

Title: Words in-fleshed: enculturation

Text: John 1: 1-18

Rev Sharon Smith

It was 1991 and I was part of a clown troop. Yes you heard correctly, we would put white chalky make up on our faces, go into complete silence, and mime our way through the streets of Johannesburg. Using our bodies to communicate and bring smiles to strangers.

This year, 1991, we were attending an international mime workshop. It was awesome and enlightening. And one particular exercise was most memorable to me. 10 mime artists, from different parts of the world, were given an object and a concept. All the objects were the same – a silver key, and the flashcard with the concept was the same word but translated into the language of the artist – the concept was receptivity. Similar to improv, these 10 artists, in silence, came onto the stage and used their bodies and the single object of a silver key to explore the concept – receptivity. It was inspiring to watch the movement, the expressions, the postures, the mime... no two alike. And yet all 10 humans communicating.

It is the most vivid image I have of “words becoming flesh”.

John chapter 1 begins with obvious references to the creation story of Genesis.
In the beginning...
Themes of life, of light, of darkness...
Words that create...

However in John’s Gospel, “the Word” refers not only to the words God spoke in creation (“all things came into being through him” (1:3), “the Word” also refers to more than this.

The term John uses for “Word,” is logos in Greek.
This logos is likely associated with the figure of Wisdom in the Old Testament.
This figure of Wisdom as being with God since the beginning (Proverbs 8:22), with God during creation. At the same time, the Word was not only with God, the Word was God” (John 1:1).

From Singing Theology by [By Laura C.S. Holmes, PhD](#)

Wisdom becomes flesh.

Now the word becoming flesh in Jesus in John’s gospel, is only the beginning.
We see Jesus constantly inviting the disciples to become like him.
It comes to a conclusion when the Risen Christ greets them in an upper room where they have gathered in fear, and says, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”
The point of John’s gospel isn’t only that Jesus is the word made flesh, but that we are also...

Each of us are invited to be God's life and word and work in the world.
God's eternal word is made flesh in each of us.

And isn't this so beautifully ritualized in the Eucharist – we receive the body of Christ so that we can be the body of Christ.

Christ Church Cathedral Sermon, by Rev. Peter Elliot (2015)

This is the in-fleshing of Christ.

This way of Christ embodied in you and me, has many forms.
Each of us with our uniqueness: our cultural ways, the ways taught to us by our parents, by our Fathers (whom we honour on this Father's Day), our social formation amongst our peers, by our own idiosyncrasies.

We live out this wisdom. This way.

My friends, this is the heart of the what we mean by "Enculturation of the Gospel"

Enculturation refer to the process of learning our own (native) culture, different from, acculturation which is the process of learning and adopting another's cultural norms, values and beliefs – usually that of the host culture.

"The essential task of enculturation of the Gospel is not one of inserting an abstract entity called 'the Gospel' into a culture. Rather the Gospel is and always has been radically enculturated, from the first preaching of Jesus through contemporary biblical interpretation. Enculturation means creating something new, and with a price to pay"

Gospel and Enculturation: The Long Road by Carolyn Osiek

In the gospels we read about how God became enculturated in a specific human context, that of Jesus of Nazareth.

- first preached in an 'advanced agrarian society among rural peasants, though also among modest village householders and merchants, but in an agrarian context.
- Cosmology consisted of a world populated by spirits, both good and evil, who were engaged in a constant battle for superiority, a battle that was played out in nature and in human persons. Kinship systems were patriarchal.
- Oral preaching was flexible and responsive to its audience. Jesus' sayings were repeated many times, adjusting them to particular audiences, and never saying the same thing the same way twice.

Meaning is created in and by social context, through social interaction, assigned to symbols and objects. Meaning is created in interaction between symbols carried by the text and symbols carried by experience, thus, culture.

There is no such thing as 'the Gospel' apart from its social conceptualisation or, in other words, enculturation. There has never been a Gospel that is not enculturated.

Today is National Aboriginal Day and we're using readings from scripture and prayers that were selected by the Anglican Council of Indigenous People.

It is important today, of all days, to be reminded of in-fleshment, of enculturation.

Where each human being, each family, each clan, each nation is free to embody their values, their understanding of God, of Christ, in a self-determined way.

The Very Rev. Fred Hiltz, Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada from 2007-2019, implored us on this day of Prayer to read the UN declaration on the rights of indigenous people.

Hear Article 2 and 3:

Article 2

Indigenous peoples and individuals are free and equal to all other peoples and individuals and have the right to be free from any kind of discrimination, in the exercise of their rights, in particular that based on their indigenous origin or identity.

Article 3

Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

The path of the Self determined Indigenous Anglican Church of Canada is expressed in this way:

"Elders began to yearn for a truly Indigenous expression of Christian faith: The Living Word of God, revealed through the reality of Indigenous families and communities. The elders imagined that they could see the life of God, as we know it in Jesus, revealed in their communities, cultures and spiritual traditions."

From Our Story of Self Determination accessed on June 18th, 2020 from:
<https://www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/our-story-of-self-determination-SINGLE.pdf>

And thanks be to God, that work has begun and continues.

And my friends, we as non-indigenous peoples also have work to do:

- (1) Our task is in telling a new narrative, a new story about this land
- (2) Our task is to grow in respect for indigenous people who first lived here.
- (3) Our task is to confront and repent of a history of racism that has left so many first nations people wounded.

Racism is an insidious evil and it is just below the surface of our culture.
With the stress of a pandemic and political uncertainty and we see it raise its head.
But it is always there.

And today is also Father's Day.

A day where we honour our elders who have given us wisdom.
And we pray for and encourage those who are in the midst of fathering children.

The words, ideas and stories you speak out shape lives and will shape futures.
As followers of Christ, we believe that our words co-create with God.
We get to name our wrongs and share our values so that they will be in-fleshed in the next generation.

Words becoming flesh.

May God give us wisdom and courage.
Amen.