

Hearing, Seeing, and Touching the Word Made Flesh
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St John the Theologian begins his first epistle with the words:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life — the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us — that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. (1 Jn 1:1-3)

St. John emphasizes in the strongest way possible that the eternal Word has become human: we heard Him with our own ears; we saw Him with our own eyes, we even touched Him with our own hands. Recall Jesus' words to His disciples:

Blessed are the eyes which see the things you see; for I tell you that many prophets and kings have desired to see what you see, and have not seen it, and to hear what you hear, and have not heard it. (Lk 10:23-34)

The Son of God becomes the Son of Man to be heard, to be seen, and to be touched. He is Emmanuel, God with us. This is the foundational Christian experience which we proclaim, and in which we participate. This is the Nativity of our Lord. The Christian proclamation is beautifully expressed in our Nativity hymns:

Today the Virgin bears the Master within the cave.
Today the Master is born as a babe of a Virgin Mother.
Today the shepherds behold the Savior wrapped in swaddling clothes
and laid in a manger.
Today the Master who cannot be touched is wrapped as a babe in swaddling rags.
Today all creation rejoices greatly and makes glad, for Christ is born of a Virgin Maid.
(*Nativity Matins, Ode 9, Second Canon*)

As our festal hymns so often express, a historical reality reveals the eternal reality: *Today* the Son of God becomes the Son of Man. The hearing, seeing and touching that was available to the first century disciples is available to all; it is available “in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15).

That which we have heard

In the Old Testament, we often hear the exhortation to listen. "Hear, O Israel" and similar phrases are frequent throughout the Scriptures. In these cases, however, God is not speaking directly to His people but rather through others to them. St. Paul expresses this point at the outset of his Letter to the Hebrews:

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son. (Heb. 1:1-2a)

In the New Testament, the Son of God speaks directly to His people. From His astonishing discussions with teachers in the temple as a child (Lk 2:46ff) until His comforting promise of the Holy Spirit to His apostles (Acts 1:4ff), He spoke as one having authority (Mt 7:28-29). Our Lord's words heal, teach, exhort, admonish, instruct, and question. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Mt 13:9). It is the wise man who is like the one who built his house upon rock to withstand the storms of this life for he hears Christ's words and does them (Mt. 7:24-25).

"Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God", St. Paul instructs (Rom 10:17). Often we understand 'hearing' to be 'reading', or we think there is no real difference between the two. Yet the Word, *logos*, is first and foremost the spoken word. It is a speech, a report, a talk. It is the word that we hear. In ancient times, there are only a handful of cases where people are seen to be reading silently even when they are reading alone to themselves, and these cases are so noteworthy that they are recorded with surprise by observers. We are so accustomed to silent reading that we underestimate the profound importance of the *spoken* word. Even though our services are filled with the spoken Word of God (the Epistle, the Gospel, the Psalms and hymns), almost all of us confess how difficult it is to remain attentive, to let the words enter us and to let them take root within our hearts.

The audible word is intended to resonate within us. This is expressed etymologically in the term "catechesis," which in Greek is an intensification of the word "echo". Enjoying a play on words, St. John Chrysostom exhorts his listeners to let his catechesis echo in their hearts. We call people who are preparing to enter the Church 'catechumens' because they are learning to let the Word of God resound within them. This is precisely the sense in which we never cease to be catechumens; we are always striving to let God's Word echo, resound, resonate within us.

Unfortunately, sometimes our lives are filled with anxieties, worries, cares, fears and so many more distractions. These act like dampening materials embedded in our hearts which hinder the Word from echoing within us. They diminish the sound so we become like those who hear the Word of God only to have it fall on the path, or rocky soil or among the thorns. By the grace of God these dampening materials need to be purged from our heart; we must release them. As we say in the Holy Liturgy, "Let us lay aside all earthly cares, so that we may receive the King of all." Releasing these various distractions allows the Word to have His ongoing resonating presence within us.

That which we have seen

Just as in the Old Testament Israel was exhorted to listen to the Word of God spoken through the prophets, so also they were told to behold the works of God. They were not told, however, to behold God Himself.

