

THE LAST GOSPEL I: “IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD”

For a good many months, albeit with interruptions and digressions, we have been making a journey through the various parts of the Mass down through the “Blessing of God Almighty” which we considered two weeks ago, that benediction in which the Triune Name is invoked and his blessing signaled to the congregation with the sign of the cross. In response the people bless themselves, as we say. By signing themselves they take the blessing upon them.

The Mass is then over, and yet just after blessing the people, the priest turns back to the altar, to the Gospel side, and says yet once more, “The Lord be with you,” and, after the people’s response, announces a Gospel reading. As at the principal Gospel of the Mass, he and the people, cross themselves on the forehead, lips and heart that they may properly respond to the lesson, the priest saying, “Here beginneth the Gospel according to John.”

It is a strange custom to many. Why isn’t the end the end. I had a friend who once cuttingly remarked to the senior pastor after the sermon, “I liked your first ending better than your second or third.” It wasn’t meant as a complement! But the Mass is something like that. We are told, “Depart in peace.” Then we remain there in our places for the Blessing. And after that, it’s like we act as though we left out something and read another Gospel.

It may help us to know that this is not really intended as yet another Gospel lesson. The practice grew up in the Middle Ages, a very late development as far as the Liturgy is concerned, that after Mass was ended a number of congregants would crowd around the sanctuary asking the priest to read over them yet a further lesson from the Gospels as a blessing. It is understandable that this practice was soon changed so that the priest would read the same lesson over everyone that stayed. In time this became usually the Prologue to the Gospel of John, because of its popularity and appropriateness. Another practice that fed into this development was that many priests would quietly recite John’s Prologue to themselves as they returned to the Sacristy. Thus, strictly

speaking, the Last Gospel is not really an additional part of the Mass, nor is it intended as another Gospel Lesson read for the purpose of instruction. It is rather of the nature of a post-communion devotion or blessing, and many churches no longer use it. It is, however, a most appropriate reading for its purpose for it sets our reenactment of the sacrifice of Christ in the Mass in the framework of eternity and the purposes of God from before the beginning of creation. Nicholas Gihl wrote, “The profound, magnificent contents of St. John’s Gospel are in most beautiful harmony with the mysteries of faith celebrated on the altar.” He continues,

This Gospel [of John] depicts the divinity and the divine efficacy of Jesus Christ; it shows in what manner all the blessings of creation and redemption proceeds from Him. –It may also be appropriately applied to the Eucharistic Saviour; for the Sacrifice and the Sacrament of the altar is truly a memorial of all the mysteries of the Incarnate Word. On the altar, to the eye of faith, the glory of His divinity is revealed under foreign and veiled appearances; thence He pours out light and life, truth and grace into all susceptible hearts. But, moreover, on the altar the world of darkness does not recognize Him; there, too, many do not receive Him, –hence they do not become children of God, but remain in the shadow and night of death.¹

St. Augustine quotes the saying of a contemporary to the effect that this text ought to be spelled out in gold letters in some prominent place in every church. Given all of that and the fact that the Last Gospel comes from the pen of our blessed Saint John, I do not intend that it shall fall into disuse here.

As we begin to reflect on this richest of passages, we need to remember that the whole of John’s Gospel was, in a very literal sense, the *last* Gospel. Of the four canonical Gospels, his was the last to be written, and this fact itself is significant. John who was the youngest of the apostles and who outlived them all by several decades, had time to reflect over maybe sixty years on the life of his Master, the Beloved against whose shoulder he had reclined at the Last Supper. *Mark* wrote his Gospel first and with the greatest dispatch. Eager to get right to the ministry of Jesus, he took time first to tell us only about John the Baptist, the forerunner who introduced the Lord. *Luke* wanted to give a full account of Jesus’ birth and of the events that led up to it, beginning with the

¹ Nicholas Gihl, *The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass: Dogmatically, Liturgically and Ascetically Explained* (St. Louis & London: B. Herder, 1946), p. 769.

two annunciations, that to Zachariah concerning the birth of John the forerunner and that to Mary concerning the birth of our Lord. *Matthew* wanted to set the birth most fully against the Jewish background, and so went back further. He wanted to trace Jesus' royal roots, and did so, back to King David and then once more further back to Abraham, the father of faith. So Matthew begins with a genealogy. These three Gospels may have been around a quarter of a century or longer before John wrote his in the last decade of the first century. Where will he begin and how will he tell his story, a story he says would never be exhausted in all the books the world could contain? There was so much to tell and he alone of the apostles was left to tell it.

