

In the Beginning, was the Logos!

Sermon

Scripture Reading: John 1:1-7

It is often preached that Jesus Christ, God the Son, possessed a dual nature, Divine and human. It is necessary to throw some light on why God incarnated with such a dual nature. John, in the Gospel account he wrote, brings this out with ample clarity.

At the outset, it may seem that in the Old Testament, God sounds harsh, so much so that many may find it hard to reconcile that impression with the personification of love and peace depicted in the New Testament and with the loving personal God we discover there. In pondering the portrayal of God, Jehovah, in the Old Testament in relation to Jesus in the New Testament, the perception of Jehovah points to a vindictive, capricious and cruel God.

It is a seriously mistaken line of thinking. The God who pours out His wrath against sin in the Old Testament is the same God who will inflict eternal punishment on those who do not believe in His Son Jesus (2 Thessalonians 1:5-10). At the same time, the God who in the New Testament is described as loving the world enough to send His Son for their salvation (John 3:16) is the same God who revealed Himself to Moses as “merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth ... forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Exodus 34:6-7). From Genesis to Revelation, we see both God’s stunning love and His terrifying wrath against sin and wickedness – highlighting the fallacy of a different God in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The New Testament authors consistently claim that the God revealed in the Old Testament is the same God who is now revealing Himself in and through Jesus Christ. Referring to Jesus as the Word, John writes, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:1-3). John’s point is clear: the God of the Old Testament has taken on flesh and lived among us in the person of Jesus Christ. Today we will meditate on these three verses John wrote as a preamble to the Gospel he authored.

John begins his account by making a profound prologue. The very first verse is three assertions about Jesus Christ, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’ (John 1:1). John originally used the expression ‘Logos’ which was translated into English as the ‘Word’. This translation does not express everything that ‘Logos’ means. It is argued that John used the term ‘Logos’ to facilitate a transition from the prevalent theories of his time to the pure Gospel which he proclaimed. In other words, the expression meant something quite different in the Greek philosophical thoughts, from what John meant when he used the word Logos, and that makes it critical for us to take a quick look into this multifaceted topic.

As we delve into the subject a bit deeper, we see that John did not use the word ‘Logos’ for want of a better word or expression to portray Jesus Christ, God the Son. He was, as a matter of fact, demonstrating the real meaning, implications and dimension of Logos. To understand this better, we need to have a basic understanding of what Logos meant in Greek Philosophy. The subject is quite complex and there are several interpretations of the word by many theologians and philosophers. I find the thoughts expressed by Philo (20 BC – AD 50), a Hellenised Jew, easier to understand and make a meaningful comparison with what John meant by the word ‘Logos’, which is the portrayal of the very Christian belief.

When John asserts that the Logos became flesh, he is indeed saying something that was never dreamt of by Philo or other Greek philosophers; but in all other respects, it is their logos, the cosmic Mediator between God and the world, who is the personification of God’s ‘Truth’ and ‘Wisdom’. What John is asserting is that Christ as the Logos is the incarnation of God. According to Philo, God is the absolute Being. God exists for Himself, without multiplicity and mixture. No name can properly be ascribed to Him: He simply is. Hence, in His nature, He is unknowable. It is in these thoughts we come into conflict. Philo argued that God is so perfect and so pure, He cannot come into direct contact with the senseless, corrupt and evil matter, the ‘created’ world, which according to him exists outside of God. Going by that argument, Philo held that the world could not have been created by God’s direct involvement. Hence the doctrine of a mediating principle between God and matter, the divine thought or reason, the Logos, comprised of all the ideas of finite things, and Who created the sensible world by causing these ideas to penetrate matter.

According to this doctrine, to bridge the enormous gap between God and the material world, an intermediary was necessary. God can come down to Logos, thus far and no further, and the world can go up to the Logos, and in no way

can God and the world come in contact except through the arbitration of the Logos. Simplified, Philo described the Logos as someone lower than God; however, the Logos contains the very thoughts of God and is someone higher than anything in the world. This line of thinking was later expanded in Gnosticism, a teaching contrary to the Gospel teachings. Gnostics believed that the world of the ‘public worker’ — the Demiurge, a term meaning literally ‘worker for the people’ — is represented by the underworld, which is associated with flesh, time, and, more particularly, the imperfect, transitory world. The world of God is represented by the upper world and is associated with the soul and perfection. The world of God is eternal and not part of the physical world. It is intangible and timeless, and the Logos finds a place in between.