God tells Moses, "You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live" (Ex 33:30). Yet in the New Testament, God Himself is beheld. St John the Forerunner instructs his disciples, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (Jn 1:29). And St. Peter, recalling his experience of seeing Christ transfigured, reports,

We ... were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. (2 Pt 1:16-18)

The Son of God is seen in His majesty by Peter, James, and John. But the Father, as St. Peter describes, is heard but not seen. As St. John explains, "No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has revealed Him" (Jn 1:18). It is this revelation of the Father through the Son that the Holy Apostles experience with their own eyes.

It is for this reason that Orthodox, to this day, do not permit images of the Father. He has not been, and indeed cannot be, seen. Yet, in his defense of icons, St. John of Damascus emphasizes that while no one has seen God the Father, many people have seen God the Son. The Son of God has become the Son of Man. Accordingly, it is permitted, and not only permitted but required, to have icons of Christ for they are a proclamation of the incarnation -- of what, as St. John the Theologian put it, "we have seen with our eyes ... concerning the word of life."

The Holy Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, which affirmed the need for icons, went on to underscore the importance of viewing icons since focusing our attention on them draws us toward the reality they represent. When we look upon the icon of Christ, not outwardly venerating it but simply contemplating it, we are drawn toward the reality that is expressed symbolically in that image. Much like the Word of God echoing within us, gazing upon the one who is "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15) re-forms our deformed image; it elevates our fallen image. It is this focused attention on the icon, the Seventh Council informs us, that leads us to veneration. It is easy to become careless in our veneration of icons, not experiencing them as the expression of Emmanuel, God with us; not letting them imprint His image within us. The inner veneration of the icon arises from letting the image portrayed stamp itself in us so that the external veneration increasingly expresses our inner reality.

The Holy Fathers declare concerning icons that what we have heard in Word, we now see in image *silently*. We've heard Christ; now we see His image. His image is silent, and it invites us into His silence. "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps 45:11). Some Holy Fathers say silence is the language of the Kingdom. And yet that inner stillness seems so elusive in our self-reinforced, frenetic worlds. Holy icons invite us, summon us, to step off life's treadmill, to pause for a moment of quiet reflection, letting the His image find its home in us.

That which our hands have handled

At the very center of his vision of the heavenly realm, the Holy Prophet Isaiah reports, "one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And

he touched my mouth with it” (Is 6:6-7a). However piercing a word or a sight might be, the deepest mystery is expressed by touch. When the Creator of all takes on flesh to become a part of His creation, He can touch, and He can be touched.

All the mysteries of the Church involve touch. In Baptism we are plunged into the life-giving waters by the hands of the priest. In Chrismation we are anointed with the Holy Chrism, the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit, on our forehead, eyes, nose, ears, chest, hands and feet. In Holy Unction we are anointed with oil for the healing of soul and body. And so it is with all the mysteries: the grace of God is conveyed tangibly.

Nowhere, however, is touch more profoundly present than in the reception of Holy Communion, daring to touch the body and blood of our Lord and God and Savior, Jesus Christ. Consider the words of but one of the many expressions of this transforming and purifying touch found in our prayers of preparation for communion:

Receive me as You received the sinful woman and the woman with the flow of blood. For the first embraced Your most pure feet and received forgiveness of her sins, and the second just touched the hem of Your garment and received healing. But I who am lost, daring to receive Your whole body, may I not be burned; but receive me as You received them.

“Take, eat; this is My body.... Drink of it all of you. For this is My blood of the New Covenant” (Mt. 26:26-27). The Church has never softened the sobering reality of our Lord’s body and blood in the Holy Eucharist. Another pre-communion prayer which emphasizes this theme recalls the touch of Isaiah’s vision: “But let the fiery coal of Your most pure body and Your most precious blood bring me sanctification, enlightenment and strengthening of my lowly soul and body, ...”

Indeed, the vision of Isaiah frames the entire Anaphora (Eucharistic prayer), including these familiar words:

Above the Lord’s throne stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
The whole earth is full of His glory!”

And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. (Is 6:2-4)

And following communion the priest echo the words of the seraph to Isaiah: “Behold, this has touched your lips; Your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged” (Is 6:7b). In its essence, then, every Eucharist is Bethlehem and Golgotha woven together and experienced anew. The Son of God again takes on the material of this world in order to be heard, to be seen, and, most of all, to be touched -- to be Emmanuel, God with us.