

# Nativity of the Lord Proper 3

25.12.2016  
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## Introduction

Unlike Matthew and Luke, John has no infancy narratives, instead presenting the arrival of Jesus in sweeping cosmological terms. The resulting Prologue to his Gospel is perhaps one of the most well known and best-loved passages of the New Testament. John's beautifully crafted, mysterious, poetic masterpiece provides us with a dense and deep introduction to the multifaceted Jesus who strides through his Gospel. As with the Lucan birth narratives however, 'conflict' is not a theme we tend to associate with this particular Christmas reading, despite the hint in verses 10 and 11 of a less than positive reception to the appearance of the Word. Once again though there are elements and dynamics within the text which we can use to help us delve into aspects of what developing a spirituality of conflict entails. This reflection will focus on two themes – the first implicit in the opening 5 verses with their creation-story resonances, and the second at the heart of verse 14.

## Anchor question

Read the passage several times, including once out loud, and simply savour its cadences. Then choose one verse which particularly draws your attention and reflect on the following questions: what does it tell you about Jesus? In light of that, does it help you to understand anything about your own place in the world, and about the consequences of that in terms of how you live your life?

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## Text

### John 1:1–14

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

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 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.

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## Comment

The way in which John uses his Prologue to establish Jesus' divine credentials as God's logos is not unlike a typical piece of *Midrashic* commentary: the first verses are an exposition on the opening of the book of Genesis, using the Wisdom passage in Proverbs 8: 22–31 as the interpretative key. In directing attention back to 'the beginning' John invites his readers to recall the creation story and the fact that before 'things came into being' under the direction of God and his Logos, a state of primordial chaos existed. In fact the narrative of Genesis 1 is primarily concerned with the imposition of order on chaos: from God's first move against the primal threat of the *Tohuwabohu* (Gen 1:2), via a series of separations and namings, amongst which is the arrival of light, disorder is progressively driven out and order and structure gradually achieved. As such the text reflects the Priestly perspective that chaos is the great menace to creation (cf von Rad). There is a strong link here with the key Old Testament concept of *sh lôm*, which was deeply and organically connected to understanding the world as a place from which chaos has been driven back by God. The pursuit and realisation of *sh lômic* relationships within society was seen as a vital component of keeping those forces, with their destructive potential for individual, society, and nation, at bay.

There is much here which we could also apply to dealing with conflict situations – separating out, recognising and naming aspects of what is happening, or bringing light to bear on hidden dimensions etc. can play a role in attempts to bring order and resolution to a situation of disagreement or strife. However a third element in John's prologue might suggest that this is not necessarily the first point of application for such tactics.

The final verse of the passage is critical in a number of ways to what John seeks to convey both in this Prologue and the Gospel which follows it. As already noted, John makes no reference to the birth of Jesus per se, concentrating instead on establishing Jesus' relationship to God. However in this final verse he asserts the incarnational nature of Jesus' presence on earth – the reality of his enfleshed existence – in a very strong and unambiguous way. In using the same root word – *ginomai* (to come into existence, begin to be, receive being) – as is used in verse 3 in relation to the rest of creation he underlines the humanity of Jesus, that he comes into existence just as we do, that he occupies and acts in the earthly, human realm, just as we do. In John's gospel 'the flesh' is not a locus of corruption but a place of potential: Jesus constantly reaches out and restores the flesh of others, releasing new possibilities in the process; he offers his flesh for the life of the world; it is in his own fleshly existence that God is revealed – 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father' he says in response to Philip in 14:9; ultimately it is through his own flesh that he teaches his disciples what it means to be faithful to God and the imperatives of his Kingdom, what it means to love those with whom we are connected 'to the end'.

Perhaps then, any attempt to bring progress or resolution in a particular situation needs to begin in our own flesh with an examination of ourselves and our relationships to people, processes and ideas – since it is as embodied humans, not disembodied theoreticians, that we act as agents in the world. We need to look critically at our own relationships with others and see whether and to what extent these are governed by the principles of *sh lôm*; we need to recognise and name dysfunctions and prejudices rooted in our own experience which might influence how we respond or act – and offer these to God for healing and transformation; we need to become more aware of areas in our thinking and understanding which need further illumination from the light of the Gospel – and open them up to its radical challenges. Only when we have opened our own chaos to the light of God will we be in a position to contribute to driving back disorder elsewhere.

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## Response

Think about different groups of people whom you 'live among' – family, friends, work, church, groups to which you belong etc. Choose a couple and either list the names of the people with whom you are connected in that context or draw a relational web of those links. Then think about the people and connections represented: are there any which are of have been particularly helpful of life enhancing? How might you celebrate these? Are there any which need attention or repair? How might you nurture these? Spend some time praying for the people with whom you are connected.

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## Prayer

### Prologue

#### Inspiring Word

Move over the chaos within me  
Calling forth form and order  
That I may know you in my shaping  
And, in the shaping  
Surrender my life to yours.

#### Illuminating Word

Pierce the darkness within me  
Calling forth insight and understanding  
That I may know you in my seeing  
And, in seeing  
Follow the way of your Kingdom.

#### Incarnate Word

Indwell the life within me  
Calling forth passion and purpose  
That I may know you in my living  
And, in living  
Embody you for the world.

Amen

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