

*“Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph? Do we not know his father and mother? Then how can he say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?”*

We live in the age of statistics. The daily newspaper seems dominated not so much by words as by numbers: percentages, rates, stock market averages to say nothing of dollars into the trillions; the weather statistics in Fahrenheit or Celsius degrees. Today I go to the doctor’s office and he reads off 5.9 of this and 6.2 of that and body temperature and blood pressure millimeters, glucose at milligrams per deciliter. And then there are miles per hour, the number of light years to a distant galaxy; the average wait in an office . . .

Or let’s just limit ourselves to sports statistics. The analysis of a baseball game is framed within batting averages, the frequency of errors, earned run averages, the speed of a pitch, plus every statistical performance of every player and team back beyond the last century. I knew fellows who bet dimes and nickels per pitch on the possibilities of every pitch being a strike, ball, single, double, etc. or out. And now there is a new statistic displayed after every game showing the changing *probability* of a team’s winning or losing inning by inning – almost like a cardiogram of the event. And then there is this daily need to report pandemic data . . . I mean every day public health confronts us with how many cases, vaccinations, hospitalizations, deaths to keep the disease under control.

It all has to do with – as we used to say – getting down to brass tacks, i.e. being “correct” about what’s happening physically, socially, fiscally, health wise, technologically – as the most dependable way of getting to the “truth” of things and thus managing and controlling things. Even as with Gulliver who was all tied up by the Lilliputians, so also our whole globe is entangled in mathematics.

But does math, conceived as the most “correct” means for telling the truth, tell the *whole* truth? What then do we make of the whole of biblical discourse, of philosophical speculation, the Odyssey of Homer, the plays of Shakespeare, the poetry of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickenson, the novels of Dickens and Hemingway, of musicals like *Les Miserables* . . . of graphic excursions into the fascinating dimensions of human nature or of a sunset or turbulent sea or the roses in our yard or the mystery of a new born child – or Ella Fitzgerald singing: *what is this thing called love?* How can you add that up? “Correct” begins to shrink amid such excursions into the warmth and fear and joy and fright and depth of such discourse – as more than true.

John’s Gospel begins with the phrase: *The Word became Flesh and dwelt among us*. We take that to refer to the incarnation of Christ – that he was both human and divine. But it can also be read as Christ bringing our distant idea of God as author of the abstract laws of the universe, high above the heavens, *down to earth*. His Gospel unveiled divinity as flesh and blood, warmth, care, a capacity to suffer as we suffer – as “this thing called love” – encouraging us to become more than “correct” in our ways – but *true* in the sense of really real – even godly.

