

Sermon: 2019/12/29 (1st Sunday aft. Christmas, Year A) - *Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 147; Galatians 3:23-25, 4:4-7; & John 1:1-18_BTR*

[Invite children to the front. Print on letter-sized card pairs of blue and brown eyes, an elephant's trunk, a human nose, etc.]

What do you know about...*genetics*?

"Genetics" - our DNA - is something hiding in all of our cells that makes us who we are.

It determines ("decides") *many* of our "traits," such as whether we have curly hair or straight, etc.

And when mums and dads make a baby together, they "pass" their DNA to their children.

Imagine I have *blue* eyes, for example.

And [?] is my child, (who has, therefore, inherited my genetics).

What colour eyes would they have?

Brown?

[Hand ? the brown-eyes card.]

No?!

And what about if I had a nose like this?

What kind of nose would [?] have?

This one?

[Hand ? the elephant-trunk card.]

No?

Well, Saint Paul wrote a letter to his *Christian* friends in Galatia, who were Jews but had converted to Christianity. And they u set stood that

says that before they became baptised, confessing followers of Jesus they *needed* The Law - written rules - to *constantly* remind them of "right" and "wrong;" but now they have the Holy Spirit (inside) to help guide them.

Let us pray: Dear God, ...

[Dismiss children.]

I *love* the Christmas story:

I love that idea of that angel, Gabriel, suddenly surprising a young woman in her bedroom in some obscure village at the edge of the Roman Empire.

I love the idea that he told her of an impossible thing - that God, *who is spirit*, had taken on human shape in her womb as a vulnerable, fragile foetus.

I love the idea that her husband, Joseph, although initially rightly concerned and, let's face it, probably *very* heart-broken, puts his feelings - of woundedness and shock - to one side, to do the *right* thing.

I love to think about how absolutely *terrified* those shepherds must have been when the 'heavenly host' appeared in the sky above them, singing hymns to the Lord; and how the sheep they were tending probably scatted left and right in a mad panic.

I love the thought that *my* Creator, who even now holds all things together, was laid in a rough feeding-trough, and how, for the first time in His *eternal* existence, had to use senses like mine - a tiny nose to smell the straw that was His bedding; tiny ears that heard cattle "lowing" and people talking and coughing.

It is a *magical*, winsome tale isn't it?

Even when you've heard it, like, a thousand times.

You know, *I* think it is one of the biggest and sharpest "arrows" in the Christian's evangelistic "quiver."

And we've lots in there:

Other "arrows" to convert the "nations" - our neighbors, such as one's personal testimony, and whatever.

But that stuff about the star, and the voice that Zechariah heard in the Temple - the first Christmas says so much about the Gospel;

it expresses so much of the Church's doctrine - about how deeply God must care for us to put Himself at such risk in an impoverished and violent part of the world, with only a carpenter and peasants to protect Him.

As such, it speaks too to the gravity of my sin that He would take such an extraordinary "step:" *to give up glory* for a short, simple life Galilee.

It also says something about the specialness and uniqueness of the Jewish people that they and their history were set apart to be the "vehicle" for the whole thing; the whole episode.

But if this is all true; if the Christmas story is so great in this way, *why on earth* doesn't John employ it in his account?!

Why didn't he describe, for example, the journey to Bethlehem, or that there wasn't room in the inn?

Why, *instead*, does he neglect to name Jesus, calling Him instead as 'the Word' of God, who *was* God and *with* God at the beginning, before the "Big Bang."

Well, we need to appreciate *the context* in which he wrote; specifically, the audience for whom he was (originally) writing:

Was there something peculiar about them that demanded a different kind of approach?

Yes.

Certainly.

As far as these things are possible to discern by "reading between the lines" - as it is said, and with the caveat that any remarks on this topic can only ever be speculative, I do think the hypothesis of the scholar, Alan Culpepper, is plausible, who suggests that John, a Jew - the author - along with *many* friends, was (probably) expelled from a synagogue in Judea for his commitment to Christ as the Messiah by countrymen who were not themselves witnesses to Jesus' miracles as he had been.^[n.1]

And that, *in reaction* - in protest, if you like, he formed a "school" on the *Hellenistic* model; which is to say he founded a *secular* institution that *presented* itself as a place for *philosophical* learning as opposed to a straightforwardly, strictly *religious* congregation.

These "schools" of philosophy were known *throughout* the Greek-speaking world. That is to say, they were everywhere in the eastern Mediterranean - like McDonald's or Subways, or Domino's Pizza here (in America); every town had branches of the same "franchises."

There were the Pythagoreans and the neo-Platonists; the Stoics, Epicureans.

And *many* others.

And they all competed for attention in what was a stimulating and rich intellectual marketplace - quite literally:

Wealthy families would pay good money to send their sons to these academies, as they were known, to learn theories about pretty much everything.

And this heyday for philosophy - for logic and *abstract* thinking - came on the back of *sweeping* disillusionment with the ancestral mythologies and the fantastical explanations that they offered; and *acute* scepticism toward the traditional Greek stories about heroes like Hercules, Perseus, and so on.

In such a competitive, crowded environment, John skilfully and intentionally positioned *his* (personal) reminiscences of Jesus' life - by downplaying the *seeming* fairytale-esque elements of our Savior's birth; and this is a *shrewd*, tactful, *expedient* thing to do.

He wants to "grab" the attention - *the intrigue* - of a wary, *jaded* public.

And so he avoids the appearance of 'Once Upon A Time' and rather "dives" *deep* - He goes "deep" to "unearth" the *fundamental* truths that remain "subterranean"; only implicit in his colleagues - *Luke* and *Matthew's* - narratives.

"Fundamental truths" like the fact that Christmas isn't the true beginning of the story anyway, but "merely" another "milestone" in a *very* long history - a history told in the Old Testament - a "milestone" on the way to an *incredible* climax: the redemption of the whole universe, and the final triumph of 'light' over darkness.

Footnotes:

1. Culpepper, R. Alan (1998), *The Gospel and Letters of John: Interpreting Biblical Texts Series*, Nashville, T. N.: Abingdon Press, 44.