

Just Who Is This Exactly?

Psalm 147:12-20
John 1:10-18

An ad currently running on radio lists great pairings. Lemonade and iced tea, Sonny and Cher, Lewis and Clark, bacon and just about everything. It makes me want to list a few more. Doublemint gum, Marvin Harrison and Peyton Manning, Simon and Shuster, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Tom and Jerry... In his own person Jesus consists of a pairing. The Gospel of John speaks profoundly of it in our passage for today, just 12 verses into it. Only a poetic prologue precedes it. Clearly, John believed what his readers thought about the nature of Jesus was of the highest importance. Let us therefore examine his thinking.

Our passage opens with, "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him;"... The "He" here refers to Jesus of Nazareth, though John had yet to name him in this Gospel. But he clearly delineated between references in prior verses to John the Baptist and here, to the Word. This Word created all that exists. This Word was He who was "in the world..." He was and is the "true light" which the previous verse mentioned. That light was indeed the light which "shone in the darkness and the darkness comprehended it not", in the beautiful phrasing of the King James Version. That light is the creating force, the eternal one, the guide for sinners trying to make their way toward him through the darkness. But tragically, though he truly was and is all that, "yet the world did not know him."

At this week's Seekers and Searchers bible study we found ourselves asking why the world does not seem to know God as well as it used to. Part of the answer lies in the largely unknown fact that about as many people attend worship weekly in America as ever have.

They just go to different churches, with a huge shift toward the non-denominational, big box ones. But part of the answer also lies in the fact that it has become socially acceptable not to believe in God. And while we ought to defend fiercely every person's right to believe or not, as their convictions dictate, we still have the responsibility of bearing witness to what we believe. We know him. We see him. We in some limited fashion comprehend him. This does not elevate us over those who do not. Instead, it makes us blessed and burdened, burdened with the responsibility of speaking of him with honesty and modesty.

For, as John noted, “He came to his own, and his own people did not accept him.” Jesus, a Jew, inaugurated his ministry in a synagogue. He spent the entirety of his earthly life within the boundaries of modern Israel—with the exception of a brief sojourn across the River Jordan into the Decapolis, the equivalent of if we walked half an hour across the line into Illinois and returned home before supper. He was “of the house and lineage” of the great Hebrew King David. Yet his own people could not accept him. He did not conform to their longings for a masterful, powerful Messiah king who would lead his people in a military uprising against their hated Roman masters, and against the even more hated quisling “leaders” among the Sadducees and high priests. No he came offering the “power to become children of God” as John put it. They wanted revenge; he offered salvation. They wanted political freedom; he offered spiritual freedom. How dare he?!?

He desired followers “born of the will of God”. This spiritual birth is perhaps *the* central theme of the Gospel of John. Again and again he wrote of people who experienced it: the guests at the wedding where he turned water into wine, the Pharisee Nicodemus, the Apostle Peter, the member of the Sanhedren Gamaliel. For John this clearly is the point. This is the purpose. This is why he wrote his Gospel in the first place: to urge people to seek spiritual

birth. Because becoming reborn spiritually follows from Jesus' having been born as one of us. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." The Word—Jesus, God speaking directly to us in this time and space, the creative force of God, has become flesh. The word John chose here for flesh is not the same Greek word Paul chose. Paul's "sarkos" meant blemished, dirty, sinful humanity. John's "logos" meant the creative, positive, edifying Spirit of God. God spoke his son, himself, into existence as one of us. He became God incarnated, in the flesh, fully a human being. And there is that "paired" nature: God and human, fully each, all at once.

But why? So we could receive from the fullness of God "grace upon grace." Jesus was born as one of us so we could all have the opportunity to receive grace, which as the Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology tells us, is "the unmerited favor of God." Jesus came into the world to offer us the love of God which we have not earned. Jesus was born to die on the cross because we could not earn the forgiveness required to earn a place with him forever. Maybe you believe this. Maybe you do not. But the Word of God in the Gospel of John claims it is true. Jesus, a human being born of Mary, was and is also God. Jesus, born a human being, nevertheless did not sin as we all do. Jesus, while the eternal and omnipotent God, accepted the humiliation of becoming a human being in order to offer all of us, his sisters and brothers, a place at his banquet table.

John adds, "(T)he law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through

Jesus Christ.” John, a Jew himself, revered the Law of God. Though this sentence of his uses a semi-colon to separate law from grace and truth, he does not mean to imply he thinks the law is ungracious or untrue. He means rather that in Jesus, God has changed the very foundation of our interactions with God. Formerly, under the Law as explained in the various Old Testament covenants, humanity had the obligation to obey that Law. Do so, and blessings would follow. Fail to do so, and punishments would follow. But now that Jesus has brought grace and truth, while we still must try to obey God's will, we do not depend on our obedience for blessings.

And thank God for that! Now, we have grace which we have not earned, and John wants us to know this is the truth. Jesus, God and human, has come teaching the truth about our new standing with God, with himself. John will use the rest of his Gospel to document that teaching. For our purposes today, we need to focus on the impact Jesus' identity as both God and human can have on us. Jesus has made God known. Jesus has placed himself—God—into a familiar, more understandable form. As John concludes, “he has made him known”. We do live in an era of more open disbelief in God. If about the same number of people still go to church, we have also clearly encountered more skepticism. More people openly seek meaning and purpose in life without faith in any god. ***Jesus has made God known. In the person of Jesus we can comprehend God more fully. In the person of Jesus we can find reassurance that our faith is not in vain and that God's grace and love are true.***

When somebody makes a disparaging comment about people of faith, we need

not argue with them—even in our heads. We need only to look to Jesus. When a television show or movie challenges the notion of a loving God we need only to look to Jesus. When a neighbor gives us that **look** when we tell them we go to church, we need not apologize, nor must we always and forevermore avoid the subject. We need only to look to Jesus. What would Jesus say and do in such a situation? I believe he would love that person. He would listen to their thoughts and feelings. And he would invite them to follow himself.

The growing culture of skepticism has made many (most?) of us reluctant to bear witness to our faith in our gracious and true God. We don't want to come across as “preachy”, or superstitious, or, you know, too Christian. More's the pity. The doubting world **needs** us to bear witness to Jesus. It **needs** our love and listening ears. It **needs** our invitations. Look to Jesus. He has made God known. Trust in his grace and truth. And whenever possible, bear witness to him.