Of Grace and Truth

2nd Sunday of Christmas

January 5th, 2020

 Thousands of years ago, in a little town, a woman gave birth to God. It was a surprisingly quiet event in the history of the world, noticed only by her husband, some livestock, some shepherds, some traveling kings or mages, and some bloodthirsty soldiers in the service of a corrupt king. The birth of this Saviour, this Word made Flesh, only became known because of a doctor and a tax collector who later wrote of the life of this God who lived among us, walked among us, and died among us, and more importantly, rose to life again among us. The doctor had come to the historical event through sharing the faith of a wandering preacher, who had seen the risen Lord on the road to an ancient city. The tax collector had come to know the Lord in person, when he first revealed himself to a band of twelve, comprised of poor fishermen, bandits, thieves and peasants, on the shores of a great lake. One of the poor fishermen also wrote of the life of this God, many years after his brother had given his life for his faith in the one who died and rose again. The poor fisherman did not write of singing angels, curious shepherds or traveling astronomers. Instead, he began his Gospel with one of the most profound statements of philosophy or religion ever made: “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 came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people…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…From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (John 1:1-18). The other gospel writer, the fourth, likely a relative of one of the fisherman who was close the our gospel writer today, likewise began his gospel with an earth-shattering and simple statement: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). One could say that all he had written was a mere beginning that leads to the statement, an exclamation of faith, at the end: “‘Truly this man was God’s Son!’” (Mark 15:39).

 The word for beginning, however, is Ἀρχὴ, the word used by ancient philosophers to define the indefinable, the boundless, the origin, the beginning of all existence. And the term for Word used by the poor fisherman, is Λόγος, the organizing principle of all creation, the divine. The second and fourth gospel place the beginning, not in Bethlehem, but in eternity itself. This is not a hagiography, not a fairy-tale, not a legend, not an allegory, not the life of an ordinary teacher, nor the mere chronicle of a distant time. It is revelation. It is the inbreaking of the Ἀρχὴ, it is the revelation of the Λόγος. Some poor shepherds will come to the manger to wonder; some mages will come to worship; some soldiers will come too late but will kill nonetheless, thinking to kill the One who has broken into our earth, into our time, and into our world. Some innkeepers and travelers may never hear of what has happened in a barn nearby. Though the reactions to the event differ, there is no mistaking what is taking place. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us; God became human, and entered into our history. Salvation has come. The French philosopher Luc Ferry has argued that the true quest of philosophy is salvation. In the gospels, it is God who embarks in search of us; salvation is on a quest for us. It would be hard to summarize salvation—it has so many ramifications, so many applications for us. And yet, the Gospel of John presents us with one such summary: “Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). Grace and truth are the light that extinguish the shadows of ignorance, doubt, sin, sorrow and death. Grace and truth lead us to beatitude. They lead us to worship. As Jesus would tell the Samaritan woman at the well: “The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:23-24). Salvation is to receive the revelation of God and to receive His grace through the gift of His Spirt.

 The truth comes through Christ. It is a truth about who we are and what we need. The woman at the well thirsted, and we thirst. And God gives us living waters. The truth is that we do not know anything without God, that we cannot do anything without God, that we are creatures in need of redemption. It is also a truth about who God is. God is not a fantasy, a psychological byproduct, a cultural manifestation, an artistic creation, nor a philosophical concept, nor a particle or principle of physics. God is who God is (Exodus 3:1-15). And since in our many quests we could never reach God, much less imagine or create Him, God quests for us. God reveals God to us. It is the most humbling, sobering and uplifting truth in existence. God is. In silent prayer and similar forms of meditation, participants are often asked to think of a word to meditate on, a word that will help them avoid distractions or daydreams. I cannot imagine a better word than *Lord,* or *God, Saviour,* or just *Jesus*. Our minds are so prone to wandering, not just when we pray, but when we wake or sleep, it is so easy for us to forget the most important truth of all existence—the One upon which all existence depends. All that is evil in this world is that which would have us forget this radiant truth, this source of peace, which is love Himself (1 John 4:8). Nicholas Cabasilas, a Byzantine theologian of the 14th Century, writes: “If, then, God’s work always consists in imparting goodness, it is for this end that He does all things. This is the goal both of past events and of things which may happen in time to come, since the ‘good has been poured forth and spreads abroad’ (Dionysius, *Of the Divine Names,* c. 4). By doing this God would impart the greatest good of all. Greater than this He could not give, and this would be the greatest and fairest work of His goodness and the utmost limit of His kindness…God did not merely impart whatever was good for human nature and keep most for Himself, but He bestowed all the ‘fulness of His Godhead’ (Col. 2:9), all the riches of His very nature. It was for this reason that Paul said that in the Gospel the righteousness of God is eminently revealed (Rom. 1:17). For if there is any virtue and righteousness of God it would consist in bountifully imparting to all His own excellence and in sharing His blessedness” (Nicholas Cabasilas, *Life in Christ*, tr. Carmino J. DeCantanzaro. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974. 52).

