

Christ, the Eternal Word

John 1:(1-9) 10-18

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

14 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. 15(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") 16 From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Since the beginning of Christian worship and in many other religious communities the congregation praises God for what has been done through songs of praise. One I remember as a child was a call-and-response. The song leader called out the words “Father I stretch my hands to Thee,” and the congregation sang out the words in chorus. Then the leader said “No other help I know.” The congregation then sang those words. The last two calls were “If Thou withdrawn thouself from me...or whether shall I go?” I assume there were several reasons for singing this way...maybe they could not afford song books...I am sure it was a way of teaching the word of God in a way easy to remember...and a way of

reminding people during the week how they had to rely on God to help them through the difficulties of life. We are told by commentators that this passage from the first chapter of the Gospel of John is a Christian hymn of the church to teach the members that Jesus, the Savior of the world, the Messiah of the Jewish people, exists, not just as a babe in a manger in Bethlehem, or a child and youth in Galilee, or even a man who taught about God's reign and demonstrated God's compassion for people of low estate, or who died and rose again for our salvation, but was in the beginning with God as the Word, the Light, and the creative power of God...that he always existed and will always exist!

In the first stanza of this hymn of John, we are introduced to the Word, Jesus, and we learn of his origin, his place, and his power, as "the darkness did not overcome it." We also learn of John the Baptist, one "sent from God," the "introducer" of Jesus—"the true light."

In John's hymn we are told of Jesus' entry on the world stage. "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him" (v. 10). As we ponder this pronouncement of our state, we can understand it. When light suddenly appears, it takes time for the eyes to adjust. In the initial moments of light, we may not really know what we are seeing, especially if we have been in the dark for a long time. As one comes out of the dark, there may be recognition of silhouettes in the light. The image may be familiar, but we do not quite know what it is. In many ways, this is how the world received Jesus. Jesus "came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him" (v. 11). Perhaps it was hard for people to know and accept him because they had been living in darkness for so long.

Additional words of the hymn provide the movements of the process of knowing. And in these movements we can begin to identify Jesus more practically and identify with him more clearly: "the world came into being through him; yet

the world did not know him." In a very real sense, with these verses, John is already introducing us to the passion narrative; the horror and the injustice of being responsible for so much and yet being unknown.

First, there is the experience of not being known, not being recognized for who he was. We too know the pain of being unrecognized for who we are and what we have done and can do. That unknownness is something to be overcome. Jesus, the Word, was and is in our midst, undergirds our life, and yet we did not and still do not know him. There is within this verse 10 an implication of the unfolding process. The first step in that process is awareness. We begin, as the world begins. We "did [do] not know him." We might well say that our coming to know Christ begins in ignorance. And in our ignorance we do not even know what we need to know! We are therefore helpless. If we were left there, there would be no process of knowing in which to participate. We would simply be in a "state" of unknowing. But here the process of knowing begins.

Second, we are told that "he came to what was his own." The initiative to bring us into a new state of knowing comes from outside of ourselves. This initiative comes from God. People often, living in a state of ignorance, are not aware of the health that is possible for them. Someone must reach out to them, often in the name of God, to bring them into an awareness of what they need. We all begin by needing to know that we are needy. We reach out to others with compassionate understanding, knowing that others, like us, may not know what they need until it is offered to them. Jesus is the embodiment of God's grace. We can be the embodiment of Jesus' extension of himself to all humanity.

To believe what one is seeing sometimes takes a leap of faith. It means trusting in something not quite understood. To believe in Jesus Christ as God in the flesh means relying on that something within that allows one to trust. It means opening up the heart to believe that God has so much love for humanity that God

wants to walk in our shoes. We are compelled to accept the possibility that God chose to live as one of us—to be one with us.

Third in this unfolding process: disbelief, remember "his own people did not accept him." We certainly know human nature well enough to know that offering good news to someone is not a guarantee that it will be received happily. Disbelief grows out of any number of things: fear that daring to hope will result only in further disappointment; recognition that acceptance of good news brings responsibility; numbness that makes new reality difficult to comprehend. Our sharing, reflective of Jesus' purpose in the world, is not to assure acceptance. Rather, we come to introduce good news, a new reality, into a previously uncomprehending context.

When the light comes, one must choose either to stay in the anonymity of darkness or to move forward in the familiarity of light. Darkness is somehow relaxed and distant. Light is intimate in the midst of visibility and understanding. The question we each must answer for ourselves is, would you rather live your life in the dark or in the light?

The fourth stage, if the third stage is overcome, is one of receiving new power, or energy. And it is more than that. It is recognition of who we are, and becoming who we were created to be: "to all who received... he gave power to become...". And, it is a gift to us, who began with not even knowing who we were or what we could become. The rest of this powerful passage is an expression of the joy that comes with such recognition.

Jesus came to the world to bring the spiritual gift of light. Light has a way of making things look better. We can see more detail and color. Light creates warmth and gives us a richer point of view. With this in mind, Jesus Christ came into the world as light, so those of us who have the desire to know God better can see God, through Jesus Christ. We can make the choice to accept the light and adjust to the

light as people who choose to accept God and adjust to life in the midst of God's revelation to the world. In the light, we can better see things as they really are, and we can see truth placed before us.

Words of John's hymn are a powerful and graphic description of the unfolding process of God's love revealed in Christ. We all are called to share the Good News with one another. As sharers of the Word, we are called to recognize the helplessness of many who do not even know what is possible. Our recognition of their helplessness, combined with an awareness of God's recognition of our helplessness, can become an occasion—or perhaps a call—to offer them good news. That news, of course, is that they are more than they even know. Our bringing them that message may generate instant gratitude, but in more cases it will first generate disbelief. To believe would be to take a risk. So, we stay with them, still reflecting the sustaining love of Christ. We will hope to share with them the joy that comes with the recognition of who we are and whose we are. Then we, and they, become more of who God created all of us to be.