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## **Bearing God (John 1: 1-16)**

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‘We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly, but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I also do not give birth to him in my time and my culture? This, then, is the fullness of time: When the Son of Man is begotten in us’. So wrote the 13<sup>th</sup> century German teacher and mystic, known to us as Meister Eckhart. It’s a sentiment echoed by the 17<sup>th</sup> century priest and poet, Angelus Silesius: ‘Were Christ born a thousand times in Bethlehem, and not in thee, thou art lost eternally’. And it’s a theme beloved of many a Christmas sermon and carol, in which we are exhorted to ‘make room’ for Jesus in our hearts, as we warble, ‘O holy Child of Bethlehem descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin and enter in. Be born in us today’.

Somehow, it seems, we’re called not only to celebrate and witness to the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth; but we are to become God-bearers as well. Tonight, in this last of our Advent reflections, I want to explore this dimension of the Christmas gospel, this facet of the mystery of the Incarnation.

A little background first. Last week, I suggested that what’s so deeply significant about God becoming ‘truly’ human in the person of Jesus is that through his life, death and resurrection, we’re shown how to become truly human too. On the one hand, through Jesus there came the possibility of realising our common or shared humanity. In a culture characterized by sharp distinctions between Jew and Gentile, Rome and other peoples, and between those of high and low repute, Jesus established a community which transgressed these taken for granted, seemingly ‘natural’ boundaries. And after

his resurrection he empowered the earliest Christian community to call into being ‘a new people, a new kindred’ to which everyone and anyone may belong.<sup>1</sup> This ‘new people’ is called the church and, says Rowan Williams, however imperfectly and falteringly, it exists to proclaim and to realise the possibility of a “‘belonging together” ... in virtue of nothing but a shared belonging with or to the risen Jesus’.<sup>2</sup> It’s a belonging that transcends all tribal, national, racial or familial identity – it is ‘communion between human beings as such’, and it’s a new thing.

What’s more, there’s something distinctive about the relationships within this universal community. Jesus had taught his disciples they were not to ‘lord it over’ one another (Mark 10:42). In his way of being human, the strong do not dominate the weak, nor the wealthy oppress the poor. Instead, this is a humanity characterized by mutual service and up-building, a pattern of relating which liberates and authorizes people to become fully themselves, children of the one Father.<sup>3</sup> It’s a community of friends, as the Quakers say. The church brought into being by the risen Christ exists to manifest this way of life, this pattern of Christ’s humanity – a new humanity for us all.

Except, do we really need the church, do we really need discipleship, for this? Now that it’s been pointed out to us that we are one people under God, now that we’ve realized we can be for one another’s flourishing, it’s tempting to think we can just take it from here. And given the manifold failures of Christian communities, it’s little wonder that many in our culture are happy to adopt the values of this Jesus of Nazareth without seeing the need to buy into the whole doctrinal, spiritual package. After all, if we’ve got the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, what need is there for those elaborate and dangerously close to sentimental notions of Jesus being born in our hearts?

Here, I think, is the short answer. God became truly human, said the early church theologians, not only so that we might become truly human too – but so that we might

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, ‘Incarnation and the Renewal of Community’ in *On Christian Theology*, pp.225-238, pp.230-231.

<sup>2</sup> Williams, ‘Incarnation and the Renewal of Community’, p.231.

<sup>3</sup> See Williams, ‘Incarnation and the Renewal of Community’, p.232.

become divine. Incarnation, our tradition maintains, is not uni-directional. In Jesus, God became as we are so that we might become as God is, which is to say persons constituted by a plenteous and life-generating overflow of hospitality, mercy and love. This plenteous life is the real source of true humanity, true community. And to realize it takes a lot more than simply holding certain values. It requires incarnation ... and this time, the flesh is ours. That, I believe, is what these difficult and mysterious notions of God coming to birth in us are pointing towards.

