

Fully God & Fully Man, from Sinners for Sinners
Christmas Eve, Year A
24 December 2022

The Rev'd N.J.A. Humphrey
St. Thomas's Anglican Church, Toronto
John 1.1-14 (& Matthew 1.1-17)

✠ In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

The prologue to John's gospel is majestic and lyrical. And it is particularly familiar to anyone acquainted with the "Last Gospel" at the end of Mass. When I first arrived at my former parish, it had long been the custom for the Celebrant to read the Last Gospel after the dismissal at *every single* Mass. "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." Problem is, when you read something *every week* at the very *end* of the service, knowing that people are always in a rush to get to coffee hour or just to go home, one tends to get into the habit of reading as quickly as possible. [*Demonstrating:*] "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made..." You get the picture.

That really does a disservice to this stately passage. What can I say? It's an occupational hazard.

For those of us who come to church on Christmas Eve looking forward to stories about shepherds and angels, the adoring ox and ass, it's probably a little disappointing to hear instead something that one may have heard rattled off a hundred times before, week in, week out. What about "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree ..."? Well, that's tomorrow morning, folks. At 8, 9:30, and 11 o'clock. So now you have something to look forward to *tomorrow!* See you then!

In the meantime, we have John's prologue, best summarized as "Jesus is God". That's the important point: Jesus is God.

Of course, the other gospel writers all believe the same thing. It's just that they don't *start* there. While John begins his gospel with an opening statement, sort of like a lawyer in a courtroom, the other Evangelists *show* rather than *tell*. As storytellers, Matthew, Mark, and particularly Luke lead us along gently—like Joseph leading a heavily pregnant Mary on a donkey over rough terrain—until it slowly dawns on us what this is all about: Jesus is God.

But Jesus is also Man. *A man. A human. Fully human.* I personally believe one of the best ways we can get at the full impact of John's prologue is by first looking at Jesus' family tree in Matthew's gospel, because it, more than almost any other passage of scripture, subtly details just how fully human Jesus really was. Matthew in particular wants to make it very clear that the *sinless, perfect, fully human* Jesus is descended from a very *sinful, imperfect, and broken* family.

Although we hear Christ's genealogy, Matthew chapter one, verses one through seventeen, in the Daily Office lectionary, it never comes up in the three-year cycle of readings at Mass—which isn't all *that* surprising because it mostly sounds like this: "Rehoboam begat Abiah; and Abiah begat Asa; And Asa begat Jehoshaphat; and Jehoshaphat begat Joram..." You get the picture.

Significantly, in this patriarchal litany of “begats”, *forty-two* generations long from Abraham to Jesus, we hear only five—just *five*—women’s names: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, the unnamed “wife of Uriah”, and Mary.

In the Old Testament, Tamar and Rahab are remembered best for being prostitutes, or at least, in Tamar’s case, for playing the harlot in order to get pregnant by her own father-in-law. How much lower can you go? Rahab, on the other hand, was a full-time prostitute and part-time colluder with spies intent on killing everyone in her city. So it’s reasonable to infer that she had some issues.

Then there’s Ruth, a young widow and Gentile refugee, reduced to poverty, living among Israelites who likely viewed her as worse than a dead dog. And let’s not forget the “wife of Uriah”, better known to us as Bathsheba, the woman who infamously committed adultery with King David. And at last we get Mary, whom we rightly venerate as a Virgin, but who at the time was seen by both her neighbours and her fiancé as just another unwed mother, the father of whose child was unknown.

In short, these five women were not, in the world’s eyes, upstanding young ladies of unimpeachable moral virtue. These are the kind of women genealogists are careful to *prune* from their family tree, rather than leaving them hanging out like rotten fruit for all the world to see. Yet Matthew wants us to *see* these women, because it is precisely *from* these women, and *for* these women, that Christ Jesus came into the world.

