

The Rev. Ryan Fischer
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Christmas Day
December 25, 2019

Lectionary Year A; John 1:1-14

What is "the Word"? Some might say it's the Bible, which is partially right. Partially right, I said. You see, the Gospel of John, from which we just heard, revealed something much fuller to us than a bound volume. John gave us the concept of Word as logos, "logos" being the Greek word for "word." But the sense contained therein is more abstract (and yet simultaneously more concrete). The Word is God...an idea that strikes us as indefinite and vague. On the other hand, the Word is as definite and clear as the One who is born among us today -- Jesus Christ.

In an episode of M*A*S*H from 1982, Father Mulcahy met one of his heroes, a boxer known as "Gentleman Joe" Cavanaugh, whose life came to a sudden end at the 4077th because of a massive stroke. Father Mulcahy, being Irish like Cavanaugh and both a boxing fan and boxer himself, confessed to the barely conscious Gentleman Joe that boxing provided for him the balance that he needed as a shy, bookish young lad interested in the "ideal plane" of the Greek philosopher Plato. Boxing, and presumably the style and grace of the pugilistic art, taught him how also to confront the realities of the world...realities that surely as a Catholic priest he could never escape. So, as Father Mulcahy put it, he kept one foot in the "ideal plane" of Plato...and one foot in the boxing ring.

Christ comes to us as the "concrete" Word -- into the boxing ring of everyday life -- born as a real human being in a real place under the most modest and unlikely of circumstances. And yet this same Christ did not compromise his faith in and commitment to the "ideal" from which he came. He was, as the Greek so

beautifully puts it, that true, complete, and ideal logos from which we derive our faith in something genuinely transcendent and of another world. But then he was also fully of this world and taught us what it means to be more authentically human ourselves.

"And the Word became flesh and lived among us..." (John 1:14). This is an account of a God who, in an interestingly Greek sense, comes out of the "ideal plane" and into the real...taking on real human sufferings and afflictions. There is no deeper expression of divine compassion than that which we experience today on the festival of our Lord's Nativity. Think, for a moment, of what occurred when God put himself into the "boxing ring" of human existence. A lot of risk there, including life itself! Surely, everything is perfect where God dwells in that dimension currently inaccessible to us (at least partially inaccessible, anyway). But the same cannot be said about the world in which we live. Actually, not much has changed since Jesus' time. One example? We still have "cruel and unusual" punishment, if not by crosses and crowns of thorns, instead by injustices rendered unto the innocent and unto victims convicted with crimes they did not commit.

"He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him" (John 1:11). Though Jesus was, indeed, the Son of God, such special status did not guarantee him immunity from the anger, jealousy, and spite of those who opposed him. Yet, in teaching us what it meant to be more authentically human, he demonstrated, among other things, that retribution for wrongs done to us was no real solution to injustice. Rather, he showed us that the truly humane thing to do was to turn the other cheek; the only arbiter of justice was and is and always will be God alone.

The best thing to do in this boxing ring is not to fight for one's own honor, but rather to turn the other cheek on behalf of those who cannot fight for themselves.

Perhaps amid the cozy and quaint depictions of the Nativity we lose sight of the reality that God self-sacrificially became "one of us" in order to make the world better...to save a whole bunch of people from themselves...and to show ordinary folks like you and me how to do it. The "transcendent" ideas of faith and hope and peace and love and justice condescended themselves so that we might learn how to live them out better.

God took the ultimate risk, therefore, when we think of that Word -- as vague as it may seem -- "be[coming] flesh and liv[ing] among us." God is as real and as concrete as the floor on which your feet now rest...and God is as lofty and as unimaginable as the infinite universe that extends beyond all human perception. Yet our faith calls us, ultimately, to have both our feet planted firmly in both "planes" or both realities. We believe in something otherworldly and yet, like Christ himself, live in this world. But as Father Mulcahy learned from Plato and "Gentleman Joe" Cavanaugh, this is the balance we both need and treasure. Indeed, Jesus was both fully God and fully human; he was and always will be the Word made flesh. And while we cannot -- and never will -- live up to that standard, we still know what each "plane" looks like.

And, in whatever way we're able, we bring the ideal into the real. One is heaven, the other is a boxing ring. But when you bring the Word with you into the many and various boxing rings of your life, the Word will surely become flesh in you.

Amen.