

Sunday 19th. November 2017
What is the Incarnation?

The Incarnation is the term used to speak of the coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of God into the world. It involves the Christmas Story, the birth of Mary's child, in a stable long ago. It is a lovely story, because it comes with all the memories of Christmas past, and for others with new babies or young children, the promise of Christmas to come. Christmas is a very sentimental time. I hope they will show a few Mark's Brothers films, late on Christmas Eve. I look forward to a warm fire and an ice cold can of coke!

For others, Christmas will be lonely or sad. There will be memories of parents, friends, son's and daughter's gone or far away. In all these swirling emotions and memories, the meaning of Christmas is often assumed, but crowded out. For others, business and the inevitable crisis of what to get for who, and who have we forgotten to send a card to, will distract and worry! Usually, by Christmas Eve, we are ready for a break, and secretly we may even be glad that it is almost all over!

The celebration of Christmas for a Christian, is all about the coming of Christ into the world. That is what counts and that is a fundamental belief which is clearly expressed in numerous places and ways in the Bible. The Old Testament, from Genesis right through to the end has promises that God would send a great deliverer to humanity. The Book of Isaiah features strongly in this regard, and anyone who has ever been to a traditional Carol Service will have heard the promise read of, 'unto us a child is born,' and so on. For those of you who are keen on great classical music, you will surely have heard the 'Messiah' performed, or better still, been to a 'sing along' event and sung your heart out to the Hallelujah Chorus! It is enough to believe the man Jesus to be the Son of God, and the son of man, but there is a long history of questioning what this all means and mystery surrounds this foundational belief.

The New Testament has no doubt that Jesus is both man and God. Peter confesses Jesus to be 'The Christ of God,' in Mark 9 v 20. The Gospels also portray Christ as sharing all the weaknesses of a truly human body and mind. He was hungry and thirsty, He was weary and tired. This was accepted by the Apostles and the Early Church, but as time went on, people wanted to examine and try to understand what it meant for Jesus to be both a man, and God.

What at face value seemed an obvious and accepted matter began to become complicated when people tried to dissect and comprehend what is in fact a great and incomprehensible miracle! Hebrews 11 v 3 tells us that it is by faith that we understand the miraculous, not by reason alone. There are many things which are beyond our reason to adequately grasp. For example, I cannot comprehend the distance of a light year! I am used to earthly measurements, not cosmic! We use material instruments to observe and measure and experiment on material things, but we need different instruments to examine and explore and evaluate spiritual things. Faith is the microscope, the telescope, the scales and the litmus paper of spiritual things! Just as we would not expect a dentist to use a joiners tools, or a surgeon to use a plumbers

tools, so we must not expect bare human reason to fathom the spiritual realm. That realm is the arena of the Holy Spirit and faith. No wonder we get things wrong. One of the greatest Christian philosophers, St Anselm once said, 'I believe, therefore I understand.' It was so in his day, and it is still the same today.

The ideas of Christ's exact identity swung like a pendulum between two opposite and equally dangerous and wrong ideas. At one end of the spectrum was the view that exalted Christ's godhead, and all but denied the reality of His humanity. The other pole held the true humanity of Christ, but denied that He was the only eternally begotten of the Father from all eternity. In other words, it almost lost Christ's divinity.

The history of the Church seeking truth, and almost losing it is easily followed up in a history of Early Church Doctrine. In short, the Council of Nicaea AD 325 clarified the doctrine of the Trinity from the heresy of the Arians. The Creed can be found in CH4 number 649, which clearly delineates that God is three in one, yet an undivided three, and the particular roles each of the Persons of the Godhead fulfill. This council settled the fact that Jesus Christ is God.

