

3 December 2016

The Word Became Flesh (John 1: 1-9)

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Last week, I drew on theologian Sebastian Moore's insight that the 'will of God' can be described as the 'pressure of God wanting to be in our lives'. God's will, on this view, is not in competition with our will, but is what most deeply animates us. Rowan Williams expresses the same insight: 'God is the God whose act and 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'.¹ When God is allowed most fully to 'be' in us, then we are most truly ourselves.

In John's gospel, we noticed, this pressure, this divine wanting to be is imaged in terms of utterance, speech. In the beginning, from the beginning, God communicates, shares God's self and this eternal speaking of God is the source of all things. 'In the beginning was the Word ...'. According to this picture, the whole cosmos is spoken into being by God. Everything that exists is the self-expression of God taking form, becoming flesh. And in this sense, I said, creation is a kind of incarnation.

What, then, are we to say about 'the Incarnation', the feast we celebrate at Christmas, the birth of Jesus of Nazareth? If incarnation can be seen as the dynamic of creation in general, what's so special about this event? Not a lot – some say. There are those who suggest that our Christian language about Jesus, about 'the Incarnation', is simply an instance of this more general incarnational dynamic. Jesus is the son of God, yes, but in exactly the same sense that all of us are sons and daughters of God. Jesus is God's word incarnate in just the same way as each of us are words incarnate. Perhaps

¹ Transcribed from 'The Gift of Christmas', a talk 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>

he's a bit more fully realized, more accurately 'translated' (as it were) but we're all essentially like him.

Now I think there's something true in this. We *are* all called into being by the one Word and we're all called to realise, to en flesh as faithfully as we can the truth of ourselves as spoken by God. St Paul writes to the Corinthians of their vocation to be 'living letters' of the Word (2 Cor. 3:3), and in a similar vein draws on metaphors of mirroring and reflection. We are made in God's image and called to reflect back to God our increasing likeness to that image; all of us, says Paul, 'seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another' (2 Cor. 3: 18). The Eastern Orthodox tradition speaks of our human vocation to realise, to embody God's Word in terms of our vocation to become divine. In that sense, we are (at least potentially) as Jesus is – 'bright images of God's glory'.

However (comma), to say that we are called to be as Jesus is, is not quite the same as saying he's none other than we are. The doctrine of *the* Incarnation holds that in the person of Jesus something has more happened. 'At a pivotal point in the history of the world', Rowan Williams says, 'that divine pressure, [God's] longing to be in creation, broke through – it flowered'.² And because of this breakthrough, something has been released in the world, something new has become possible. This sense of things comes through in our gospel reading today, when the being of John the Baptist, is specifically distinguished from the being of Jesus. 'He (John)' says the text 'was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world'.

This means then, that despite all I've said about incarnation as continuous with creation in general, *the* doctrine of the Incarnation is about discontinuity as well as continuity. It's about Advent – an unanticipated future breaking in to the present time.

² Williams, 'The Gift of Christmas'.

In the life of Jesus of Nazareth, *the* Word that God is became flesh – in its fullness, in its entirety. What are we to make of this? How are we to understand it?

Well, how did the first Christian communities understand it? What was it about the experience of Jesus that made the notion of ‘divinity’ attributed to him a theological possibility and eventually something they felt bound to confess?³

As I pondered this question, the two words that came to my mind were authority and liberty. In the gospel narratives, Jesus is portrayed as one who speaks with authority, unlike the scribes and Pharisees; he takes authority over the wind and waves, and over the Sabbath; he claims authority to forgive sins. And relatedly, liberty. Although his meaning is only first understood in the context of Israel’s religious and social system, Jesus shows himself to be free within this system. His belonging, his identity, his meaning is sourced elsewhere.

For the first Christian communities, Jesus’ authority, his liberty, are rooted in the resurrection. Even death has no dominion over him, and so he returns to those who victimized and denied him, those entangled in the violent and truth-avoiding systems of the world, as both liberator and judge. As John’s gospel expresses it, Jesus, crucified and risen, is the one in whose light all people and all systems will discover who they really are, what is true of them and what they have made themselves to be.⁴ He is the ‘true light, which enlightens everyone’. He reveals the shape of God’s life in the world as merciful, just, creative of community, restoring of relations. And he reveals the world to itself, our tendency to push God out, our resistance to the pressure of God wanting to be in us and in our common life.

So Jesus is ‘the judge to whom all shall answer’. That’s one aspect of what seems to have pressed the early Christian communities towards the language of incarnation, God with us. Another is perhaps this. The first disciples experienced the return of Jesus

³ Rowan Williams, ‘The Finality of Christ’ in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp.93-106, p.103.

⁴ Williams, ‘Beginning with the Incarnation’ in *On Christian Theology*, pp.79-92, p.81.

in the resurrection as a renewed invitation to ‘follow’ him, to be conformed to his way of being. Their encounter with Jesus turns out not to have been a one-off episode, now in the past, sealed and finished. He’s experienced as still alive and among them, calling them, convicting them of the truth, sending them out. In relation to him, something is still being asked of them and released in them – and as this happens, as they respond, they discover themselves sharing in his liberty, his authority. Through him, they are entering into his relationship with his Source, the Father. And this is new, a breakthrough in possibilities for being. They called it a new creation.

This is the point at which, I think, we do have to speak of mystery. At one level, it seems bizarre and unbelievable that such an intervention in the course of the world could be; that in this particular historical moment, the pressure of God’s wanting to be could be fully expressed, without blockage or remainder, in this human life and so transform the possibilities of life on earth forever. Who could believe that? And yet, at another level, something profound seems to have happened ... something in which we too are promised and may experience a share.

I’ve said that if we want to be open to the deep meaning of the Incarnation, we must approach it in a contemplative spirit – seeking not just to understand it intellectually, but being willing not to know, letting ourselves be baffled, encountering it as something far beyond our capacity to master or manipulate. As we continue our preparation for the feast of Christmas, our journey through Advent, I invite you this week to ponder the mystery of Jesus, the Word become flesh. Maybe there’s a story in Scripture or a phrase that draws you, maybe you experience a longing to know him more nearly, maybe you glimpse – hovering just at the edge of awareness – a sense of being called into new possibilities for being. I encourage you to let yourself be with your unknowing, your longing, your sense of being drawn, to let your humility and openness and receptivity deepen. For this is the work of making ready to encounter, to receive the fullness of God’s life and our own in Jesus Christ.