

Sunday 26th November 2017
Why was Christ Incarnate?

Texts Isaiah 61.1-3
1 Cor. 15. 20-22 & 42-49

The Bible opens with an account of creation. When we think of all the science that has unfolded over the generations of human investigation, and our fascination with coming up with other theories of origins, then the account of the creation is, to say the least, sparse. It is almost as if the author of Genesis wants to skip over such matters as quickly as possible, and get to the main story to be told! The alternative is this, how do you tell the story of creation from nothing?

The story goes quickly on to the creation of man, his place in God's economy, the relationship of intimacy God and man had, and the act of treason, rebellion, and foolishness that we call the Fall. It is called this because the word graphically describes the change in the status of mankind. We fell from grace into bondage and death!

In Genesis 3 v 15, we are told God's response to the fall of man. There is the promise of One who would be born from the woman, who would crush the serpent's head. It might be said that the rest of the Bible is the history of God bringing this event about and the unfolding consequences of the offspring of the woman crushing the serpent's head. The serpent is of course Satan, and the offspring of the woman is Christ. This is what the Bible is all about.

The Fall is recounted at the start of Genesis 3, and the speed with which God responds shows that God already knew what He would do, the Fall did not come as a surprise to God, or leave Him with a crisis He was not able to respond to. This in no way diminishes the seriousness of the Fall, nor does it excuse Adam and Eve from their responsibility.

All of us are born fallen. We wake up in the morning and we are fallen and all that comes our way is received and taken as normal. We may have been appalled by things we hear on the TV, but very few people, other than those directly affected by a crisis such as a genocide, will have their lives permanently changed. This is a result of the Fall, we are most interested in us and ours, and the more degrees of separation there are between us and others, generally the less we care.

There are so many results of the Fall, but the greatest one is our separation from the fellowship and intimate relationship with the God who made us in His own image so that we could know His love for us, and love Him back in response.

However, there was a second sin after the taking of the forbidden fruit. The fruit does not matter, the disobedience was the issue. There is every reason to suppose that the history of humanity would have been different, in part, if the second sin had not immediately followed the first. The second sin was to hide from God. This sin is almost as inexplicable as the Fall. Man sinned against the goodness of God, and then fled from

it and hid from the One who had only done him good. Humanity has been hiding ever since.

We hide behind an overinflated sense of our goodnesses. We hide behind the faults of others, blame shifting. We hide behind the sins others have done to us, and we hide by seeking to persuade ourselves that God does not exist. We also hide because we have believed the lie of the Devil, which tells us that God is full of vengeance against us, and not safe to be around! This comes from the Devil! Is he safe to be around? However, we still listen to his lies. The Francis Thompson poem, 'The Hound of Heaven' contains these lines,

'I feared lest having Him,
I must have naught beside.'

Here is a fear that God would keep us miserable and on the bread line, without joy or comfort in the world. For years Thompson fled from God. Thankfully God kept after Him and ran him to ground and blessed him! Such a response is typical of our fallen state, yet from Genesis to the end of the Book, God promises us good, and Jesus went about 'doing good and healing people.'

We turn to the text in 1 Corinthians.

To understand this passage, and much of Romans, we need to understand the concept of Federalism. This does not come as an easy thought, or indeed, a welcome thought to our individualistic generation, but it still operates. If we do not begin to grasp this concept, then we will find it difficult to understand how sin passed on its baneful heritage to us, and how Christ coming, as a man, could do anything about our fallen condition. Indeed, the idea that Christ took our place and bequeathed His benefits to us will be lost on us.

Before we get into this, there may be someone who still thinks that people are essentially good. Perhaps you think that all we need is more social care, more education, and to outlaw things like smacking children, or to unit price alcohol, while legalizing certain drugs. Well, since these things have come into force in Scandinavian countries, things are reported to have got worse rather than better. Anyhow, the Bible says that to disagree with God's verdict on the state of humanity is sin, so either way, we are in trouble. 'All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.' Rom. 3.23. Men have been arguing with God over this ever since the fall, and not one person has ever won the argument!

