

JOHN AS MIDWIFE AND QUARTERBACK

Hebrews 1:1-4; John 1:1-14

Every Christmas Day, I encounter an old friend in these first fourteen verses of John's gospel. It still fascinates me that my mother had me memorize the first five verses when I was six or seven years old. It must have been her favourite passage of Scripture; and when I think of all the challenges she knew in her life, it seems to me that she lived by the promise and unequivocal good news proclaimed by John. For me, it has done nothing less than guided me in an understanding of God's mercy and grace, an understanding that I might not have encountered so directly elsewhere in the Bible: it really is an amazing insight into how God works to establish a new covenant with people through Christ Jesus.

Interestingly, in reading these first verses of John this year, I became aware of how the passage moves; how it starts really as a kind of pinprick of light – a thought, an idea, a premise – and then grows and grows into a revelation of the great and saving purposes of God, a blaze of glory, if you will.

But as I read and re-read it, it occurred to me that the passage itself parodies the birth process; that it is the thing it describes; that Saint John the Evangelist is also Saint John the Midwife, coaching, encouraging the birth of a new understanding of God – an understanding which captures the depth and significance of God's saving and redeeming action in Christ Jesus, God's Word for a world that never tired/never tires of filling in the blanks where God's silence is concerned and getting it wrong.

Follow along with me as we all become midwives with this passage. As the water breaks, we receive the groundwork for John's understanding of something completely new to the tradition of creation stories, something quite Greek, in fact. He declares that in the beginning it was the creating Word, the logos, which was first and foremost at the beginning of time.

As he writes, however, the Word becomes dynamic, having a life of its own. It is a creating Word, bringing things, people to life: "all things came into being through him." And because later, he identifies the Word as Christ Jesus, we can read here a similar understanding to Jesus' cosmic dimensions as understood by the writer of Hebrews in today's Second Reading. But the Word's identity does not remain cosmic: very shortly, within a sentence, he begins relating to people, becoming their "light," i.e. their essence, their life, which overcomes the darkness, i.e. death. We enter the transition of the birth process: we shift from eternity to history, beginning with an account of John the Baptist. In this passage, an intentional bridge is built to the introduction, but the light is now identified in an individual whom John testifies to. We continue with a description of the person who is light and Word, but he is not yet named as either Jesus or Christ.

Some historical facts are disclosed – the calm before the hard labour: the ignorance of the world concerning God's intervention in Jesus Christ (who is still not named); his rejection by his own people – certainly a reference to how things ended; his success in reawakening the essentials of faith in people. "Giving people power to become the children of God" is an interesting observation which may relate to baptism, conversion, and the mission to the Gentiles.

The head crowns, and then the culmination or "birth" of this passage comes in verse 14 when John makes full disclosure of his understanding of what is happening or what has happened: "the Word became flesh and lived among us!" He identifies Jesus as the Son of God indirectly, but then goes on to indicate Jesus' especial quality of being "full of grace and truth" Without question, this is an event that is full of blessing, a full sign of God's presence with people: God's Word is spoken, God's Word is born into the world and will be identified as such.

But there was another image that came to mind as I read this passage – nothing nearly as poetic as John as Midwife. I'm not sure I had football on my mind when I started reading the lesson, although it's true that there will be no shortage of games on TV over the next week or so. But it is the movement in this passage and John's intention that people not continue rejecting God's Word that prompted the image I saw in my mind's eye.

When I was in elementary school, my friends and I would have pick-up games of football on the side lawn of the school on weekends when most students would be anywhere but school. It got me into the game, although it clearly was not one of my areas of strength. Later, in high school, we had a steady diet of football in the autumn: we would have shortened periods so that the whole student body could watch our school team from the bleachers at the school football field. Because we knew all the players and were hyped into our school cheers by our cheerleaders, we were riveted to the games. And I expect it was there and then that I really began to love the beauty and elegance of a completed pass. The center hiked the ball to the quarterback who, because he had called the play, knew where his good receivers would be, and every few plays would make a magnificent pass down the field over the heads of all the other players to the receiver deep in the field who in catching the ball would make a first down. More often than not, the receiver was tackled, but every once in a while, the pass would not only be completed, but the receiver would be able to dodge and outrun the defense on the other teams, coursing into the end zone for a touchdown. And, of course, the stands would erupt with cheers and shouts. We had no shortage of school spirit in the schools I attended. Pardon my enthusiasm, but there is nothing quite as beautiful as a completed pass, and especially a completed pass that then takes on new life when the receiver takes the ball and runs with it.

And I see this action in beginning of John's gospel. He is so inspired with this idea of Jesus as the Word of God that he goes through play after play when it seems the team can't even gain a yard; and then finally in verse 14 the quarterback lobs an almighty throw to a receiver halfway down the field and they complete the pass: the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us, and we see his glory, full of grace and truth. The stands erupt in cheers: God's will is accomplished.

And so this passage still works on me, every time I read it. And my sense is that John was very intentional about the movement he creates; that he wants us, his readers, to internalize this good news of God and take for ourselves the momentum he give us. My guess is that he wants us to be evangelists too who will be able to encourage and coach the birth of the living Word in our community and among those who are close; that he wants us to complete the pass he throws to us and then run with it. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was Jesus, given, born, passed to us to be used for the deep needs of our world.