

## “OF THE FATHER’S LOVE BEGOTTEN”

Today is the Feast Day of our beloved Saint John: Apostle, Evangelist, Theologian. As *Apostle* he was chosen by our Lord as one of the Twelve, the youngest thereof, and referred to often as “the beloved disciple”, for it was he that rested his head on our Lord’s breast at the Last Supper; it was he to whom upon the cross he entrusted the care of his blessed mother and John to be her son; it was he who ran with Peter to the tomb on Easter morning, arriving before him but not going in; it was he who recognized the risen Lord at the sea of Tiberias; and it was he who in the decades left to him would ponder the nature of God’s love in Christ and set it forth so wonderfully for all the ages to come.

As *Evangelist*, John wrote the fourth Gospel, the one that traces the history of our Lord into the unfathomable reaches of eternity past, and from there describes in such a wonderfully seamless pattern the descent of our Lord into this flesh of ours, and tells the story of his life and ministry in the bold contrasts of light and darkness, life and death, truth and falsehood, that which is from above and that which is from below, picturing him who is the living water, the true manna from above, the resurrection, the way, the truth and the life, who turns water into wine, bread into his own flesh, and sinners into saints, a story of such manifold deeds of love that John concludes by saying, “And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the book that should be written” (Jn. 21:25).

John himself was to write other books: his three epistles, and the Book of the Revelation. It is especially in connection with this latter that he is called Saint John the Divine or, as they say in the Eastern churches, Saint John the *Theologian*. The word ‘theologian’ is a compound of the Greek words for God (Θεός) and word (λόγος) and speaks of one who ponders the *word* or message of *God*, and surely that is an apt description for the one who began his Gospel with the Word who was with God from all eternity and who was God. St. Luke, whose Gospel account occupied our attention on Christmas Eve and Day, was a historian. His two volume history of our Lord and the

Apostles is based on his consulting of many documents and eye-witnesses. It was natural that he should tell us in detail of historical matters such as the decree of Caesar Augustus, of the time when Cyrenius was governor of Syria, and of the more important matters of the journey of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, of the inn, of the birth and of the manger. John's approach is not historical. At times he will even tweak the historical detail to make a theological point. He is interested above all in the very heart of the matter, in its ultimate dimensions and in its spiritual reality. So it is, that while St. Luke tells us of the birth of Jesus of the Virgin Mary, St. John will have us consider his eternal generation of the Father, as we say in the Creed: "Begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Lights, very God of very God." St. Luke begins in time; St. John begins before time.

Of those marvelous words with which John begins we need not say much today for we hear them in the Last Gospel each Sunday and we have expounded them at length, though surely but scratching the surface. We will ponder the words endlessly and comprehend them never. We simply worship in awe the One who is mysteriously both distinct from God and yet God, at the same time "*with God*" and yet himself "*God*" without qualification. At the end of the Prologue to his Gospel John writes, "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him" (Jn. 1:18), he hath made him known, literally. "he hath *exegeted* him." He who is God is the message coming forth from God, the Word become flesh and tabernacling among us, bringing not the Law, as did Moses, but grace and truth. This message, this Word, of God it is the whole business of St. John the Theologian to contemplate, to worship and to declare for all the world.

Repeatedly in the course of his Gospel does John hearken back to the theme with which he began. In chapter 1 he tells how John the Baptist declared, "This was he of whom I spake, He that cometh after me is preferred before me: for *he was before me*" (1:15). In chapter 3 he speaks, of course, of God's so loving the world that he gave his *only begotten Son* (3:16), another reference to the Son's being eternally begotten, to which subject we will return. Toward the end of that chapter Jesus speaks of himself, "He that *cometh from above* is above all: he that is of the earth is earthly: he that cometh from heaven is above all" (3:31). In chapter 6 Jesus speaks repeatedly of his eternal

origin, both in metaphor and directly. “The bread of life is he which *cometh down from heaven* and giveth life unto the world” (6:33). “*I came down from heaven* not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me” (6:38). “I am the living bread *which came down from heaven*: if any man eateth of this bread he shall live forever” (6:51). And in chapter 8 Jesus said solemnly, “Verily, verily, I say unto you: *before Abraham was I am*. And they took up stones to cast at him” (8:58-59).