 Revelation is not merely the matter of salvation, it is also the means. God gives Himself to us and God gives us the way to become like Him. Everything is gifted to us in Jesus Christ. It is good for us to begin the year with thanksgiving, just as it is good to close the last one with thanksgiving. From beginning to end, God is a God of grace, who lavishes on us everything we need for life and life abundant. In almost hymn-like words, Johann Arndt, the 16th-17th century pastor, writes:

 Behold the wisdom of God! God hath made himself to be ours,

That we might be made his…Now whosoever possesseth any good for his own, may doubtless make use of the same to his own profit, in the best manner that he can. And so is Christ become ours, that we may use him for our salvation, which is an everlasting profit, according as we will ourselves. Wherefore thou mayest make use of him, for

The Medicine of thy soul, to restore thee;

Thy Meat and Drink, to refresh thee;

Thy Fountain of Life, to quench thy soul’s thirst;

Thy Light, in darkness;

Thy Joy, in sadness;

Thine Advocate, against the accuser;

Wisdom, against thy folly;

Righteousness, against thy sin;

Sanctification, against thy unworthiness;

Redemption, against thy bondage;

Thy Victory, against all thine enemies;

Thy Champion, against all thy persecutors;

Thy Way, against thy wandering;

Thy Truth, against lying and vanity;

Thy Life, against death;

Thy Everlasting Father, when thou was an orphan and desolate;

Thy Prince of Peace, against the adversary;

Thine Everlasting High-priest, who intercedeth for thee.

Behold what Christ is given unto thee for! And pray thou daily,

That the proper use may be made by thee, and that in thee may be fulfilled all that is contained in any of these his relations or offices: but pray thou in faith, not doubting, and it shall be so.

(Johann Arndt, *True Christianity,* tr. Anton William Boehm and John Wesley. Vancouver: Regent College, 2012. 150-151).

Indeed, as the Gospel of John proclaims, “From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (John 1:16). There is nothing incomplete in the gospel, nothing incomplete in the work of God through Christ. Through Arndt’s list, we see that salvation by grace is a relationship of constant trusting and constant receiving. Christ has brought salvation in a way that nothing he commands can ever lead to destruction or evil in this world; all that he enjoins, all that he shares is life, peace, healing, and goodness. It is written in the beatitudes, it is written in the way he befriends the poor and sick; it is written in his triumph over cruelty; it is written in his urgent insistence against relativism or apathy; it is written in his wounds of self-giving love or kenosis; it is written in his resurrection and glorification that he invites us to share.

 The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. God came to us. It is not we who will save the earth; it is not we who will define what is right or wrong, true or false, good or evil. It is not we who will lift ourselves up over historical ruin and physical entropy. And yet, it is not futility or impossibility that we have been given, but victory and salvation, grace and truth. When giving the law a second time, Moses said: “Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe” (Deuteronomy 30:11-14). Likewise, the apostle Paul wrote to the Romans: “For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law,that ‘the person who does these things will live by them.’ But the righteousness that comes from faith says, ‘Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?” ’ (that is, to bring Christ down) ‘or “Who will descend into the abyss?” ’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, ‘No one who believes in him will be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’” (Romans 10:4-13). When the poor fishermen first heard the call, they dropped their nets and followed Christ. When Mary first heard the annunciation of the angel, she said: “‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’” (Luke 1:38). Amen, Lord. It is the New Year. Let us throw away our nets and follow Christ; let us become the servants of the Lord, and let it be with us according to the word of the Lord, that the Word might become our flesh and dwell among us, shine light into the darkness, and reveal grace upon grace. May our hearts be filled with the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God.