wrote that the Word was God, he was not saying that Jesus is identical with God. He was saying that Jesus is so perfectly the same as God in mind, in heart, and in being that in Jesus we perfectly see what God is like.

St. Paul, the other great theologian of the church, was expressing the same idea in his letter to the Colossians, another largely Gentile audience. He didn't describe Jesus as the Messiah or the branch of David or the fulfillment of the prophecies of Isaiah or anything like that. Here's what he told his non-Jewish readers about Jesus:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist (1: 15-18)

In other words, he was the Word of God.

And as our first pulpit message of this brand new and sparkling year, perhaps it would be good to remind ourselves that we worship a human God, someone who came not only to save us, but also to help us to see and understand the vital source of all creation, to help commit us to goodness and mercy and forgiveness and humility, not because these are admirable human qualities, but because they are part of the very fabric of creation, part of the glory of God Most High.

And so let's make that our prayer for this morning and the coming year. Father, we pray that you help us to pattern our own lives after the example of the one who patterned his life after You, not as an article of faith, but as an article of knowledge. We ask that we may come to know Jesus as intimately as he knows You. We ask for eyes to recognize his virtues, and ears to follow his guidance. We ask that you open our heart to him, because in so doing, we open our hearts to You, and we do so in his name.