The concept of federalism is simple, but not one we use much in our day. An example of it is in the Book of Hebrews chapter 7, when it talks about Abraham giving a tithe of all he had to Melchizedek. Basically the Book of Hebrews is written to show how Christ is the reality of which the OT cultic acts were but a shadow. In this point of Hebrews, the author is showing how Christ, as a High Priest is superior to the Levitical priesthood. The idea is that the unborn Levites were 'in the loins' of Abraham, so they paid a tithe,

paid honour, as an inferior to a superior when Abraham gave the tithe. Since Christ's priesthood is after Melchizedek, then Christ's priesthood is superior to the Levitical priesthood because Abraham was the federal head of Levi. Read the chapter and all should become clear!

Another way of thinking about Federalism is this, if a man has sons, and they have sons and so on, then the man is the federal head of the resulting family. He is the clan chief, as it were, and what he does affects all. So it is with Adam. When he sinned, we all became party to that sin, because we are all human.

Back to 1 Corinthians. The message of v 20-22 is this. Regarding the fall of humanity into sin, it happened by the action of a man, therefore it is necessary that the effects be undone by a man. Now that seems straightforward enough, but what man can undo a treasonable act like the fall? Can anyone be found that could do this? The Bible tells us that there is no-one who can do this, for all have fallen under the veil of sin and cannot even save themselves, never-mind die for anyone else.

This takes us to verses 42 to 49. I want to focus on the concepts contained in v 45 to 47. The first man is Adam, the last man is Christ. The first man is of the dust, that is Adam, the second man, from heaven, that is Christ.

Adam is the first man, Christ is the last man like Adam – a race of man is ended. The first man is of dust, the second man is from heaven – Christ instigates a new race of man.

What this means is this. Jesus was born a man, to bring the race of men, like Adam, like us, to an end. Jesus was also God, from heaven, to create a new order of humanity – the Christ-man, the Christian. One federal clan is brought to an end in Christ, and a new federal line is begun in Christ. Christ closes the chapter on fallen mankind, and opens a new chapter on mankind indwelt by God. We could say that the fall rendered humanity beyond a cure, so God remolded Him in the image and person of Christ.

This is what the New Birth is. This is what becoming a Christian is. It is our fallen humanity being brought to an end, and a new principle of life, the life of Christ, entering into us.

This is what was happening when Jesus shed His blood on the Cross. There were consequences to deal with from the fall of man, and there were new things to be brought into place for a new day to dawn on us. This is the work that Christ did on the Cross, it is His work alone, and it becomes effective in us when we receive Christ into our lives by believing in Him and asking Him to come into our lives.

This is why becoming a Christian is to become a new creation. Corinthians 5 verse 17 says,

‘Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.’

Now this is what happened legally and actually, but it will take the rest of our lives for this new principle to infuse through all our being, for it to change our thinking, feeling and acting. A picture of this is when a bride marries her husband. She changes her name and becomes a member of her husband's clan. She does not cease to have links with her old clan, but the focus of her life now revolves about her new name and new clan.

To become a new creation requires that we respond to God's overtures to us. It does not happen automatically, but it is something that happens up close and personal, each one of us must respond to God in faith and surrender,

This usually requires that we become aware of our needy and dangerous state without a relationship with Christ. I have already spoken about how none of us like to be told that we are, as Ephesians puts it, Chapter 2 verses 1 and following,

'you were dead in your transgressions and sins...
following the ways of this world, and the ruler of the kingdoms of the air, (Satan)
Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.'

However this is where we stand, in a dangerous place, on railway lines and here comes an express train called death!

Then the good news,

'But God,' by Christ's Cross, God rescues us.

Turn to Isaiah 61. This passage has its first level of meaning in the return of the exiles from Babylon. However, Jesus, who is the fulfillment of all Biblical prophecy, reads this passage in the Synagogue, Luke 4.18-19. He tells the people that this passage is fulfilled in Him. Jesus came to save such as we find in Isaiah 61.

