

Word Become Flesh (Phil. 2. 5-13)**Emmanuel Series II**

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The reading we've just heard is said to include one of the most ancient Christian hymns – it was not written by Paul himself, but inserted by him into his letter to the church at Philippi in around 60AD. It represents an early part of the long process by which the Christian community sought to speak about who Jesus was and to elaborate his meaning. This was a process which continued right through the 4th and 5th centuries with the great Christological debates that culminated in the creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon. With these creeds we arrive at the statements that continue to define orthodox Christian belief, encapsulated in such seemingly archane descriptions of Jesus as 'the only begotten Son of the Father, begotten not made, true God of true God, incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary (Nicaea)' and 'of a reasonable (rational) soul and body; consubstantial (coessential) with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; ... one and the same Christ ... to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather of the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son' and so on (Chalcedon). It all seems a long way from 'O little town of Bethlehem'!

At Benedictus we are embarked on our very own series of Christological reflections – pondering the meaning of Christ. And although it feels like a challenging way to approach it, I do want to touch base with some of the core doctrinal statements

of our tradition – and today to explore the theme of Incarnation, the claim that in Jesus, God has been born a human being, the Word (capital ‘W’) has become flesh.

For many of us today the great creedal statements shed more heat than light, more often becoming blockages to faith than a help. I know many – and I’ve been among them – who refuse to say the Creed or bits of it, or only do so with our fingers crossed. So to begin, let me say something about two ways we can relate to these documents. We could think (I used to think) they are statements of plain fact that we are supposed to think true, operating at the same level as other facts. The earth is round, I ate breakfast this morning, and Jesus is the only begotten Son of the Father, two natures indivisible and so on and so forth. And here, it seems to me, the problem is not only the difficulty of believing these ‘facts’, but the difficulty of understanding even what it would *mean* to believe them. What difference is it going to make if I sign up to that? How could I ever know whether it is true or not – how will I test it?

Well, there is second way we can think of all this, that I find profoundly more helpful. It is to understand creedal statements as something like rules of grammar. Their purpose is to hold open the space within which the *mystery* of Jesus may be encountered. Let me try to spell this out a bit.

What does the claim that Jesus is very God of very God and yet also truly human, do? What function does it perform? The major thing it does is to stop the church, stop us, from adopting two ways of thinking about him which are in fact much more plausible. It stops us, on the one hand, from seeing Jesus simply as a human being, one who attains an extraordinary degree of wisdom or enlightenment, and so is a model or exemplar for us, but is still exclusively human. And it stops us from seeing Jesus as a manifestation of God, pure Spirit, who seems to have human form but who really is

exclusively divine.¹ Both these ways of seeking to understand and relate to Jesus were obvious paths open to the early church – that’s why the debates were so fierce, though probably for us it is the first, exemplar model that is the prime temptation. But the doctrine of the Incarnation obstinately and explicitly refuses either of these shortcuts. It gives you a rule of grammar – if you are going to use the name ‘Jesus Christ’ then this is how you must use it – otherwise you’re speaking about something else. ‘Jesus Christ’ just means truly human and truly God, the Word made flesh.

So the Creeds don’t *explain* anything. They don’t make it *easier* to understand who Christ is or believe any of it – as if we could say, ‘oh, now I get it’. All they are doing is seeking to preserve the possibility of our encountering the reality from which they arise and to which they testify. We might think of them like icons – they point to and invite us to see *through* them to a reality that can never completely be represented or explained or solved by us.

OK – so if something like that is going on, I want briefly to draw out three aspects of this icon of Christ that strike me in the doctrine of the Incarnation, and that make a difference to our human journey, our sense of our own human possibilities.

First, Jesus is truly God and truly human. Here we are given the church’s testimony that in the person of Jesus the utterly boundless energy at the source of creation itself wholly indwells a human life, and doesn’t obliterate its humanity but draws it to its fulfilment. In the person and work of Jesus, this energy shows up in the human world as freedom, healing, truthfulness, life – it shows up as inviting the rest of us into communion with it. So – as St Irenaeus said, ‘in Jesus God became human so that we might become divine’. To be drawn into the orbit of this mystery, to get a glimpse of this possibility, is to begin to be transformed in *our* humanity – made not less human, but more so, more and more fully alive. It is to imagine and know ourselves being energised

¹ See Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp.90-91.

by a reality which is coming towards us and is other than us, experienced as grace and judgement and invitation to adventure. Our human world is not self-enclosed. God's own self is doing this among us – God has come down from heaven, says the Creed, and dwelt among us.

Second, the doctrine of the Incarnation testifies that though he was always God (eternally begotten of the Father), Jesus consents to a profound self-emptying. This is the theme of our reading: 'who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave', humbling himself even to the point of death. This same truth is represented in story form in the nativity scene in Luke's gospel – the birth of God in a stable. To ponder this aspect of the mystery of the Incarnation opens us to the revelation of God as love. The energy at the source of all things is a love which cares enough to seek us out by a way of compassion and tenderness and solidarity. And, as we allow this mystery to work on us, we find ourselves drawn into this same dynamic – discovering that we become who we truly are, and find our own fullness, only to the extent that we let ourselves go, not clutching at an identity for ourselves but receiving our lives from God in emptiness, poverty of Spirit. As we do so, we discover our radical solidarity with all people, all creation. Fullness and emptiness are not enemies – not for God, Jesus shows us; nor for us.

And third, the Word becomes flesh. The longer I walk the spiritual path, the more I realise for myself that all transformation, all spiritual growth, all wisdom needs to become flesh in us, to become part of our bodies and our lived experience. We can know in theory, believe all sorts of things – that forgiveness is true healing, for example, that new life comes from brokenness and death and nowhere else. But only when we have lived it, do we *really* know – only when we've had our hearts broken and then received new life as grace, do we understand what we were talking about all those years

and become able to communicate this reality by our lives. Spirit needs matter, incarnation, to be realised. And the mystery of the Incarnation seems to be – that’s true for God too. The healing of the world cannot happen by magic, by waving a wand, even for God. The Word, Truth itself, became flesh, embodied – and only in and through the flesh are any of us saved.

We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven, was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. Do I believe this? Not like I believe I had breakfast this morning. What I know, though, is that gazing upon this mystery like an icon, keeps opening my heart to an experience of being transformed by a grace I do not generate. What I know is that gazing upon this icon keeps drawing me into a journey of deepening trust and self-emptying, and into a bodily living out of the truths of our faith. I *know* something of the reality to which this icon points – the mystery of incarnation, of God and humanity coming to dwell together in human flesh, in all our continuing doubt and vulnerability. And this, I think, just *is* what it means to believe – learning to trust, to live by, the truth of that to which we testify – God with us, Emmanuel.