

**The Word Made Flesh:  
Love Becomes a Body<sup>1</sup>**

St. Mary's Metchosin

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About 25 years ago, I got in the back seat of a car. In the front passenger seat, being driven to a church meeting sat the Rt. Rev. Philipose Mar Chrysostom, a senior Bishop of the Mar Thoma Church, my Indian Christian church. The Mar Thoma Church traces its origin to the Apostle Thomas—the doubting one—who, according to tradition, came in AD 52 to establish the church in India. Now Mar Chrysostom was, until his recent death this past year at the age of 103, a towering figure in global ecumenical circles, and much beloved in India. He was a brilliant man known for his raucous sense of humor. In that regard, he was a lot like Bishop Tutu. I do not know if they had occasion to meet, but I know if those two are together now, there are sure to be howls of laughter emanating from them.

Now, Mar Chrysostom was also known for bringing people down to size, never in a mean way but playfully with mischievous wit. Perhaps that's why he asked me a question, one I can still remember. John, he asked me, "When the Word became Flesh in Jesus Christ, did he disappear from the rest of creation? Was the Word then only in Jesus?" I have no idea why he put that koan-like question to me. Perhaps he was trying to take my measure. Perhaps he had heard that I was a hotshot young theological student who thought rather too well of myself.

His question utterly confounded me. I tried out a number of answers, but none satisfied the Bishop nor did he answer the question himself. To this day, his question lingers. Mar Chrysostom's question was clearly a reference to our Gospel reading:

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.

The phrase translated as "the Word" here is the Greek, "*ho logos*." The term *logos* can be translated as reason, order, wisdom, structure, and, of course, Word. John echoes Genesis 1 and refers both to the figure of Wisdom in the book of Proverbs and the idea of *logos* in Stoic philosophy. In both contexts, the *logos* is that which gives to the world its structure, order, and rationality. The *logos* is also that power in the human mind which enables the mind to understand the structure, order and rationality of the world. It is the world's deep order and the mind's capacity to understand that order.

New Testament scholars, Cynthia Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson write, "*Ho logos* (the Word) had deep resonance within Greek philosophy, representing the rational principle or power that is the glue of the universe."<sup>2</sup> I love that phrase: "the glue of the universe." Perhaps now you can begin to appreciate the wisdom of Bishop Chrysostom's koan. If the Logos is the glue of the

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<sup>1</sup> This subtitle is a gift of Wendy Suddaby, a parishioner at the Anglican Church of St. John the Divine, Victoria.

<sup>2</sup> Jarvis, Cynthia A.; Johnson, E. Elizabeth. *Feasting on the Gospels--John, Volume 1* (p. 2). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

universe, what happened to the rest of the universe when the world's glue became flesh in Jesus? Did the rest of the world come unglued? Did the Logos take a vacation from keeping it together; and by "it" here, I mean the entire cosmos?

Let me ask you a koan of my own: Did the Word, happen to pop by on Earth for some 30 years around the turn of the first millennium only to return to heaven or wherever else his permanent residence happens to be? Is that what incarnation means? Was the Word slumming it for a spell for our sake? The sad truth is that something like this way of construing divine incarnation plays an unacknowledged role in popular Christian imagination and even in our own minds—incarnation as cosmic visitation, God appearing in a world from which God is otherwise absent.

Whatever else we may say about the prologue of John's Gospel—the one unquestionable truth that the writer wants to convey is that incarnation is not about the Logos paying us a quick visit. This is the Word's world, and the world is never without the Word, not for a single moment: "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him."

Note well those words: "He was in the world and the world came into being through him." He was in the world! The Word was already here, and is in the world even now. The whole of the world is saturated by divine light and life. It cannot be otherwise. If the Word is the "rational principle or power that is the glue of the universe," it follows that if no glue, then no universe. In the Christian imagination, the world is never empty of divinity. Incarnation is not God's entry into a universe bereft of divinity; on the contrary, the incarnation is intensification. It is as though God turns on a spotlight that beams brightly through a child laying in a manger. And that child helps us to see afresh and with new eyes the light and life and beauty and harmony and order that always already permeates the universe. Incarnation is a rendering concrete, a making meat (*carne*—as in *chili con carne*)—of the divine presence which is always already here. This is a God-soaked world. It has never not been.

What is true of the world is also true of you and me. Listen to what the Gospel says about John: "He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, *which enlightens everyone*, was coming into the world." Enlightens who? Just some especially holy people, perhaps the saints alone? Just the one called Jesus of Nazareth. Or perhaps just Christians? No, no, no! ***The Logos is the light that illumines ALL without exception.*** John may not have been the light. We aren't either. That does not mean we are bereft of light. Not at all. There is but one light, and it shines in and through us all. To borrow an image that is hardly poetic but illuminating nonetheless, to say that Jesus is the Word incarnate is to say that He is a bulb set to maximum brightness—with the dimmer switch turned all the way up. But to make that claim about Him is not to diminish the presence of the light in us.

John was not the light but John, just like the rest of us—every single one—is enlightened by the Light. Whenever we reason, whenever are self-aware, whenever we care, whenever we strive to know the truth—that is the Logos at work in us. In a secondary sense, incarnation is happening everywhere at all times because the Logos before, during, and after the incarnation sustains, orders, and enlivens the entire world. Christians confess that what came into the world in Jesus is not a stranger but the world's own light disclosed most radiantly: "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."

And now, what do we do, now that we have seen the Word's glory and brilliance? *We burn brighter!* We let the flame of the divine light made flesh in Jesus set us aflame so that the light

which is already at work in us burns all the brighter. What would that look like? Well, if the Word is the glue of the universe, the rational principle and power that holds the world together, we join in the work that the Word is already doing in the world to keep the world together. We pit our lives, our passions, our intelligence, our talents, and our energies, against every divisive force that seeks to divide, rupture, and break the world apart and we join with *all* others whose inner light is at work in the world's healing regardless of their religious tradition or lack thereof.

And what is it my friends that really holds the world together? What is the adhesive binding power at work in the world? Lest the word lose its power due to overuse and sentimentality, I have not employed it till now: Love. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Incarnation Light illuminates us to its presence already at work in the world. By watching, loving, and tuning our lives to His, we fall ever more deeply in love with a world that is already shot through with the divine light. And, we seek to be, like John, witnesses to that light. But we need not point to the light as though it were to be found only outside of us somewhere. It is already present in us because it is "the light that illumines everyone." Ours is the task to be so enflamed by the intensity of Christ's light that the light, already present in us, is rekindled and shines out ever more brightly—our light meeting the world's light in healing love. That is what we trust the incarnation to do in us and for us. That is the work of Christmas—to be the ongoing incarnation of the light that became flesh in Jesus that so that now it becomes flesh also in and through us.

And what will that concretely look like? I have no better words than those of Howard Thurman's lovely poem, "The Work of Christmas,"

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among others,  
To make music in the heart.  
Amen and Merry Christmas!