

1st Sunday after Christmas (Year C)

John 1:1-18

I'm finding it a little tricky to get used to the new lectionary. Instead of using the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, it uses the New Revised Standard Version, which, when I'm feeling a bit irreverent, I call the Revised Revision of the Standard Version. Especially with well known passages, such as the beginning of John's Gospel, I'm always falling in when I read aloud. When one knows a passage nearly by heart, and then it's different, it's a challenge, a problem, a frustration.

Unfortunately for any wish to indulge my irritation, and knowing a bit about the Greek text, I also know that, for the most part, the revised revision is a better translation. So I'm thankful for the chance to fall in. By and large, the text has been improved, and the improvements keep me on my toes. Sometimes they keep me on my nose, but that's another story.

Anyway, this prolog to John's Gospel is well known. Before Vatican II, every Western Rite Roman Catholic Mass closed with its reading. Whenever I confront one of these well known passages, I'm concerned about my ability to extract anything from it that you haven't heard at least a half-dozen times. Then I remind myself that my job is not to think up something new, but to say the same things over and over again until we all discover, somehow, how to take them seriously. That, after all, is a challenge of the Christian life. We hear it all over and over again. And for me, at least, the problem is not in hearing and knowing, but in discovering what it means to take seriously. I remember the famous passage from Bacon's Essay, I believe *Of Studies*, but don't quote me because I'm not going to be quoting him exactly, and may be wrong as to my sources. Bacon says "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested . . ." Now there's a similar passage found in the Book of Common Prayer, asking that we may ". . . hear them (*The Scriptures*), read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them . . ." (The Book of Common Prayer Proper 28, p. 236). If you are going to steal, steal from the very best. Both Bacon and the BCP qualify.

So, when confronted by a passage such as John's Prolog, we read it, then we learn it. Then we mark it, which means to establish points of connection. Where does this passage connect with me? Then we inwardly digest it, incorporating those points of inner connection into the structure of our inner lives, so that who we are is informed by what we inwardly digest, even if we are not consciously thinking about it.

I am ruefully impressed by people who are skilled at quoting chapter and verse -- in the same way that I'm impressed by a juggler who can keep a half-dozen balls in the air at once. It's a real skill. But what impresses me more is a person, who may not be able to quote a single verse of scripture, but has, somehow, managed to so internalize it that his/her life grows out of a scriptural framework -- whether scripture is quoted or not.

It is this latter which is needed -- a life growing out of a scriptural framework, whether it can be quoted or not. Now the quoting is fun. It may even be useful. It can be a good thing, although one has to be careful since it isn't necessarily a good thing. Scripture can serve purposes for God and, as we have all too much evidence in history, it can serve purposes against God. The only thing which can sort it out is a well disposed heart which knows how to mark and

inwardly digest scripture as well as read and quote it.

That is, if you will, a long prolog to a short sermon on a prolog.

The hymn we sang immediately before the gospel (*I am for you . . .* GIA Pub. 1987) has its origin in the Iona Community off the west coast of Scotland. The Iona Community is known for music that takes biblical material and makes its core meaning accessible to the contemporary world. This hymn captures an important point about John's prolog: The world is no accident. In its very structure, it is intended to be a place for human beings. Therefore God, the alpha and the omega, (a Greek metaphor for the beginning and the end) is for us. Talk about something which is a challenge to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest – that God is for us fills that bill. It's hard to orient our lives to that perception and live from it. It's not that God begins from a dignified, neutral stance: "I'll like you if you're good enough." Most things in our lives operate in that way: I'll hire you if you're good enough; you'll pass my class if you're good enough; our relationship will work out if you're good enough. There are all kinds of situations in life in which external standards are imposed and we're then measured against them. In ordinary human life, perhaps, it needs to be that way. I'm not sure, but maybe it does. But it is clear from scripture that that is not God's way with us. God does not say, "I will love you if you are good enough." God begins by saying, "I love you. Therefore strive to be good enough." Our lives as Christians are a response to being loved, not an attempt to curry it.

For the Christian, it is knowing who you are that's foundational and then responding to that knowing as we create our new life. If I know that God loves me, if I really know that, then my morality, my life patterns, my relationships, become my thanksgiving for being loved. Otherwise, it's a market economy for heaven. If I am good enough, maybe I'll pass muster and get in. But we start out with God loving us. In my pastoral work, I find that is the hardest thing for people to grasp, the hardest thing on which to make our foundation, the hardest of all things from which to live our lives. This faith of ours, yes it's important to do well, to have standards, to be persevering, to read our Bibles and pay attention to them, to pay attention to our faith, all these things are important, but more important than all is the fact that you're loved.

Reading and learning are preliminaries. Then comes the marking and inwardly digesting, the founding of our lives on the perception that it's not a market economy, but we respond to a gift, that the Christian life is figuring out how to say "Thank-you." How do we say "Thank-you"? It is, I suppose, confirming of my ego to think that a right relationship with God depends on what I do, after all, that does leave me in control, and, ultimately, there is a part of me that wants to be in control. But in the long run, to attempt to control even my own salvation doesn't work well with God.

So what can I do? The best is to receive love – and that, by the way, as a side comment, is one of the purposes of the church when she is in her right mind, to be a place where people can get some training, not just in how to do good things, but in how to receive the love of others. And we don't pay too much attention to that aspect of the church. But it's important, because if we don't know how to receive love from each other it's much more difficult to learn how to

receive it from God. Yet receiving it from God is the foundation.

OK. So God says, "I am the Alpha and Omega. I have created the world as a framework in which you may live." More than that, I am present in that framework to be known, to be responded to, to be treasured. For us, in this room, that is a summary of the story of Jesus, a summary of the story of the presence of God, given to us so that we may learn to treasure him in creation. Ultimately, of course, what that means is learning to treasure the presence of God in each other. On occasion this is a strikingly difficult assignment, but it's all good practice. So, in a sense, that is something the Christmas Season is about. Why celebrate the coming of the child to us? Because young children, infants, are always a bit of a challenge in the practice of love. There are easier things in the world than taking care of babies. And yet, if we cannot love that which is helpless and dependent upon us, it will be all that more difficult to love each other, where, although dependency on each other exists, we are, to use the word advisedly, hell-bent to hide it. That makes it more difficult.

And so the coming of Christ and the presentation of the story of Jesus inside this community, the purpose is to allow, to encourage, to give us the opportunity for the practice of love.

After all, loving is not, for the most part, something we wake up in the morning and find ourselves doing. It requires practice. It requires a life which is focused on that practice. We do not learn how to love each other just by getting out of bed. This is where Christianity becomes a life long matter of trying, recognizing our failure, picking ourselves up, trying again, perhaps in a different way. It is all based on this idea of the practice of love which will, eventually, enable us to accept the love God offers us and through that acceptance, be eternally bound to him through life and death.