Where would he start? John the eagle would soar high above the earth and then fly back through the ages, as it were, . . . to King David, yes, for he too would write in chapter 7, "Has not the scripture said that the Christ is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was" (7:42). So he goes back to King David and then on to Abraham, of whom John would write in chapter 8 that Jesus said that Abraham saw his day and rejoiced (8:56). John would also record that Jesus went on to say, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, before Abraham was, *I am*" (8:58). So John cannot stop with Abraham. The eagle will fly back further and further until he reaches the very edge of time and the beginning of holy writ, to Genesis the book of beginnings, and of that book the first chapter, and of that chapter the first verse, "In the beginning God created heaven and earth," and from there there was no further that he could go. Or was there? Going back as far seemingly as he could go, he used Genesis 1:1 as a brief perch and then flew into eternity past. How could he do that? you ask. By the simple use of the verb 'was.' "In the beginning," he began, and we may have thought that that he would start there, but then he says "was," 'was' already in the beginning. He will not begin where Genesis began, in the beginning when God created heaven and earth; he will begin before the beginning. My father used to joke that he was getting ready to commence to begin to start. Well, it's something like that, only more profound. This is the Prologue to the Prologue.

"In the beginning was." We creatures cannot imagine a time before creation, a time before time, but that's where we have to start if we are to understand who this is of whom the Evangelist will write. He is before the beginning and therefore is at the source

of all that is. John will shortly tell us that he is not only *at* the source of all that is; he *is* the source of all that is, but let this sink in for a moment. The one of whom John writes was in the beginning; in the beginning he already was.

But please note that there is more involved here than time. When John wrote “In the beginning,” he was not simply taking us to that beginning point of time which will forever from that moment on be ‘past,’ that point in time toward which all subsequent time looks back and before which time was not. John was writing in Greek, and fortunately for us many English words are of Greek derivation and help us to understand better the rich fullness of some Greek words. The Greek words translated as “In the beginning” are Ἐν ἀρχῇ. Now stick with me. This is very simple. The Greek word Ἐν means in English ‘in.’ That’s easy. And ἀρχῇ, which is translated as ‘the beginning’ means ‘the beginning,’ of course, but carries the fuller connotation of first, first both in time and in primacy. So in our language *archeology* means the study of first things, or ancient cities and artifacts. An *archangel* is first or head of the angels, with primacy and authority over them. An *archetype* is a prototype; and, as Douglas would know, an *architect* is a first builder or master builder, and here you begin to get a better idea of the full meaning of the word. The design of an architect not only lies behind a building, but the building manifests his design and will always reflect that design that was in his mind as long as the building exists. So while John is saying, “In the beginning,” it is true that he refers to the beginning and deliberately echoes Genesis 1:1, but he also alludes to this other meaning of the word ἀρχῇ which carries the sense of original design. All of that was expressed when John wrote, Ἐν ἀρχῇ, “In the beginning.”

Now, I don’t think I have lost you yet, so let’s move on with our Greek translation. John wrote, “In the beginning was the Word,” and the Greek term translated by ‘Word’ is Λόγος. Now Λόγος is not the word for ‘words’ such as those I am speaking now or those that are written upon a page; there’s another Greek word for that. The Λόγος refers to the content or meaning of words, that which words are meant to deliver. When John F. Kennedy died I was up in the stacks of the seminary library, and a friend came up and said, “Did you get the word?” It was not any particular spoken word that he was referring to but the message, the meaning of the words.