So what does all this mean in practice and not just in Christmas carols? I want to suggest that the traditional metaphors of pregnancy and birth profoundly express the spiritual dynamics of this, our vocation to incarnate God.

Because, first of all, there must be conception – and with God, this requires consent. God does not force God’s self upon us. Remember we began this series by pondering Sebastian Moore’s insight that the will of God is ‘the pressure of God wanting to be in us’. But that pressure is not coercive. ‘Behold, I stand at the door and knock’ says the book of Revelation (3:20). That’s another metaphor that speaks to this dynamic of what Julian of Norwich calls God’s ‘courtesy’, God’s ‘courteousness’. God asks, God waits, God wants to be invited. Simone Weil says that ‘Over the infinity of space and time, the infinitely more infinite love of God comes to possess us ... We have the power to consent to receive him or to refuse.’<sup>4</sup> The whole event of Christ’s Incarnation, so the story is told, hangs on Mary’s consent – her being receptive to the life of God entering her, being conceived in her.

What does this look like in our lives? In the absence of angelic visitation, how do we know God is wanting to enter us, to be conceived in us? Well – the pressure of God wanting to be and be more fully in us shows up in different ways. Sometimes we glimpse it in experiences of heartsickness and a yearning for intimacy that feels always

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<sup>4</sup> Simone Weil, ‘The Love of God and Affliction’ in *Waiting on God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Fontana Books, 1959), p.91.

unsatisfied; sometimes we sense the 'more', the transcendent, in our struggle to receive the gift of beauty or to let love in. Sometimes we recognize the pressure of God wanting to be in us only as we undergo the unravelling of careful lives, or our failure to be who we planned so earnestly and sincerely to be. In these moments of vulnerability and openness we may glimpse the infinite seeking us out, and because of our poverty and humility and need we finally dare to receive, to say 'yes'.

But as with any conception, it's only the beginning. And more often than not, before the painful joy of birth, the process of enfleshing this new life gets harder. Mary gets heavier, uncomfortable. God growing in her is stretching her, changing her, and there's yet more room to be made. Weil says that if we consent, 'God puts a little seed in us' but that 'the growth of the seed within us is painful',<sup>5</sup> partly because to make room for it we must keep weeding out whatever would hinder it. Or, as in Mary's case, she must simply keep undergoing what is happening in and through her.

Some of you might know this experience in prayer – a sense of something being wrought which is obscurely painful, yet to which you know you must keep giving your consent. Some of you will know the anguish of being rejected or misunderstood because of what your 'yes' to God has meant for the shape of your life – maybe you gave up a job you no longer felt called to, maybe it's meant the breakdown of relationships, or the loss of belonging in a community. I imagine that all of us know the daily and unglamorous struggle to let our habitual reactions and defences be transformed by the life of God becoming more wholly our own. And if you've ever sought to forgive someone who's hurt you badly; or chosen not to render evil for evil, or let pass opportunities for self-justification, or tried to engage conflict with patience and generosity, you know how excruciating letting the life of God grow in you can be. Nevertheless, says Weil, 'after all, the seed grows all on its own. The day comes when the soul belongs to God; when it not only consents to love, but when truly, effectively, it

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<sup>5</sup> Weil, 'The Love of God and Affliction', p.91.

is love'.<sup>6</sup> When this happens, then God is enfleshed in us. We have become bearers, mothers of God – the divine life incarnate in ours. And this is the fullness of the Christian vocation. It is the deepest message of Christmas.

Hear again these unforgettable words from the Prologue of John's gospel: 'And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth ... From his fullness have we all received, and grace upon grace'. Incarnation. It's about God becoming human in the person of Jesus Christ, the divine life showing us what it means to be fully human. And it's about this grace so poured out upon us, that we in our turn become divine, living God's life in our world.

A merry Christmas to you all.

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<sup>6</sup> Weil, 'The Love of God and Affliction', p.91. (trans. altered)