



## Hopeful Universalism

A sermon preached by the Reverend Carol Cole Flanagan on the Fifth Sunday of Easter, April 20, 2008 at Christ Church, Detroit. Readings: Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10; and John 14:1-14.

Today's gospel is from the farewell discourse in John which comes between the Last Supper and the Garden of Gethsemane. The primary concern is not with what will become of *Jesus* but what will become of his *disciples*. Jesus says to them, "Do not let your hearts be troubled," and everything that follows is an attempt to reassure them.

What follows is a sort of pattern of promises and commands. In a sense the promises of Jesus carry a commission and the commissions imply a promise. The One who sends accompanies those sent. The One who commands them to love empowers them to love. The One who loves expects the loved to love others, and the One who abides with the disciples expects them to go just as Jesus himself was sent.

The three promises are these. First, we will abide with God and that abode has been made ready for us. Next, there is a sure and certain way there. And thirdly, there is a power that will sustain the community of followers on the journey and allow them to do even greater works than Jesus did.

Today I want to address the words that trouble and challenge us. In speaking of the journey to that promised abode, Jesus says, "No one comes to the Father except through me." These words perplex the faithful, so I want to unpack this a bit today beginning by looking at the second person of the Trinity.

If I were to ask you this morning to identify the second person of the Trinity, I have no doubt that all of you would name the person of Jesus Christ, and you would be right. However, if I were to ask where the second person of the Trinity was before the incarnation – before Bethlehem, I suspect we'd be on more uncertain ground.

To help you follow, you can frame what I say in Roman numerals I, II, and III. First, I am going to talk about the *logos* or Word of God. Secondly, I'm going to say a bit about

*sophia* or the Wisdom of God. Then, in Roman numeral III, we can consider what light they shed on today's gospel.

I. *Logos* - To begin, throughout the scriptures there are many references to the Word of God. For us, in our culture, a word is primarily a unit of speech, although it may sometimes be a message. For example, if a colleague tells us of a new development in the workplace, we might say, "Oh yes, I got the word." When a prophet says, "The Word of the Lord came to me..." we understand that the prophet is delivering a divine message. However, in the Hebrew scriptures, the Word is a form of communication much more powerful than what we think of in Western culture and more significant than a unit of speech. It is a "dabar," the Hebrew word for an event, or a "happening." When God speaks, something happens, and you had better look out. You had better keep your eyes and ears open, and your head down. Sometimes, as in Exodus, it comes complete with sound effects – the earth shakes with thunder, the skies flash with lightening, and the mountains tumble into the sea. The first time God speaks is in Genesis. We're told, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep... Then God said, (and here comes the Word.) 'Let there be light...' (Genesis 1:1f) And, kaboom! There was light. When God speaks, it happens. So, the Word or *logos* is the self-communicating presence of God.

Our ancestors understood it as the means by which the world came into being. God spoke, and it happened. The word is both a creating force, (Genesis 1, Isaiah 55:10-11) and a commanding force. Listen for a minute to the word of God as it was given to the prophet Isaiah:

10 For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return there until they have watered the earth...

11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10-11)

There is no difference between word and action. They are one and the same. This is so fundamental that the prophets are known to be true or false prophets on the basis of whether or not the word they delivered happened.

So the *logos* or Word is a mediating force between God and creation, a means of divine creativity and revelation, between a seeking humanity and a self-communicating God. And the Word was made flesh.

Who does not resonate to the glorious prologue to John's gospel?

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being... 14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory... (John 1:1-14)

II. With the birth of Jesus we see the Wisdom of God incarnated in him as well. *Sophia*, the Wisdom of God, also appears throughout scripture, and is often personified as a Divine Lady. We are told (Proverbs 3:19, 8:22-31; Wisdom 9:1-2; 1 Corinthians 1:24; Job 28:25-27; and Ecclesiasticus 24:23) that she is God's companion in the creation of the world, and she too mediates between God and humanity. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus and Wisdom are described in the same language (Matthew 11 and 23). In 1 Corinthians, Paul describes Jesus as the "power and Wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24).