However, as the years passed, people began to ask how Jesus could be God and man. Two views had arisen as to the humanity of Jesus. The Nestorian idea was of a schizophrenic Christ, having two personalities in one skin. This is a rather strange idea, and one that makes me feel that such a Christ would be a rather unsafe or inconsistent person to deal with! The other concept was called the Eutychian view where the humanity of Christ was swallowed up in His divinity. The Council of Chalcedon, AD451 was held which rejected both of these views, and affirmed that Jesus is one divine person in two natures, neither mixed nor confused. In other words, this creed confirmed the true divinity and the true humanity of Christ.

To many this may all seem like a storm in a tea cup, but if Christ is not fully God, then He could not have procured an eternal redemption for fallen people, and if He were not fully human, He could not have applied His sacrifice to such fallen creatures. However, read the literature yourselves. It is not easy stuff to wade through, but it is very valuable! We do not need to understand the working of these debates as long as we believe the outcomes. However, the more we understand of Christian history, the more our faith can be enriched. It comforts me to know that even the greatest minds have been baffled by these great truths, and it is not just me who is overwhelmed by God's greatness. All this should lead us not to confusion, but to wonder and worship the wisdom and kindness of God. This was by no means the only or last great debate and crisis as the Early Church attempted to understand the great mysteries of God's person and acting in human history.

For us today, as we approach Christmas, the celebration of the birth of Christ into the world, what is its significance? The passages that we will look at are Colossians 1 v 15-20, and Philippians 2 v 1-11.

The Colossian passage is a wonderful passage to make our heads buzz! Christ is the image, the visible manifestation, the appearing of God who is invisible. Now if that is not the stuff of miracle, then what is? This passage is telling us that in Christ, God who no person can see and live, has made Himself visible. In John 14, Jesus tells doubting Thomas that if he knew Jesus he would know the Father as well. Philip asked Jesus to show them the Father and Jesus told them that those who had seen Him had seen the Father also.

There is great mystery in these verses. However, it is not necessary that we fully comprehend them to experience the fact that Jesus is the presentation of the Father, that God is as kind and gentle and true and holy as Jesus, and that is where we start. We believe this, and then, for the rest of our lives we increase in understanding and amazement of Jesus showing us what God is like.

In the same way, the passage in Philippians, and verse 6 tells us that Jesus, 'being in the very nature God.... Humbled Himself,' to be our Saviour, and God's favoured and beloved servant to accomplish God's great work of saving fallen man.

Once again, we are to believe the statement, and then spend the rest of our lives unwrapping the glory of this truth, without ever getting to the end of discoveries! Put it this way. A child can go outside at night and look up at the stars and be thrilled and amazed at the beauty and colour of the stars on a clear and dark night. If they develop an interest in astronomy, they will grow up to be able to tell us the names of the stars and constellations. They will be able to baffle us with all sorts of facts and figures. However, if they lose the sense of the beauty of the starry sky, their knowledge will not have enriched their lives, but robbed them of wonder and awe.

There are two aspects, or stories of the Incarnation that I would like to present you with. This is not so much technical theology as a looking at the stars and going, 'wow!'

1. In the Incarnation, God becomes a man. What does this tell us about God's attitude to humanity?

If we have a low view of God, then we will not see anything of any great glory in the Incarnation. It is when thinking about well-known passages in the Bible like these that the poets and Hymn writers can help us.

From the hymn, 'I have a friend whose faithful love,' by C.A. Tydeman we find these lines,

He held the highest place above,
Adored by all the sons of flame,
Yet, such His self-denying love,
He laid aside His crown and came
To seek the lost and at the cost
Of heavenly rank and earthly fame,
He sought me – Blessed be His name!

Or these from Noel Richards,

You laid aside Your majesty,
gave up everything for me,
suffered at the hands, of those You had created.....

Perhaps one of the greatest poems about the perfections of the fellowship in the Trinity is that of Frederick William Faber in his, 'The Vision of the Godhead.'

This hymn begins,

Unchanging and Unchangeable, before angelic eyes,
The Vision of the Godhead in its tranquil beauty lies;

This hymn just continues to soar to higher and higher visions of God's perfections.