The poor, the broken-hearted, the captives, prisoners, those in need of the Jubilee. The Jubilee was where what had been lost or sold was restored to the original owner. Now these things are more than just temporal, outward conditions, but Jesus is speaking to people about the consequences of the Fall and sin, committed and committed against us. For example, every person ever born is doomed to die. Everyone is a captive to death. Jesus by His death and Resurrection promises that those who become new creations will also be raised to life beyond and through death. In this life, a believer is progressively set free from the fear of death, and this is very good!

In the same way, we could go through the list of good news in these verses. What do you make of the start of verse 2? – the Lord's favour. People either dread God, or ignore Him, but Christians can live in the favour of God. We say this at children's baptism or more often today, dedication services. Numbers chapter 6,

'the Lord lift up His countenance upon you,'

The import of this is God's smiling face. This is God's favour that He smiles on us, that He looks on us like a father does on his new born son! This is the inheritance of the believer, to be under the smiling face of God, and not in line for His coming wrath! This is what the Incarnation does!

It is so important that we see our situation correctly. Do you remember the story about the Pharisee and the Publican in the temple? We find the account in Luke 18 verse 10 and following.

The Pharisee thanks God that he is not like other men, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, and not like the Publican behind him. So often I hear people justifying themselves by saying how they are better than others in general and sometimes specifically. However, this story should put any such commending ourselves as worthy of God's favour out of our heads and hearts. The Publican did not look to human standards, but looked at God and saw the gulf between His holiness and his low state, and asked not for a due reward or regard from God, but mercy. The Publican got mercy, the Pharisee got nothing, and hell was waiting for him!

We need to examine ourselves from God's value system, not ours.

Turn to one of people's favourite passages, Matthew 5, verses 1-13, the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, and the section known as the Beatitudes. Read the 'blessed' phrases first. Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek and so on. These phrases tell us the character of people God esteems. Blessed means to be envied, to be happy. The way to happiness is to become like this, but we cannot in our own strength. To be like this, which is the character of Jesus, we have to become a new creation in Christ! Ever tried to be good? How much harder it is to be meek! Meekness means to have no opinion of ourselves and to be surprised that anyone would have an opinion of us! To be like that would mean that nobody could lord it over us, offend us, depress us or affect our state of peace by ignoring us, belittling us, insulting us or snubbing us, because all we were concerned about was God's verdict of us!

God would be entitled to require these character traits of us without any of the phrases that follow the blessed phrase. God never requires without giving, and without giving beyond merit or expectation.

He requires these characteristics of us which we cannot fulfill, so He gives us the life of Christ to enable us to begin to be transformed into this likeness of Christ. However that is not all. Not only does He give us the life of Christ in our souls to enable us to become such blessed people, but He promises us more blessings! Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven! Each requirement is supplied by the working of the life of Christ within us, and each living in this way is further rewarded with a promise of further life and blessing. Why would we not devote our lives to this?

We sometimes say of a nice person that they were the 'salt of the earth.' Not so, look at verse 13 of chapter 5, the people who conform to the beatitudes, they are the salt of the earth in God's eyes.

So, there we have it, the Incarnation and our need to respond. What will it be? Will we continue to regard and grade ourselves as the salt of the earth, or will we heed what God says about this? Jesus came to make us new creations, yet the majority of people fight hard to remain as old creations. Why would anyone do this to the endangering of their immortal souls? As an old Wesley hymn says, Jesus, 'died to save my soul from death.' He was Incarnate to save us from the Fall, from the sin of Adam, from our own sins, from the wrath of God on us, and to give us life and blessing, and His face turned towards us in a smile, and in addition to all this, eternal life. All this comes as a gift.

At Christmas we give gifts. At the first Christmas, God gave the Gift of gifts. Do not miss it, there is a gift to be received and a gift to keep on receiving in fuller and fuller measure.

This is what the Incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ is about, and why it is crucial to us all.