In the Book of Proverbs she describes herself saying:

- 22 The LORD created me at the beginning † of his work, †  
the first of his acts of long ago.  
27 When he established the heavens, I was there,  
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,  
28 when he made firm the skies above,  
when he established the fountains of the deep,  
29 when he assigned to the sea its limit,  
so that the waters might not transgress his command,  
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,  
30 then I was beside him, like a master worker...

Wisdom is said to be more precious than jewels (Proverbs 31:10, Wisdom 3:15, 8:11), a counselor and teacher (Proverbs 8:6-10, 14), and the giver and preserver of life (Proverbs 3:16, 18, 22; 4:13, and 9:6). She, too, serves as mediator between a searching humanity and a self-communicating God.

It is through God's Word and Wisdom that the second person of the Trinity was present and active from the very beginning and throughout the Old Testament period – long before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. So, this is the answer to the question, "Where was the second person of the Trinity before the incarnation - before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth?" The Trinity cannot be divided and the second person of the Trinity was active from the beginning of time.

Consider the Philippian hymn to the pre-existent Christ...

- 6 who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
7 but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.

(Philippians 2:5-7)

III. The Word and Wisdom of God are the means by which the second person of the Trinity was present and active from the beginning. So, what does the pre-existence of Christ, what does the Word and Wisdom of God, have to do with the gospel?

Today, Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." What does he mean? Is it necessary to be a Christian to hope for eternal life? Must one claim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? Does a Hindu baby, born in the streets of New Delhi, who may never hear the gospel have any hope of salvation? If a twelve-year-old in a rural village in southeast Asia dies of malnutrition, without ever having been exposed to Christianity, is that child doomed to burn in hell for ever? Or what of those who are mentally disabled? Or what of those in under-developed parts of the world growing up in primitive religious traditions? If faith is a gift from God, what of those persons who have never received that particular gift? Even in our culture, there are many people with no experience of the church, who have never been brought into the Christian faith, and yet who lead lives of compassion and generous self-giving. Are all of these, well more than half of the world's population, lost forever? Consigned to outer darkness for eternity?

Scripture tells us that God made *all* things, loves *all* creatures, and longs for *all* to be saved. From Isaiah, "I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isaiah 49:1f.). From Acts, Peter says to the gentiles: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in *every* nation *anyone* who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34). Or from I Timothy, "This is right and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires *everyone* to be saved..." Everyone! (1 Timothy 2:3-4).

So, when Jesus says, "No one comes to the Father except through me," does he mean through me, Jesus of Nazareth, or through me, the second person of the Trinity in all its fullness, the *logos* and *sophia*, the Word and Wisdom of God? Is "anyone who fears him and does what is right...acceptable to him," or only those who know him by the name of Jesus, and through the Christian faith? Those who have been properly introduced as it were?

For many years, Rome taught there was no salvation outside the Church, and by that they meant the Roman Catholic Church of course. But even Rome is capable of new insights, and this claim was overturned by Vatican II, having been challenged and refuted from time to time at least as early as the Council of Trent in 1379.

Vatican II put it like this:

Nor is God himself far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all men (sic) life and breath and every other gift (cf. Acts 17:25-28), and who as Savior wills that all men (sic) be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to His grace.” (CE 16).

(From The Documents of Vatican II as quoted by Hans Kung in The Church, published by Image Books of Doubleday by special arrangement with Sheed and Ward, 1976.)

So, the second person of the Trinity guides the consciences and inspire the deeds of those who have never encountered Jesus Christ or been formed in the Christian faith.

We believe Jesus to be both fully human and fully Divine. When Jesus says, “No one comes to the father except through me,” he speaks as the second person of the Trinity who continues to mediate the divine love of God to mortals whether or not they ever know him by name.

Finally, Jesus says, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” All people. (John 12:32) Not just Christians, but all people from all places around the globe and from all times in history.

Because in the end, while human beings *have* the free will to resist, we believe no one will *want* to, that we will find God irresistible, and that God’s will, and God’s promise of salvation for all, will prevail.