

10 December 2016

Becoming Children of God (John 1: 1-13)

Sarah Bachelard

There's a Hindu story of the infant Krishna who is told by his mother to open his mouth so she can see if he's been eating mud; 'she looks in, and sees the whole universe in the dark interior of his throat'.¹ The Christian doctrine of the Incarnation confronts us with a similarly vertigo-inducing claim. In the infant Jesus, the infinite is said to have been expressed in finite form, the eternal Word has become flesh, God born a human being.

Last week, I tried to say something about what it was that led the first Christian communities to begin to speak in this way of Jesus as 'Lord', to see in his human life the pressure of God's life given total expression. I said that Jesus was remembered as having exercised an unusual degree of authority, an unusual freedom, particularly in relation to religious rules and power structures. Not surprisingly, he'd fallen foul of the religious and political systems of his day and was executed. Yet, death turned out not to have been the end of him. And when he returned to his disciples, crucified yet somehow alive and still bearing peace, they began to perceive the real nature of the system that had condemned and killed him. Despite its claim to speak for God, its claim to be the necessary guarantor of stable communal life, the risen Jesus revealed it to have been shot through with violence, delusion and self-interest. It's in this sense, as John's gospel says, that Jesus is the one in whose light all people and all systems will discover who they really are and what they have really been part of.² He is the 'true light, which enlightens everyone', 'the judge to whom all shall answer'.

What's more, when this risen Jesus encountered his sheepish and frightened disciples, he called them once more to 'follow' him. So they discovered that, in relation

¹ Rowan Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ* (Melbourne: John Garratt Publishing, 2003), p.4.

² Rowan Williams, 'Beginning with the Incarnation' in *On Christian Theology*, pp.79-92, p.81.

to him, something was still being asked of them and released in them. As they responded, so the New Testament declares, they began to share in his liberty, his authority. Through him, they were entering into his relationship with his Source, the Father, and this transformed them and their relationships with one another. These experiences of judgment and renewal, I suggested, are at the source of their beginning to speak of Jesus as divine. He was and remained among them as the revelatory and creative power of God.

Well, these reflections I think offer at least *a* way of engaging with the Christian proclamation that Jesus is true God of true God ‘who came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and became truly human’. It gives us one way of understanding how this claim ever got off the ground, and so far, in our Advent series on the meaning of Christmas, I’ve been focusing mostly on this. Tonight though, I want to shift our focus a little. I want to ask about the point of God becoming human at all. ‘For us and for our salvation’, says the Creed – but what does this mean? Well, try this! What is so deeply significant about God becoming truly human is that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, God shows and empowers us how to be truly human too. We needed, in other words, divinity to teach us about humanity.

I think we can discern, once more with the help of Rowan Williams, two profound shifts in the possibilities for being human in the wake of Jesus having dwelt among us. First, as the New Testament describes it, there’s a newly emerging sense of a common or shared humanity – a humanity that transcends what were assumed to be ‘natural’ divides of nation, religion, ethnicity and status. Williams has pointed out that, ‘as far back as we can trace it’, Christianity ‘is a missionary movement’.³ What that tells us is that the earliest followers of Christ felt called to tell people of ‘all imaginable human backgrounds’ that what had happened was ‘decisively relevant to their humanity [too], that it can deliver [anyone] from whatever bondage [they] may happen to live under’.⁴

³ Williams, ‘Beginning with the Incarnation’, p.230.

⁴ Williams, ‘Beginning with the Incarnation’, p.230.

Or (as the Christmas gospel puts it) that this story, this event really is glad tidings for all people. We're accustomed to the notion of a shared or common humanity – but that's thanks to this gospel. We shouldn't forget how utterly strange it was in an ancient world characterized by sharp distinctions between Jew and Gentile, between Rome and other peoples, between those of high and those of low repute.

Yet just as in his ministry, Jesus establishes a community beyond the customary boundaries of kinship and nation – think of all that fraternizing with foreigners and sinners – so, 'as risen from the dead, he is the one who empowers the [earliest Christian] community to make a new people, a new kindred' to which everyone and anyone may belong.⁵ The true Church just is that which (Williams says) 'proclaims and struggles to realize a "belonging together" of persons in community in virtue of nothing but a shared belonging with or to the risen Jesus'.⁶ And this possibility of a universal community, of 'communion between human beings as such', is new. Even today, this is a deeply strange confession in parts of the world where caste systems, and tribal or ethnic belonging definitively determine the shape, possibilities and relative worth of human lives.

So, the idea of a common humanity – that's the first shift in possibilities for being human in the wake of the incarnation. The second is to do with the nature of the relationships within this universal human community. Because here, it's not about the strong dominating the weak, male dominating female, the healthy prioritized over the sick or disabled, the wealthy licensed to use and abuse the poor. Instead as Williams writes: 'the relation of Christians to each other is one of building up: we are engaged, in Christ, in *constructing* each other's humanity, bringing one another into the inheritance of power and liberty whose form is defined by Jesus. And that form ... is ... the power that gives authority and assurance to others and the freedom that sets others free'.⁷

⁵ Williams, 'Beginning with the Incarnation', pp.230-231.

⁶ Williams, 'Beginning with the Incarnation', p.231.

⁷ Williams, 'Beginning with the Incarnation', p.232.

I've often spoken of our life together at Benedictus in terms of our commitment to the journey of transformation – I think this is getting at the same thing. We're committed to being together not as a club of like-minded people who share common interests and backgrounds, but in order to grow in maturity, into the 'full stature of Christ', being liberated from old habits of being and patterns of reaction that are destructive and no longer serve ourselves or others. We're a community oriented to each of us becoming truly and fully ourselves and so able to offer who we are to the world. And this form of life, this way of being and becoming more truly human together, constitutes a witness and sometimes a critique of other forms of human togetherness. The Christian community, then, the church, exists to be 'the body of Christ'. That is, to be the life, the pattern of Christ's relating still enfleshed, still engaged in the world as the presence of mercy and grace and the call to maturity. When it's being truly itself, the Church is a continuance of the incarnation, and so is intrinsic to the meaning of Christmas.

Of course, as church, as communities of faith, we constantly fail at this, just as all of us individually constantly fall short of our call to be truly human, truly Christ-like. But just as in meditation, we're called not to succeed perfectly but to be faithful, so it is with our call to incarnate Christ. We open ourselves as generously as we can to that 'pressure of God wanting to be in us', wanting to give us life and transform us as individuals and as a body, from the inside. We're honest about our struggle and failure; and we begin again.

The gospel of John recognizes that Jesus comes into a human world that is hostile to his way of being human: 'he came to his own, and his own people did not accept him'. But John goes on to say that 'to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God'. That's the promise of the Incarnation for us and for our community. It's the hope we have to share with the world.