As Jason Micheli writes in *The Sinner’s Christmas Pageant*, “Emmanuel—God-with-us—comes from a family tree every bit as knotted as ours: a family of scoundrels and unbelievers, rapists and hookers, cheats and those consumed by their resentment over being cheated upon—all the way back to Abraham, who wasn’t righteous, but was reckoned so on the only basis any of us are so counted: faith, alone. Christ comes from a family just like us. He comes *from sinners for sinners*.”¹

So when John’s prologue proclaims, “and the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us,” John really means Jesus became a perfect human for *us*—for *all of us*—in *all* our fallen human imperfections. Christ comes from a family just like ours that is *at least* as messy, if not messier, than our own.

Which is *Good News*, because as much as we like to pretend otherwise, Christmas itself is a very *messy* holiday. I’m not talking about all the wrapping paper, cardboard, and plastic packaging that ends up on the curb, along with a desiccated pine tree that’s shed needles all over the floor as it’s dragged out the door. No, I mean the mess of our *lives*, “our selves, our souls, and bodies”, the mess of our families, friends, and neighbours. I mean the messes we are inevitably confronted with—or, even, *create*—whenever people get together, whether at home, or even, dare I say, in church.

By now, it should be dawning on you that I like to get a little *dark* around the holidays, because, well, it’s more *real*. Some of us might be here this evening with people we don’t really *like* all that much,

¹ *The Sinner’s Christmas Pageant* by Jason Micheli is found at https://mbird.com/holidays/christmas/the-sinners-christmas-pageant/?fbclid=IwAR0ADDewz_09zPa7JT1fXXafgG3GvFHjCDVPV3Pmv-mxjJU0wowdoQ2FxA. Emphasis was added and the quote edited for homiletical delivery purposes.

but they're *family*, so we're *here*. Or maybe we like them just fine. It's *sermons* we don't like. Too preachy. Some of us may be headed somewhere tomorrow to celebrate Christmas, but we're bracing for all the awkward questions, however well-meant: "Are you dating someone?" "How long do you plan on staying in school, anyway?" "Any *buns* in the oven?" And then there are some conversations that just plain *hurt*. Some of us may already be planning our answers and our evasions, because it's all just so *messy*.

Even when we love our loved ones dearly and are looking forward to celebrating Christmas with them, there's no such thing as a "perfect" family. Except for *mine*, of course. [*Point at a random group.*] Oh, and *yours*. (Yeah, but we don't want to flaunt *just* how perfect ours are, do we now?)

Seriously, though, at this time of year, our own—or our loved ones'—struggles, with addiction, or money problems; stress at work; stress at home—none of these struggles *go away* at the holidays. No, instead, they often *intensify*.

And then there are those of us who don't have anybody we can really count as family. Not anyone *alive*, anyway, or no one *nearby*. No one we're *close* to. Maybe we've built up a "family of choice" over the years, and maybe St. Thomas's is *your* family of choice. That's great. Then again, maybe some of us are happy and relieved to be alone on Christmas! Still, I worry about those who leave church only to go to an empty home, or to those who turn off the livestream, and that's it for Christmas.

You would think that *at least* the preacher could try not to be such a *downer*, right? Well, yes. Sorry about that. But I do think it's important to speak not only to those of us having a grand old holly jolly Christmas. I want to make sure to acknowledge *all* among us who feel invisible, or who would like to *be* invisible, but who may feel like we stick out just a bit *too much* at this time of year. To you, I want to say: You are seen, and you are loved. God sees you, and God loves you.

As John 3:16 famously says, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." *This* Jesus, the Word made flesh, is God's little Christmas gift to us: Jesus, the Word, who comes to us from a bad family. And precisely because of that, he opens himself to us with love, not condemnation.

You see, the church exists not to tell you some sugarcoated fairy tale once a year, but to tell you a truth that will sustain you throughout the year. Sometimes, to appreciate the Light, it's important to get a little dark, first, so that by contrast we can see more clearly that Light that shineth in the darkness, which the darkness can never overcome. It is this God of God, Light of light, very God of very God, who is simultaneously a man descended *from sinners for sinners*, whom we are invited to receive, perhaps for the very first time, tonight, or at the very least, to welcome again, in word, and song, and deed. For to as many as receive him, to us he gives power to become children of God.

O come, let us adore him.