The point is, that Jesus left the perfections of heaven, the abode of the Father, the place of glory, peace, well-being. Jesus left the place where He was honoured, loved, adored, He left the presence of the Father and the fellowship of the Trinity, and exchanged it for what? He exchanged all that for a stable, for hunger and thirst, for rejection and as a child having to flee a genocide. He exchanged heaven for mud and heat and homelessness. He exchanged the worship of angels for the spite and slanders of hateful, jealous, violent men. He exchanged the bowing of celestial beings before Him for the caresses of a sinful woman who washed His feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. He exchanged the wisdom of the host of heaven for dinner with a tax collector. Why did He do this? Out of love for His created people!

We sing Hark the herald angels sing at Christmas time. It is one of Charles Wesley's greatest mini pieces of profound theology. It is sad that we sing with such familiarity that we can come to the end of it and not have taken in a word of it! This hymn contains one of the most profound expressions of the Incarnation found outside Scripture.

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,
Hail, the Incarnate Deity,
Pleased as man with man to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel.

The import of this is that Christ becoming human, while a humiliation from the glory of heaven, such is God's love for humanity, that Christ did not take it as a disgrace to take on a human body and nature. Rather than the miracle being that Christ suffered such a humiliation in becoming human, the miracle is that God has bestowed such dignity upon humanity by uniting it with divinity. By Christ's humiliation, humanity has been honoured with a dignity beyond all explanation other than the graciousness of God.

In passing, it is the Incarnation that gives humanity dignity. Human rights, so called, apart from this, are meaningless and groundless! In the Incarnation, God has bestowed

on dust a dignity and glory that is beyond value. God has taken the clay of the earth and made it into a pearl of great value to Himself!

2. The second, and related thing that the Incarnation tells us is illustrated in the parable we find in Luke 15.1-7. The Parable of the Good Shepherd. I admit that this point, as with the one before, takes thinking about, but that is the point, it is by faith we understand, and faith must be worked or else we will not see.

The story is about the shepherd, obviously the Lord Jesus Christ leaving the sheep that were safe, to go and find the one sheep that was missing. It is probably safe to say that it had strayed. Sheep have that sort of nature. I remember one small holder telling me that his sheep did everything they could to find ways of killing themselves. The Good Shepherd goes and finds the lost sheep and brings it back. He is not angry with the sheep, He is joyful that He has rescued it and that it is now safely back in the fold!

Think of this. When nations go to war, it is the soldiers and the generals who are sent to the battle field. Usually, the kings and presidents and prime ministers only visit when all the fighting is over and the battle is won. We will probably never see a sitting president or prime minister taking on his or her opposite number in a fight to see who rules America, or Russia or the UK!

When God sought to save humanity, He did not send an angel, he did not send an army, He did not send an ambassador. He sent His one and only, His beloved Son. God sent His best, the highest, the purest, His only and irreplaceable Son. It is one thing to send an army to rescue someone, but God came and did it Himself, up close and personal.

This is more than a military campaign, this is the power and force of love, Christ came personally to rescue those whom He loves, His Bride, His beloved, the Bride who ravishes His heart.

The Incarnation is an act of unfathomable affectionate love for us. Christ chose to embrace the people He loves and protect them from everything that was coming to us, wrath, hell and death, and to take that on Himself so that we might be rescued from it all. The only human picture that even approaches this is the parental love that will risk their own lives to save the child, and that is a shadow of the passion of the Incarnation!

So, in December, and the Sunday's of Advent, at the various events where carols are sung, remember that here is a story of stories. Remember that above all the sentimental twaddle of tinsel and presents and 'roasting chestnuts on an open fire,' and 'I'm dreaming of a white Christmas', is a story, an event which is shocking in its power and astonishing in its depth of passion, that Christ left all behind to come to this world of mud and wars, greed and pride, and He did so personally, out of love for us, and to put Himself between us and danger.