So John begins, “In the beginning was the Word.” But here we must pause again, for while Λόγος means ‘word’ in the sense I’ve explained, it means more than that. Λόγος is another Greek word that lies behind many some English words. That Λόγος lies behind the English word ‘logic’ may help us to understand that beyond the sense of ‘word’ it carries the not unrelated sense of ‘reason.’ The same Greek word lies behind the numerous English words that end in ‘—ology,’ meaning ‘study of.’ Geology is the study of the earth; biology is the study of life; theology is the study of God. But it really means more than *the study of*. What one is after in the study is the understanding of. One is seeking to understand the earth or life or God. So Λόγος is not only the word, but the reason and the understanding. John is therefore speaking of the word, the reason and the understanding that was at the beginning and therefore lies behind all that is. St. Augustine explains the meaning simply:

Daily in our speech words dissolve and vanish, because in giving them sound and utterance they disappear. But there is a word within the speaker, which remains within him, for only sound goes forth from the mouth. That which you have understood from the sound is truly and properly called the word. . . . The word that sounds outwardly, is but a sign of the word that remains concealed within, and to which the name more properly belongs.²

“In the beginning was the Word.” This Word is the one of whom John will write.

We must move on here. John continues and says, “And the Word was with God.” Here again we need to stop to consider the original. John here does not use the usual word for ‘with.’ He even uses a different word from that which Jesus himself used in prayer to the Father in chapter 17 for his being “with [him] before the word was made” (Jn. 17:5). If he had used the common word for ‘with,’ the phrase would only mean that the Word was in the presence of God, that the two were together, like two books on a shelf. The preposition here rather is *προς*, meaning toward, from which we get the many English words that employ ‘pro’ meaning ‘for.’ One is pro-active when one is involved with something. Bishop Westcott wrote regarding the preposition,

² *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers; Volume One: From the First Sunday of Advent to Quinquagesima*, tr. & ed. M.F. Toal, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press (reprint), 2000), p. 126. Cf. St. Basil: “For our Word [sic.] brings forth the whole conception of our mind; for what we conceive in the mind we bring forth by word. Our heart is as it were a fountain; the word that is uttered a stream flowing out from it” *Ibid.*, p. 128.

The idea conveyed by it is not that of simple coexistence, as of two persons contemplated separately in company, . . . or (so to speak) in local relation, but of being (in some sense) directed towards and regulated by that with which the relation is fixed. The personal being of the Word was realized in active intercourse with and in perfect communion with God.³

It is a dynamic interpersonal relationship that is involved here, the Word going out to God and God going out to the Word, a perfect communication.

John continues with consummate artistry to complete the thought with a third line: “And the Word was God.” Three things are said about the Word, all strung together with the threefold use of the verb ‘was.’ The Word was in the beginning; the Word was with God (in active intercommunion); and the Word was God. This is obvious Trinitarian language in the sense of expressing both a distinction and an identity, between God and the Word.

But once again the English translation blurs something of the original. Try to picture the three lines in your mind. First, “In the beginning was the Word.” ‘Word’ here is at the end of the first line. The end of the first line then becomes the beginning of the second line: “The Word was with God.” Then in the original, though not in the translation, that which is at the end of the second line: “And the Word was with God,” becomes the beginning of the third line: “And God was the Word.” It makes little difference how you translate it: “The word was God” or “God was the Word.” I know why the translators translate it as they do, because the word God here has no direct article. But the force of the lines is more powerful when read in the original:

In the beginning was *the Word*;
and *the Word* was with *God*;
and *God* was the Word.”

We’ll have to return to this next week before we move on, but we can already see the profound implications of this. C. K. Barrett put it in a nutshell, “John intends that the whole of his gospel shall be read in the light of this verse. The deeds and words of Jesus are the deeds and words of God; if this be not true the book is blasphemous.”⁴ And we could add, but since they are true they are a matter of life and death for us. At the end of the strong teaching about the bread from heaven and eating and drinking the flesh and

³ Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John* (London: James Clarke & Co., Ltd., 1958), p. 3.

⁴ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 1955, p. 130.)

blood of Christ in chapter six, John writes, “After this many of the disciples drew back and no longer went about with him. Jesus said to the twelve, ‘Will you also go away?’ Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and come to know, that *you are the Holy One of God*’ (6:66-69). Let these words be ours as well: “You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and come to know, that you are the Holy One of God”.

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