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Self-Sharing God (John 1: 1-5)

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At Christmas, four short shopping weeks away, we will celebrate the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. A child is born. A new human life is begun. Yet, in the understanding of the Christian tradition, as you well know, with this birth an enormous ‘more’ is simultaneously believed to have unfolded. In this *human* life, God’s very being is said to have been embodied, enfleshed. At Christmas, we celebrate not simply a birthday, but what Christian doctrine calls ‘the Incarnation’.

I love this concept: ‘incarnation’. I sense it’s profoundly important for our lives. At the same time, I’m baffled by it – it resists and disorients me. What do we think we’re saying when, in the words of the Nicene Creed, we proclaim that Jesus is ‘God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God ...Who, for us and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and became truly human’? Well – since Advent is the season of preparation for Christmas, for our celebration of this birth of God as a human being, it seems an opportune time to ponder more deeply the meaning of the Incarnation. This will be the theme of our reflections over the next four weeks.

Before we get underway, though, let me say something about what I think is the necessary spirit in which we undertake such an inquiry. The doctrine of the incarnation – as with all doctrines of our faith – is said to be a ‘mystery’. Sometimes people take this as a license not to ask too many questions – we don’t even have to *try* to understand it (it is after all, ‘a mystery’). At the opposite end of the spectrum, some suspect that calling it a mystery is little more than a strategy for avoiding proper critical scrutiny. For

rationalists and sceptics, unless the truth of doctrinal propositions can be demonstrated to analytical intelligence, they will not believe.

Neither of these approaches seems to me satisfactory. The first is lazy and leaves what are said to be the deepest 'truths' of our faith with no real connection to our lives. The second, skeptical approach mistakes the kind of intelligence which can deepen understanding in the realm of the spirit. The mysteries of our faith aren't puzzles or things for which we lack evidence, but pointers to the depth dimension of reality. They invite us to begin to see differently, and we take them seriously by paying them generous attention, by waiting on them, letting ourselves be baffled and so opened to a different kind of knowing. In this process both our minds and our hearts must be engaged, and through this process our minds and our hearts will be expanded. This is what the contemplative approach of theology is about – I invite you to join me in it as we seek to prepare ourselves this Advent for what is being given at Christmas.

So ... Tonight, before we even start trying to think about the nature of God's presence and action in Jesus, I want us to begin by getting in touch with how we imagine the nature of God's presence and action in our lives and in the world in general. We're going to be helped by a talk Rowan Williams gave last year, called 'The Gift of Christmas'.¹

In his talk, Williams said he'd been very much influenced by an insight of Roman Catholic Benedictine theologian, Sebastian Moore, who described 'the will of God' as 'the pressure of God wanting to be in our lives'. What's so profound about this, Williams says, is that it removes at once the idea of the 'will of God' as something imposed from outside. It's not as though God is outside of us, trying to impose God's will on our wills; rather God is the deepest energy of us. 'God is the God', says Williams, 'whose act and

¹ The talk was given as part of 'Christmas: The Season of the Gift', hosted by the World Community for Christian Meditation at the Meditatio Centre, London, 19 December 2016. The audio recording can be accessed at <http://wccm.org/content/rowan-williams-speaks-gift-christmas-london>.

being are the very foundation of our act and being. We are because God is, and in our being God seeks to be, to live more deeply and more fully’.

Of course, to speak in this way of God willing or wanting to be and to be more fully in us – these are metaphors, figures of speech. But we reach for these metaphors, Williams suggests, because they name something at least of our experience. When we sit in silence or in prayer, when we open ourselves in real poverty of spirit, we have the sense of what he describes as ‘the water rising’ – an energy, a life that is both deeply intimate and part of us, and yet which draws us out of and beyond ourselves, which liberates and enlivens us.

The implications of this picture are profound. For one thing, it means that the energy of the divine life is not at odds with or in competition with our life, but in fact is what most deeply animates us. When we’re most fully available to God, when God is allowed more fully to ‘be’ in us, then we are most truly ourselves. We’re made for this. For another thing, we come to understand that this wanting to be of God in our lives is God sharing God’s self. We are enlivened not by some supplement that God dispenses, but by God’s own life. As Williams puts it, it is the nature of God to share.

John’s gospel images this divine self-sharing in terms of speech, utterance. In the beginning, from the beginning, God speaks, communicates, expresses God’s life and this eternal speaking of God’s life is the source of all things and that in which all things hold together. Listen again to the familiar words. ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being that has come into being’.

Now, as John goes on to say and as we’ll explore next week, this self-sharing of God, God’s Word, is in the Christian tradition fully identified with the person of Jesus. But before we move too quickly here, let me say a little more about the significance of seeing that God’s sharing life is present in us and in all created things.

Notice first, this means incarnation is the dynamic of creation itself. The Incarnation is not an isolated act, but is continuous with the very self-expression of God. Not only human life, but all that is – the whole cosmos – is energized by God’s life. All matter is enspirited, and Spirit is expressed and revealed in all matter. Franciscan theologian Beatrice Bruteau draws on the metaphor of the dancer and the dance to express this relationship. ‘The dance movements and gestures’ are not the same as the dancer, she writes. ‘But they are revelatory of the dancer. They are contingent on the dancer and the dancer transcends them all, but the dancer is really present in and as them’. So, she continues, ‘the cosmos is a kind of dancing revelation of God. It is a kind of offspring of God. It is a kind of speech of God ... It is a kind of incarnation of God’.²

A few years ago, Australian poet and cartoonist Michael Leunig drew a nativity scene which showed not only Mary and Joseph bowed over the crib of their infant child, but three other cribs over which three other families bowed. They were a family of ducks, a family of cats and a family of some kind of rodent, all similarly enthralled by their infant offspring each one of which was wearing a halo. That’s it! There’s a sound Franciscan instinct here – in all things, the life of God is present and may be seen – if we have eyes to see.

I said that if we want to be open more fully to the deep meaning of the Incarnation, this mystery of our faith we celebrate at Christmas, then we must approach it in a contemplative spirit. I think we can begin by seeking to be more fully present to the presence of God in the world around us and in our lives, as the deep source of our being. Over this coming week, I invite you in your prayer and your daily awareness, to attend, to wonder, to open yourself to the pressure of God wanting to be in you ... notice what rises up, notice what might be blocking the channels, notice the depth of your desire as we prepare to encounter, to receive the fullness of God’s life and our own in Jesus Christ.

² Beatrice Bruteau, *God’s Ecstasy: The Creation of a Self-Creating World* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), p.39.