

In the beginning was the ... the what?

I recently finished listening to the audio book version of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, by Arthur C. Clarke. In 1968, that book was made into a film by Stanley Kubrick. If you have seen the film, one of the things I'm sure you'll remember about it was the amazing soundtrack which included a piece by Richard Strauss entitled *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. I thought about humming the tune for you, but two things stopped me. First, my humming probably wouldn't help, and, second, I'd probably never hear the end of it from my kids. So, instead, I imposed upon the grace and generosity of our organist, Vicki Penny, and she will play a few measures of that tune for you right now. [...] I'll bet that most of you are thinking, "Ah, yes, I've heard that before!"

Well, I mention all this because, whenever I hear the first few verses of today's gospel reading – "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." – that very same music seems to be playing in the background of my mind. It's a very heady piece of writing, and so I suppose it deserves a dramatic piece of music to underscore it. But what's John's gospel trying to tell us about Jesus? And what does all this stuff about "the Word" supposed to mean?

In short, it's a first century attempt to answer the question "Who *is* Jesus?" Now this reminds me of a freshman sociology class I took at Trinity University in San Antonio. One day, the professors were discussing the concept of the "self," with how we perceive ourselves. And they came out with this quote that almost brought the class to its feet in applause. They said:

*I am not who I think I am.
I am not who others think I am.
I am who I think others think I am.*

Whether or not you agree with this statement, it was the sort of quote that college freshmen in the mid-seventies loved bringing home during the Christmas holidays. And we would wait for just the right moment to try it out on our family. And in my mind, it would come about like this: My parents would be at their wits-end with me about something or another, and they would say to me: "Jim, who do you think you are?" And that would be the moment I was waiting for, and my reply would be:

*Funny that you should ask, Mom, Dad.
For I have learned that I am not who I think I am.
Nor am I who you think I am.
I am, in fact, who I think you think I am.*

Now, obviously, parents have no reply to something like this, because their brains are simply spinning out of control, as they try to figure out if this was some sort of backhanded insult, and if

so, if they have time to call the bank and put a stop-payment on the tuition checks for the spring semester.

However, imagine how much fun it would have been if Saint Peter had taken a semester of freshman sociology. Then, when Jesus had asked him, “Peter, who do you say that I am?” Peter could have replied:

*It’s funny that you should ask, Lord.
For I have learned that you are not who you think you are.
You are not who I think you are.
You are who you think I think you are.*

And I can imagine the long silence that would have followed. But (and here it get even more fun), had Peter said that, later on, when the disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee in a boat, and Peter was trying to walk upon the water but was failing in the attempt, and Peter had cried out to Jesus, “Lord, save me,” Jesus could have replied:

*Well, Peter, which one should I save?
The you that you think you are?
The you that I think you are?
Or the you that you think I think you are?*

And Peter would’ve drowned trying to figure that one out. Ah, the way things might have been. But it seems to me that sayings like this are the very thing that send certain people into intellectual spasms of ecstasy. In the sixties, it was: “A critic is someone who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.” [Aaahhh.] And among biblical scholars, it’s always been sayings like: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” [Aaahhh.] And saying like these sound good. They sound like they reveal some eternal truth. But the problem is, what do they *mean*?

I mentioned earlier that the opening verses of today’s gospel was a first century attempt to describe who Jesus was. And it is that, but there’s more to it. For, there is much in the structure of those opening verses to suggest that parts of it were taken from an early Christian hymn. If this is the case, then, in order to really understand what’s being said, we have to sift through what might be layers of artistic license, in the use of words and images, to get down to the nitty gritty of what the author is trying to say.

But there is also another issue being debated in these opening lines, that complicate things even more. It has to do with the role of John the Baptist. For, included in these verses about the Word, is this:

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light. (John 1:6-8)

One of the things I learned at the Virginia Theological Seminary is that, if the authors of a biblical text included a particular assertion in their text, it was probably because the *opposite* assertion was being circulated, either in writing or by word of mouth. And so, if the author of John's gospel makes a point of saying that John the Baptist "was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light," it's probably because there were people who were making the claim that John the Baptist *was* the Light, and that he *was* the Messiah.

