

Christmas 1 – Year C – The Joys of Mystery***John 1:1-18 – 12/27/09*****The Rev. Canon Lance Beizer**

Today's Gospel reading is simply the most heard of all of the readings in our lectionary – for good reason. It encapsulates in a very brief space the essential understanding for Christians such as we of what the incarnation is all about. It is not only quite beautiful, but also a marvelous passage to sit and contemplate. And doing that while preparing this homily sent me back to my teen years. Let me tell you about my experience, not so that you can learn more about me, but so that you might get an insight into a way of thinking about our religion that, although built into our prayer book, is simply not very compatible with life in our contemporary world.

When I was a student at Hotchkiss, I was a real know-it-all. I was tempted to put what I considered pretty esoteric Christian doctrines into the same category as the tales of the Brothers Grimm and the practice as something arcane and too medieval by far. The headmaster my senior year had been dean of the Episcopal Cathedral in Harrisburg, PA; so on a number of occasions I went to his office to ask him to explain, in language I could relate to, the mysteries of the Christian religion, to which his reply seemed always to be that each one couldn't really be explained because, said he in reply to each inquiry, "It's a mystery." Well, I'm here today to tell you that not only is mystery not so bad, but that it can bring us closer to both God and each other. In fact, when you think about it, when we recite the words of the Nicene or Apostles' Creed every week, we are participating in another exercise that falls into the category of mystery.

So, before we look more carefully at this marvelous passage, maybe we ought to think just a bit about what mystery actually means. I know that some of you are, like me, devotees of one or another of the large number of fine mystery writers whose works line many shelves in our local bookshops. If so, the word "mystery" surely already has a sense of meaning for you. But be careful, because the mysteries that we enjoy reading, whether by Conan Doyle or Agatha Christie, or Robert Parker, are different not in degree but in kind from the mysteries of our religion.

When Sherlock Holmes has to discover who killed someone, he follows a chain of clues from which he makes certain deductions. As you may recall, his ability to make deductions is what distinguishes Sherlock from all those others, like Inspector Lestrade or Dr. Watson, who are his ostensible inferiors. In other words, in the context of these stories the nature of mystery is that it be capable of being understood and resolved – of essentially being demystified. It's like a mathematical problem that can be solved – to which there is one single answer.

By contrast, when we speak of the mysteries of our religion, or of any religion for that matter, we are referring not to something that is capable of being reduced to

easily understood concepts, solved the way a math problem can be solved, but to something that may be contemplated and savored – to which we may be able to gain insights and glimmers of understanding – but which we shall never be able to understand fully – at least while we’re here on earth. You may well think in this regard, as I did as I wrote it, of Paul’s wonderful observation in his first letter to the Corinthians that “now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.” In other words, by its very nature we cannot hope to understand completely the transcendent, the things of God’s world.

Actually, that’s one of the most interesting aspects of our religion. There are those folks who believe they understand exactly what God is like and how we fit into his universe. They look at the Bible for their answers and read it in the most literal way possible, out of fear that, if they should find a single assertion in it less than credible, the whole of it will fall apart in the same manner as a display of soup cans in the supermarket might clatter into a disorganized heap if a single can is removed. Christ is not the center of their religion: The Bible is. Their slogan: “The Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it.”

But, of course, there are lots of things in the Bible that prove almost impossible to take literally. You may remember one of the most interesting of the movies of a generation ago, *Inherit the Wind*, which was about the teaching of the theory of evolution by a young science teacher in Tennessee named Scopes. Although the names were changed in the process of fictionalizing it, Spencer Tracy plays the role of the lawyer, Clarence Darrow, who represented Scopes. He puts questions to the actor playing the character who represents William Jennings Bryan, the three-time Democratic presidential candidate, who appeared as a Bible expert in opposition to the teaching of evolution.

If Adam and Eve had two children, both boys, and one was killed, where did Cain get a wife, he asks? If the Bible says that the sun stood still for a day, does that mean that it really goes around the earth? If not, must it not mean that the earth stopped revolving, with all of the implications of that sort of event? The answer, of course, as it had to be, was that God can do anything.

Lest you think, I’m picking on the poor, benighted fundamentalists, let me be quick to point out that the skeptical can be just as annoyingly unable to approach the mystery of the relationship of our world to God’s with the kind of humility it requires. There has been a spate of books lately by writers proclaiming themselves to be atheists. Richard Dawkins is undoubtedly the best known of them. It’s easy to find fault with their polemical attitude towards Christianity by pointing to the fact that they are really doing battle with only one form of the religion – the most conservative. Nevertheless, what is unacceptable in the fundamentalist *Christian* must be equally unacceptable in the fundamentalist *skeptic*.

All of which brings me back to today’s Gospel. It’s a text that has helped me considerably with my own doubts and attempts to understand our religion’s claims –

and, even more important, my life-long promptings to find my own way to God. I've never been able accept the packaged form of specific beliefs, often declared to be cold, hard facts by those who teach Christian doctrines, yet I have been called again and again into a closer relationship with the one who, in the words of Albert Schweitzer, has come as one unknown. So I thank God for John's Gospel, and especially for this Prologue, which is so full of paradox. *Paradox* – that is, statements that seem to be contradictory but which may yet hold within them a greater truth. For I have found that my own appreciation of Jesus has been greatly enhanced through my struggles to come to terms with those paradoxes.

Here we have that so well known phrase that says that in the beginning the Word was *with* God and *was* God. How can something, at the same time, both be *with* something else and actually *be* that something else? Or again, "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him." The world came into being through someone who was actually in the world? No wonder, we might well suggest, that the world didn't really *know* him! "The Word became flesh and lived among us"? Not a concept that fits very neatly into the Jewish world-view – or, for that matter, into our scientific one. All very frustrating to someone who wants simple answers!

In a way, such statements are not much different from the koans, or riddles, that have made their way to our western world from the Far East by way of Zen Buddhism. You probably know at least the most famous of these riddles, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" The student who is told to meditate on such a riddle has finally, after a lot of agonizing, to reach the inevitable conclusion that an answer that is logically or scientifically valid doesn't really grasp the true nature of the question. Shifting our attention to the deep truths of Christianity, we find that they are just as unable to be put into simple terms as the subject matter of the koans. Instead, we are left to the contemplation of the mysteries of our religion and to wrestle with those mysteries much as Jacob wrestled with the angel he encountered. That so much is a mystery may seem, at least at first, frustrating to us, but each such mystery, including those we articulate each week as we recite the creeds, and participate in as we share in the Eucharist, may ultimately serve as a window, however cloudy it may be, through which we may see from our world of human limits into the glorious world beyond.

AMEN