

The Pre-existent One
Epiphany 2, Year A
John 1: 29-34
16 January 2010

Just lately I have given up on biographies. They seem to keep growing in length. It is as though biographers can't bear to let go of any of their precious research, and feel that they have to include every scrap of information they have uncovered. The result is that we are drowned in detail as the writer, unable to see the wood for the trees, ends up obscuring his subject behind an avalanche of facts.

Interesting and insightful biographies lead us in to a grasp of their subject's character and identity by seizing on the two or three themes that explain this person's life, and back these up by presenting those incidents and narratives that illustrate them. So what is left out matters as much as what is included. The art of selection needs to go hand in hand with the ability to focus on what is central to the mystery of who this person really is.

Just in case you are ever asked to give a funeral eulogy let me recommend these same principles to you. Less is always more. By talking about one thing well you will open up many of the other vistas of that person's life. The well-chosen vignette will say what a score of stories would have laboured to get across. Concentrate on the few themes that really explain who this person was.

The gospels are infuriatingly sparse on biographical information about their chief subject. You could write all they have to offer about his early life on the back of an envelope. John takes an even more compressed view of the pre-ministry Jesus. But in one respect he has a lot to offer on the subject of origins.

As Jesus starts to come on stage in John's gospel a curious device is used to present him. We get some off scene commentary by John reporting on recent events, and offering some interpretive clues as to whom we will be dealing with in the future. But the back-story on Jesus includes a most remarkable long distance perspective on who he is and where he came from. To say of him, "he came before me" is to say a lot more than any speculation about who is oldest or who started their ministry first. John is going back to the theme seized on at the start of the gospel – "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was made flesh." Jesus is being identified as the pre-existent one, who existed before the world was made, before the universe came in to existence, before time began. He is the first in every sense of the word.

Why are we being offered this piece of information now? Why does it matter so much? And why is it tied in with a declaration that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world?

This is a cosmic perspective on the ministry of Jesus. In some Eastern churches there is a huge painting of the head and shoulders of Jesus on the church ceiling, looking down on the worshippers in a stern manner, and holding the world in his hand. It is called the Pantocrator, Christ as the Lord of the universe, who is in charge of everything. He has the power to alter reality in a fundamental way, and has in fact already done so.

But God's power must reckon with a considerable limitation. He takes the freedom he has given the human creatures he made extremely seriously. For their love to be genuine, for their relational response to be worth having, it cannot be coerced. The yes or the no that human beings utter is their power and must be respected.

In creating the world of creatures God had to reckon with the possibility that they would say no to him. Indeed, he anticipated this rejection. What then to do about it? God's relationship recovery plan must take in to account two potent follow on realities.

First, the human "no" to God has the inevitable consequence that human beings fall into the power of sin. Maybe that word is not popular now, but John and Paul use it again and again to describe the self-destructive set of attitudes, habits and behaviours that human beings have fallen in to. And it not just that they hurt themselves and sabotage their own best interests in so doing. Sin hurts God, it offends him, and it fills him with sorrow. It is a barrier to a fruitful relationship between God and humankind, and something must be done about it if their relationship is to be restored. God can't just declare an amnesty and say "there, there," it is as though it never happened.

The second reality is that God loves human beings so much that he is prepared to go to extraordinary lengths to be back in a loving relationship with them. His offer of salvation has nothing of a "take it or leave it" character about it. He is not diffident in his approach to us. People often think about this potentially tragic situation from the perspective of what does a human being miss out on if they lose the possibility of salvation. But what about the other perspective of what God loses if he doesn't get us all back – the loss that he will feel from such a waste. Indeed, God feels so strongly about us that he wont take no for an answer.

So how does God deal with the power of our no, the immense barrier that human sin poses, and his heart felt determination not to take no for an answer?

Before time began, as the Son proceeded forth from the Father he modified his being in such a way as to deal with this situation. He shaped his identity as the God man Jesus Christ. He resolved to stay in a covenant relationship of solidarity with us no matter what we got up to, or how far away we decided to move from him. He planned to journey in to the far country of our lostness as one of us. And in his mind's eye he anticipated the Cross as the intersection point our "no" and his "yes."

The Cross, and what follows on from it, means that Jesus died not just the physical death of judicial execution, but also the second death of spiritual separation and isolation from his and our loving heavenly Father. He died this "super death" as it were so that none of us need ever go there. The barrier to reconciliation with God is on our side. He is not an angry God who needs to be appeased by blood sacrifice. We are proud or indifferent sinners who need to be jolted in to awareness that the ground of spiritual reality has been changed under our feet. This saving death opens up a space which we move in to as a zone of reconnection with the life that really is life.

When John spoke of Jesus as the pre-existent one it means that he is the one who from before the very beginning foresaw all this, changed himself so as to be able to do deal with our situation, and whose saving purposes cannot be thwarted. His provenance and origins matter because they indicate his deep love for us, and the sure confidence we can have in him that he has the matter of our reconciliation with God in hand.

From the Cross Jesus returned to the Father. In this movement of return he as it were gathered us up through the action of the Holy Spirit to return us as a gift to the Father. And in an act of continuing generosity and self-emptying he Eucharistically distributes himself among us every time we celebrate this saving meal. But that is another story for another time.