Bottom line? What we have in this opening to John's gospel is not only theology, but also poetry, and a good bit of church politics thrown in for good measure. But these words from John's gospel, are only the first of many attempts, throughout the centuries, that people have been trying to make, to describe Jesus, and explain how could God become man, and still be God.

In AD 451, the leaders of the church came out with this definition:

... our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance (homoousios) with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood ...

That may have worked then, in the fifth century, but it doesn't really do much for me in the twenty-first century. Better, but still not perfect, is an attempt made by Madeleine L'Engle, an excellent American writer who died only recently, and who was known not only for her science fiction, but also for her religious writing. L'Engle once wrote, of Jesus:

Particle physics teaches us that energy and matter are interchangeable. So, for [the] love of us recalcitrant human creatures, the sheer energy of Christ changed into the matter of Jesus, ordinary human matter, faulted, flawed, born with the seed of death already within the flesh as a sign of solidarity with our mortality.

Thanks, Madeleine. *Not!* However, maybe, instead of trying to figure the "what," or even the "how" of Jesus, we should be looking at the "why."

In the summer of 1988, I took a trip with some seminary classmates to Israel. We saw many things there, but one thing especially remains in my memory: a visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem; a church build over the traditional sites of the crucifixion and burial of Jesus.

I remember how impressed I was as I walked through the doors into this enormous building. I could hear the sounds of many voices chanting their prayers to God. Somewhere, and seemingly out of place in that ancient building, a pipe-organ played loudly. From above, in the tower, a bell rung in it's deep bass tone. Clouds of sweet smelling incense drifted throughout the

building. I was convinced that we were in a holy place, and I was eager to be in the presence of God. Our group was taken through the whole church. We prayed at the altar of the Crucifixion. I placed my hand into the carved-out niche where a cross could have been placed. I knelt over the spot where the tomb of Christ was thought to have been. We watched as the Greek Orthodox monks and priests processed about, chanting prayers to God. I left that place feeling elated.

Sometime later I realized that one thing was missing from all of this, and that was the warm touch of a living, human hand. It was a wonderful place, but it was all stone and mortar, tile and wood. It was a holy place, but it could not embrace me, tend my wounds, comfort me. I came to realize that, when I left that church, I was actually no closer to God than when I had entered. God was still way up there while I was still firmly fixed to the ground.

It has always been this way. God has always seemed so far away. So, how could the chasm between heaven and earth be bridged? If we could not ascend to God in heaven (and the Tower of Babel story makes that point very nicely) then God would descend to earth. And his first appearance was one that humans instinctively are drawn to: that of a new-born baby.

Why was Jesus born into this world? The New Testament is clear that the reason for Christ's birth is this: so that he could live a good life; so that he could sacrifice himself for others; and, in doing these two things, teach us how to live. *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.* (John 1:14a) Indeed, the Law, which told us *what* to do, had been given to us through the ministry of Moses. But now, through the ministry of Jesus, "grace and truth" have given to us to *enable* us to follow his example.

Thus, I believe that the real meaning of this Christmas season – it is still the Christmas season – is that, just as God has taught us how to live, we are to teach each other. By word and example, by the "grace and truth" of the Gospel of Christ, we are to lead and guide each other. It's that simple.

And so, my friends, the next time you're listening to the music of Richard Strauss, or watching or reading *2001: A Space Odyssey*, remember these enigmatic words that begin John's gospel. And, unless you're pursuing graduate studies in theology, try to let go of the "what" or "how" of God in Christ. Instead, remember the why. Remember that God came into our presence, so that we might be present with each other: leading, guiding, consoling, loving, forgiving. For this is not only the true meaning of Christmas, but it should also be the true meaning for our lives. And it's probably going to be the best Christmas present you can ever give. Amen.