St. Luke tells of the earthly birth of the one whom the angels declared “a Saviour which is Christ the Lord.” St. John speaks of the eternal Son of God through whom all things were created, even the angels. Born in time, of course, the Word became flesh, for without that he could not save us who are not only enfleshed, but fleshly, but *able* to save us for he was not only human but divine. Born in time, but eternally begotten before and above all time. Of this eternal begetting spoken of in the Creed we can have little understanding. Its meaning rests in the great mystery of the Holy Trinity. All we can say in limited human speech is that the Son was eternally the Son and the Father eternally the Father, both without beginning or end. When we who are bound by time and space try to comprehend that which is above or beyond or before time and space (we really cannot even frame the concept) we are at a loss, unless we simply bow in faith and adore. What we can say about this eternal begetting of the Son is (and this is only because St. John has pointed the way), . . . What we can say about this eternal begetting of the Son is that it is the eternal working out of divine love. The Son going out from the Father and returning in the Holy Spirit is the eternal mystical dynamic of God’s love. We cannot fruitfully conceive of what this means ‘before creation’ but, through the eyes of St. John, we can conceive of the Son as the going forth of the Father’s love and truth and life, going forth from him and into this world, there to further go forth and give up himself in the sacrifice of the cross in order that through the life that bursts the bands of death there could be given to man eternal life, spread abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which the Son breathed upon his apostles, the Holy Spirit who then draws us back to Father in love.

“Begotten of the Father before all worlds,” declares the Creed. Abraham Heschel reminds us that Creeds do not *contain* the truth, *encapsulate* the truth, but only *point us* to the truth which is beyond, to that which is ultimately incapable of being imprisoned in words. But the Creeds are important to help us make distinctions and to guard against

ways of thinking that are false. Eastern scholars speak of apophatic theology, that is theology which tells us what God is not, and thereby points us indirectly to the truth of what God is, without trying to grasp that which is ultimately ungraspable. We commonly speak of God as ‘infinite,’ which only means that he is not finite, or as ‘incomprehensible,’ which only means that he is beyond our comprehension, which is exactly what we are talking about. The Nicene Creed in speaking of the Son as eternally begotten, is combating the heresy of one Arius who said that if the Son is begotten of the Father there must have been a time when he was not. It was a blatant denial of the true divinity of Christ and thus of his very capability to save the people for whom he died. We owe the powerful hymn we sang a short while ago to Aurelius Prudentius, who wrote his poetry just after the Creed was finalized to battle against the soul-destroying heresy of Arius.

Of the Father’s love begotten, ere the worlds began to be,  
He is Alpha and Omega, he the Source and Ending he.

Another version of the hymn is found at number 191 (look it up later, not now!): “Of the Father’s heart begotten,” and it includes a number of stanzas omitted in the version we sang. The original poem went on endlessly. Prudentius was a tireless, if sometimes tiresome, writer, but this is one of the truly great hymns of the Church.

“Of the Father’s love, of the Father’s heart, begotten.” That points us to the very essence of the Word, the message, from the bosom of the Father that Jesus came to embody. Having told us in his Gospel of the sending of the only begotten Son by the Father and then of his breathing upon the Church of the Holy Spirit, St. John the Theologian puts it all more succinctly than anyone else before or since by saying in his First Epistle, “God is love” (I Jn. 4:8). And that, of course, is the essential meaning not only of Christmas, but of the whole Gospel and the whole Creed: God is love. But having stated it succinctly, John will not let it dissolve into some generic, generalized truth. It has to have all of the specificity of the love that was spelled out in the incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension of the eternally begotten Son, *and . . . and* it has to have its concrete manifestation in the way those who celebrate the birth in time of the eternally begotten *live* in this world he so loved. I’ll let St. John make his point in his own words: “In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent

his *only begotten Son* into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another” (I Jn. 4:9-11). Let us let him who was eternally begotten of the Father’s love ever beget in us that same love.

---

Sermon preached by the Rev’d Fr. Voris G. Brookshire at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL, on the Feast of St. John, Apostle & Evangelist, December 27, 2009. Copyright © 2009.