The contrast between Philo and John is more pronounced than the resemblance. The distinction is not due merely to the acceptance by John of Jesus as the Word (Logos) but extends to the whole conception of God and His relation to the world which has made Christianity a power in the world. Let us look at the main differences, drawing on the classic comparison set out by B. D. Alexander in his article on ‘Logos’ in the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (1915):

1. The Logos of Philo is metaphysical, but that of John is the very thought of Christianity.
2. Philo moves entirely in the region of abstract thoughts, while John’s thought is concrete and active, moving in the region of life and history;
3. Philo’s Logos is intermediate, the instrument which God employs in fashioning the world; John’s Logos is not subsidiary but is God Himself, and as such is not a mere instrument, but the prime Agent in creation and sustenance;
4. According to Philo, the Deity is conceived as an architect who forms the world out of already-existent matter. According to John, the Logos is the absolute Creator. All matter that ever existed was His creation;
5. The idea of an incarnation is alien to the thoughts of Philo and impossible in his scheme of the universe; the “Word that has become flesh” is the very centre and crown of the teaching of John;
6. Philo affirms the absolute incomprehensibility of God, but it is the prime object of John to declare that God is revealed in Christ and that the Logos is the unveiling through the flesh of man of the self-manifesting Deity;
7. Notwithstanding the personal descriptions employed by Philo, his Logos remains a pure abstraction or attribute of God, and it is never brought into relation with human history. John’s Logos, on the other hand, is instinct with life and energy from the beginning, and it is the very heart of his Gospel to declare as the very centre of life and history - the great historical event of incarnation which is to reunite God and man and recreate the world. It is unbelievable that God left the world untouched. Going back to Genesis, we find that God had a direct relationship with mankind. The disconnect happened due to the disobedience of man. Ever since that point in history, God had shown His eagerness to re-establish the relationship. He achieved this through the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, God the Son. Not an intermediary as Philo thought but the Logos as the incarnation is God Himself.

Therefore, for John the Messiah is the Logos Himself, uniting Himself with humanity, and clothing Himself with a body to connect with and save the world. John makes three distinct affirmations:

1. “In the beginning was the Word”: John carries back his history of our Lord to a point before all temporal things. When as yet nothing was, the Logos was. In other words, Jesus pre-existed;
2. “The Word was with God”: Here the personal existence of Jesus is more specifically defined. He stands distinct from, yet in eternal fellowship with, God. The preposition expresses the fact that beyond the fact of coexistence, there exists a perpetual intercommunion. Here he is talking about the union, not fusion;
3. “The Word was God”: Jesus the Logos is not merely related eternally, but identical with God. The notion of inferiority is emphatically excluded and the true Deity of the Word, Jesus, is affirmed.

In these three propositions, we move higher from the eternal existence of Jesus to His distinct personality and further on to His Substantial Godhead. All that God is the Logos is. Identity, difference, and communion are the three phases of the Divine relationship.

Following his prologue in John 1:1-5, John immediately brings in John the Baptist as the witness to his proclamations and assertions in the prologue. ‘John bare witness of him, and cried, saying, This was he of whom I spake, He that cometh after me is preferred before me: for he was before me’ (John 1:15).

So rather than seeing the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament as separate, the truth is that God has not changed (James 1:17). Psalm 102:25-27 notes that in contrast to this world, which will pass away, “thou art the same, and thy years shall have no end” (Psalm 102:27). Hebrews 1:10-12 applies that very same language to Jesus Christ, who later in that same letter is described as “the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever” (Hebrews 13:8).

God's character as revealed in the Old Testament comes into even clearer focus and expression in the New Testament because He has taken on flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.