

Sunday, 3 January 2016

[Jesus, Light from Light, true God from true God- Jn 1](#)

[John 1:1-18](#)

Watching a ball bounce across a room is very different than hearing a physicist explain the same event. The physicist would describe gravity, the density of the floor, the rubber's ability to bounce (called the "Coefficient of Restitution"), the force at which the ball was thrown or the height it was dropped from, maybe even variables like the temperature of the room, etc. All of that would be communicated through a swirl of numbers and letters drawn into mathematical formulas that explain what we watched happen with our eyes. It doesn't mean that watching the ball bounce across the room is less true, they are just different ways of explaining the same event. The physicist's explanation is more abstract, but also provides a kind of truth that isn't available to us by simple observation.

The opening of the Gospel according to John is a bit like this. Most of us know the Christmas story. The images sit easily in our minds- Mary and Joseph next to a baby in a manger; Angels; and Shepherds. It is a story that is grasped fairly easily even by children, who can even repeat it after they hear it. That story is accessible to just about everyone- From the young and simple to the mature and very educated. It's like watching a ball bounce across the room. Children will throw the ball and chase after it, but they have no clue of the deeper reality behind what they are doing. There is a layer of reality they aren't aware of.

In the first chapter of John it's as if the physicist comes in and begins to describe to the children what they are doing and begins to describe the forces that are behind the ball's behavior. That maybe sounds a bit cold and boring, so maybe mix the physicist with a poet and Gandalf the wizard. That maybe gets us a bit closer to John. John's Gospel was written after the other Gospels and that means John had more time to understand and unpack his experience with Jesus. (Hobberman sphere).

John brings us right back to the beginning. Not the pregnant woman on her way to Bethlehem, but back to the very beginning. John's opening words are "In the beginning" (1:1) which brings to mind the book of Genesis- "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). John begins, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God" (1:1). The "Word" John is speaking about is the creative and organizing principle of the universe. God created through His "Word". "All things came into being through [the Word], and without him not one thing came into being" (1:3). ... God's Word is one with Him, but it also emanates from Him. John equates Jesus with the "Word".

John can be abstract, which can make him hard to understand. It's easier to think of Mary and the child in the manger. It is an image that ignites the imagination. John can be confusing. How can the Word be both with God and be God? It's a complicated statement. And to help us understand it the Church eventually came to describe God as a Trinity. There is one God. There is one nature, but there are three persons. Each person is both with God and is God. They have unity, but in their persons there is a

distinction- The Father is not the Son; The Son is not the Holy Spirit; and so on.

And as we start to describe the Trinity you might feel like the physicist/poet/magician has entered into the room where the children are playing. Some feel like the children's game is being unnecessarily interrupted. It can feel like confusion is being introduced to a very simple story. Why not keep it simple? ... I want to suggest that if we want to love God not only with all our heart, soul, and strength, but also love God with all our mind that we should pay close attention to what John is saying here about the Christmas story. Understanding what John is saying is not easy, but if we want to understand God deeply I think we need to follow John into the abstraction. Just as if we want to understand what is happening with the bouncing ball on a deeper level, then we will need to follow the physicist into the abstraction of mathematical formulas. As John reflected on his experience with Jesus he came to understand that "the Word became flesh and lived among us" (1:14).

One of the most difficult things John says about Jesus is that in a unique way, to meet Jesus is to meet God. "The Word is God" (1:1) and the "Word became flesh and lived among us" (1:14). John isn't unique in saying this. There are hints all over the New Testament, and Christians have worshipped Jesus of Nazareth as God right from the very beginning. What I would like to do is just to run through some of the reasons Christians believe Jesus is also, in some mysterious way, God. This isn't just difficult to understand, but there are also some who challenge this belief, so It's good for us to understand why Christians say this.

For example, in the Bible, when Jesus forgave a man's sins there were scribes who said, "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mark 2:7). Another time Jesus said, "Before Abraham was, I AM" (John 8:58) and people picked up stones to kill him. ("I AM" is the name of God revealed to Moses in the burning bush). In the letter to the Colossians we read, "[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15). In the letter written to the Hebrews we read, "[Jesus] is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being" (Hebrews 1:1-3). There are lots of other examples I could give from Scripture.

I want to also say that from the very beginning Christians worshipped Jesus as God. If any of you have read Dan Brown's novel the Da Vinci Code you'll know that he thinks that Christians didn't think Jesus was God until much later. He thinks it didn't happen until the 300's. There may be some of you that think this is just irrelevant to you, but I guarantee there are people in your life who believe Dan Brown's novel (or someone else's) and may even use it as a reason to disbelieve Christianity, so it's important for us to be aware of the reasons this just isn't true. I want us to look at the early Christians, so we can see their belief in Jesus as God.

Early Christians in their writing began treating Jesus' name with the same reverence as their Jewish counterparts treated Yahweh's name (YHWH). There was a particular way of writing it where it was abbreviated. Usually the first and last letter was kept and the rest of the word was replaced with a dash and a line was drawn above the word to indicate it referred to a holy name (Nomina Sacra). Early Christians did this with words

like “God”, and “Lord”, but also “Christ”, and “Jesus”.

There was a really early example of this found in the 1990’s. In Palestine in the city of Megiddo they uncovered what is probably the oldest Christian building that we know of. They dated this building to the 200’s AD (as early as 235). In it they found a broken table that was probably used for communion. Around the table there is a mosaic in the floor. The writing indicates that the table and mosaic were donated by a woman named Akeptous. Part of the mosaic says this, "The God-loving Akeptous has offered the table to God Jesus Christ as a memorial." And the writing uses the same method for referring to holy names of God, as well as blatantly referring to Jesus as God.

Another example is from a less friendly source. It is anti-Christian graffiti that was found in Rome near the Coliseum that also dates to the 200’s. It makes fun of a Christian named Alexamenos. It is a picture of a man worshipping in front of a man on a cross. The man on the cross is drawn with a donkey head. It also has the words “Alexamenos worships his God”. So not only were Christians worshipping Jesus as God, but even those hostile to Christianity understood Christians to be worshipping Jesus as God.

There was a later challenge to Jesus’ divinity in the 300’s that came from within the church. There was a priest that began teaching that Jesus wasn’t God. His teaching was starting to

have a big effect so bishops from all over met to discuss the issue. This meeting was the Council of Nicea (325 AD). We say the Nicene Creed that attempts to corrects Arius' thought by referring to Jesus as "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God". It was their way of saying that looking at Jesus was seeing the face of God. While they may have formulated the thought in a precise way, it was not a new thought for the church.

C.S. Lewis once famously reflected on the idea that Jesus Christ was a good teacher, but merely a man, and definitely not God. In his book *Mere Christianity* Lewis said,

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. ... Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God."

We are left with the option to see Jesus as a liar, fool, or lunatic, and all those early Christians who followed him as liars, fools, or lunatics for telling us to worship Jesus as God, or we see him as Pope Benedict XVI (J. Ratzinger) describes him- "This God shows himself to us; he looks out from eternity into time and puts himself into relationship with us. We cannot define him in whatever way we like. He has 'defined' himself and stands now before us as our Lord, over us and in our midst”.

If we are going to understand what it means to be Christians, then we had also better understand what it means for Jesus to be the Christ. If we get it wrong there we have no hope of understanding what it means to be Christians. And that doesn't mean we have to have perfect understanding, but we had better try our best to love God not only with all our heart, and strength, and soul, but with all our mind as well. To miss out on the divinity of Jesus is to make a very fundamental error. As children of God we receive Jesus as the true light that has come into the world. We receive him, and believe in him, as he is presented by our spiritual ancestors.