

Logos, o Theos, and the Trinity: A morning prayer homily for the First Sunday after Christmas.

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Good morning!

When Pastor Lauren+ asked me if I would lead morning prayer with you today, of course I said yes. It's an honor to serve in the liturgy, and it's also a lot of fun. So, thank you for letting me guide us through today's service.

When I read through today's Gospel reading, I realized we had hit the jackpot. I feel that John Chapter 1 is one of the most deeply moving passages in the entire Bible. How brilliant of the lectionary editors to place this reading on the first Sunday after Christmas. For me, at least, this is the centerpiece in Christianity: To recast the birth of baby Jesus into a cosmic context.

Unlike Dr. Khannanov and others in our parish, I certainly am not a scholar in these metaphysical matters. But please allow me to share with you a little of why this one chapter among a thousand speaks so deeply to me.

Imagine a young wide-eyed 17-year-old coming to St. John's College to study the Liberal Arts and hopefully gain some insights into life and God. All Johnnies share the same curriculum, and we all start with the Greeks, leading with Homer and followed by pre-Socratic philosophers, all the while attempting to learn ancient Greek.

The pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, who lived 500 years before the birth of Christ, introduced us to the word "Logos", which he used to describe a principle of order and knowledge that underlies the universe. Logos represents an inherent structure and harmony that exists in the Universe outside the flux and change that we experience.

Few of Heraclitus' writings remain, but those we do have provide gems of insight that spans millennia. In fragment 50, he states: "Listening not to me but to the Logos, it is wise to agree that all things are one." And yet he fully recognizes that the concept of Logos is difficult, as expressed in the first fragment of his writing: "Though this Logos is true evermore, yet men are as unable to understand it when they hear it for the first time as before they have heard it at all."

Fortunately, there were folks who recognized the truth of Logos and carried the torch. Logos is the central concept of Stoicism, starting with Zeno of Citium in the 3rd century BCE, refined by both slaves and aristocrats, fully practiced by the last great Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, and the subject of many new top selling books on Amazon. For the stoics, Logos represents

1. the rational structure of the Universe,
2. a divine and benevolent order,
3. the source of both moral and natural laws
4. and human rationality, in which human reason is actually a fragment of the universal Logos.

As a young Freshman and Sophomore reading about Logos, I could feel my mind opening up to new possibilities that were greater I could have asked or imagined.

I share this not only for context in my own Logos journey, but because I think it speaks to Wisdom known and experienced throughout our history. Such wisdom is not constrained to Christianity. St. Vincent of Lerins from 400 AD said “In the Catholic Church itself, every care should be taken *to hold fast to what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all.*” Commenting on this quote, Father Richard Rohr adds “In other words, if it is true, then it has to be true everywhere and all the time, or it is not true!”

The Greeks were clearly on to something with Logos.

So you can probably imagine my head exploding when our sophomore class read John’s Gospel in the original Greek. The familiar translation of this Gospel, which I did not use in today’s reading, begins with “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

That “Word” is, in fact, Logos.

And, as we know, that word is loaded with meaning imprinted from the very first Western philosophers. It drips with so much meaning that the translator I used today, David Bentley Hart, left it untouched in his translation: “In the origin there was the *Logos*, and the *Logos* was present with GOD, and the *Logos* was god;”

Echoing Heraclitus’ sentiment that the Logos is hard to understand and ever harder to explain, David Bentley Hart writes a postscript to his translation titled “A note on the Prologue of John’s Gospel: An exemplary Case of the Untranslatable.”

There may perhaps be no passage in the New Testament more resistant to simple translation into another tongue than the first eighteen verses—the prologue—of the Gospel of John... it very elegantly proposes a theology of the person of Christ that seems to subtend the entire book, and that perhaps reaches its most perfect expression in its twentieth chapter [hold that thought]. But it also, intentionally in all likelihood, leaves certain aspects of that theology open to question, almost as if inviting the reader to venture ever deeper into the text in order to find the proper answers.

Hart goes on to discuss the centuries of meaning imbued into the word Logos:

For one thing, the term logos really had, by the time the Gospel was written, acquired a metaphysical significance that “Word” cannot possibly convey; and in places like Alexandria it had acquired a very particular religious significance as well. For the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo, for instance, it referred to a kind of “secondary divinity,” a mediating principle standing between God the Most High and creation.

But the conundrum grows deeper, as Logos is not the only word used in the first three verses of the Gospel. The equally complex word, Theos (“God”), led to centuries of wonder, debate and outright argument during the “Nicene Settlement” from which came our Nicene Creed. The theological debates centered mostly around how John used the word “Theos” ... with an article (“The God”) and without an article (“god”).

I quote from Hart:

The Greek of John’s prologue may reflect what was, at the time of its composition, a standard semantic distinction between the articular and inarticular forms of the word theos: the former, ὁ θεός (ho theos), was generally used to refer to God in the fullest and most proper sense: God Most High, the transcendent One; the latter, however, θεός (theos), could be used of any divine being, however finite: a god or a derivative divine agency, say, or even a divinized mortal. And so early theologians differed greatly in their interpretation of that very small but very significantly absent monosyllable.

In his translation, Hart spells “o theos” (The God) with all capitals: GOD. Theos without the article is lowercase god. You can’t hear that spelling very well when the chapter is read, which is why I enlisted Ildar to musically lend the depth that “o Theos”, God Almighty, deserves.

In the origin there was the Logos, and the Logos was present with GOD (o theos), and the Logos was god (theos); This one was present with GOD in the origin. All things came to be through him, and without him came to be not a single thing that has come to be... No one has ever seen GOD; the one who is uniquely god, who is in the Father's breast, that one has declared him.

Incidentally, since we are talking about nuances of GOD and god as reflected in John's grammar, recall that David Hart commented that Chapter twenty represents the ultimate interpretation of Chapter 1. Chapter twenty describes Christ appearing to Thomas and instructing him to be faithful. Thomas answers and says to Christ, "My LORD and my GOD" (o theos), God Almighty.

And now, here we are in the second Sunday of Christmas. With Christ as Logos. Christ as the very blueprint and heartbeat of creation. Christ as Lord and savior. Christ as God Almighty. And Christ made manifest crying in a lowly manger.

Our journey through language and theology has perhaps pointed us to the Christ mystery. Language has led us to the mystery, but it cannot lead us through the mystery. Perhaps John left his text deliberately ambiguous, as Bentley Hart suggests, so that the Holy Spirit can pick up where language falters.

Our rational minds can never see GOD (o theos). GOD must come down to us.

In that intimate and yet unknowable miracle of God With Us, *our only true response is silent praise.*

And so, I invite you to conclude this little homily with me by singing our offertory, an ancient hymn of silence and praise: "Let all mortal flesh keep silence" H-324.

*Let all mortal flesh keep silence
And with fear and trembling stand
Ponder nothing earthly-minded
For with blessing in His hand
Christ, our God, to earth descended
Our full homage to demand

King of kings yet born of Mary
As of old on earth, He stood
Lord of lords in human vesture
In the body and the blood
He will give to all the faithful
His own self for heavenly food*

*Rank on rank, the host of heaven (rank on rank, the host of heaven)
Spreads its vanguard on the way (on the way)
As the Light of light descendeth
From the realms of endless day
That the powers of hell may vanish
As the darkness clears away*

*At His feet, the six-winged seraph
Cherubim with sleepless eye
Veil their faces to the presence
As with ceaseless voice, they cry
"Hallelujah! (Hallelujah!) Hallelujah!
Alleluia, Lord Most High!
Alleluia, Lord Most High!"*