

23 August 2020

Fleshing Out God
Philippians 2:1-11

I've said in some recent sermons and classes that I do not accept the belief, common among Christians, that only our group is ultimately received by God, while all non-Christians are doomed to eternal flames. I find it repugnant to say that the God we claim is Love offers discount salvation to those who are lucky enough to be born in predominantly Christian nations and casts into hell those who have never heard of Christ or who faithfully served their understanding of God in a different religion. Nor do I believe that's what scripture teaches. I do believe in judgment, but I believe with Paul that we will be judged by how we lived our lives within the light that was given us. Having said that, though, I need to add that I do *not* believe that all religions are really the same. They aren't. Moreover, I have zero interest in a watered-down middle-ground spirituality that has sifted out every distinctive religious teaching. God preserve us all from such a flavorless mess. No, I am a Christian, and I believe the distinctive teachings of classical Christianity. We may not have everything right – well, we don't; God is bigger than all our theologies – but I do believe that our distinctive teachings offer the clearest and most hopeful picture of Eternal God. So, for the next few weeks, I want to focus on one of those unique and essential teachings of our faith. It's the doctrine found in verse two of the great Christmas hymn "O Come, All Ye Faithful."

*True God of true God, Light from light Eternal,
Lo, he shuns not the Virgin's womb.
Son of the Father, begotten, not created.
O Come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.*

It is the doctrine that Christ, who was God, became a man, flesh and blood: it's the Doctrine of the Incarnation. We read from Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 2, verses 1-11:

2 If, therefore, there is in the Anointed any comfort, if any consolation of love, if any communion of spirit, if any inward affections and feelings of pity, 2make my joy full, so that you may be of the same mind, having the same love, together in soul, minding one thing – 3nothing according to rivalry or according to vainglory, but rather in humility esteeming each other as far better than your own selves, 4each looking not to his own concerns, but rather each to the concerns of others, 5be of that mind in yourselves that was also in the Anointed One Jesus, 6who, subsisting in God's form, did not deem being on equal terms with God a thing to be grasped, 7but instead

*emptied himself, taking a slave's form,
coming to be in a likeness of human beings;
and, being found as a human being in shape, 8he reduced himself,
becoming obedient all the way to death, and a death by a cross.*

*9For which reason God also exalted him on high
and graced him with the name that is above every name,
10so that at the name of Jesus every knee –
of being heavenly and earthly and subterranean – should bend,
11and every tongue gladly confess*

that Jesus the Anointed is Lord, for the glory of God the Father.

New Testament scholars, noting how the last part of that reading uses the rhythms and repetitions and parallelism that are found in ancient poetry, often suggest that Paul is quoting here from a hymn that the Philippian Christians knew. You know, like preachers today sometimes do. If so, then what we are looking at is a very early Christian expression of faith. The book of Philippians was written maybe only twenty years after Jesus' death, and if Paul is quoting from a hymn that he expected people to recognize, then this verse had already been around for a while. So what does this early word from the earliest church declare? That Jesus was equal to – indistinguishable from – God, but gave all that up to become a human, just like us, and that his humanity was crowned by the ultimate human experience, death. That emptying of divinity to enter our too, too sullied flesh, that embracing of temporary and corruptible and precarious human existence then became his greatest glory, a glory beyond every angel's most exalted song.

That's the doctrine of the Incarnation. Far more important than the details – the "Virgin's womb" and the stable and the shepherds and so on – is the basic fact that God became flesh and blood and bone and sinew. And let's face it, it's a weird doctrine. It was even weird in the first century. Oh, there were lots of stories in the ancient world about gods visiting earth; the Greek chief god, Zeus, for instance, was always popping down to earth, mostly to get it on with a hot young human girl while his wife wasn't looking. But those gods didn't *become* human. That would have been beneath their dignity, such as it was. They just put on a human appearance. But even weirder than the fact of Jesus' humanity is the reason for it. In all the other ancient religions – Canaanite, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and so on – the gods' interest in humanity is fleeting at best. If they cared about human beings at all, it was only in terms of what amusement they could get out of them. (Again, Zeus is a good example.) There are plenty of stories of gods and goddesses using humans for their own purposes, but none of a god going to any trouble for them simply out of love. This Christian story of a god who gave up transcendent divinity and took on all the fragile weakness of humanity, simply to rescue humans from themselves, is unlike anything else in ancient religion. It would surely have struck ancient peoples as a contradiction in terms: a god who gives up his dignity is no longer a god.

But before we begin to feel superior to those ancient people who might have been offended by this weird doctrine, let me point out that it is just as weird today. Even many of us in the Christian church who claim to believe this doctrine are very good at not thinking too hard about its implications, but let's do that. What does it mean that God became flesh, a real live human? Did teenage Jesus have pimples? And did he pop them? Did he get colds – you know, the gross kind where your head is full of mucus and when you lie down on one side it all drains to that side until you roll over? Did he ever have diarrhea? Did he experience sexual attraction for someone walking by? Now, one more question: did you think those questions I just asked were inappropriate? Were you offended at the idea of Jesus in any of those situations? If so, then you understand why many of the ancients were scornful of this strange teaching of the Christians. You understand why Incarnation really is a weird belief. It feels wrong to attribute any of them to God, but if we say that God became human, all these things come with it.

So weird is it, in fact, that a significant part of Christian theology through the ages has consisted of attempts to airbrush all the weirdness out of this doctrine. There were those in the early church who suggested that Jesus only *looked* human – like Zeus, but with higher morals – and there others who said that Jesus was human, but his divinity so overwhelmed his humanity

that really, there wasn't any visible trace of it left. Others said that Jesus was really just a human who had been adopted by God – at his baptism, say – for a special purpose; that he never was really God. All of these suggestions make more sense than our doctrine and are less offensive than the image of Almighty God blowing his nose, but to their credit, the early church steadfastly refused to go with these more acceptable options. In council after council, they planted their feet firmly on the stupid, unreasonable, illogical, sticky, humiliating option: the Creator of heaven and earth became human. Like us. Well, browner than most of us, but in every way that matters, just. like. us.

In fact, we're still resisting this doctrine in 21st century Christianity. There are still those who try to sweep Christ's humanity under the rug, because they don't *want* a human God. They want a God of power and wrath who will take their side against their enemies. Many oppressed peoples, trapped in circumstances beyond their control, long for that kind of God, and who can blame them? But beyond oppressed peoples I would add that anyone whose life is driven mostly by fear and anger pictures a fearsome and angry and all-powerful God. Extreme fundamentalist Christianity is founded in fear and anger, and those Christians have no patience with the humanity of Jesus. They skip right over the gospels, going straight from Malachi to Paul on the way to Revelation. At the other extreme, though, we have those who would like to white out the divinity of Christ and turn Jesus into just a really admirable, but entirely human, spiritual teacher. Those who prefer that picture are almost invariably comfortable, well-educated, upper-middle class Christians who are pretty happy with their circumstances and would like a god who offers gentle moral and spiritual direction, but otherwise leaves things alone. Extreme liberal Christianity, which is founded largely on smugness, would rather have a life-coach than Eternal God, come to transform the cosmos.

But again, neither of these are what we have in the Christian faith. Classical Christianity doesn't let us go all the way either direction. Instead, we're stuck with the logical nonsense that Jesus Christ was both human and divine. He was wholly human, with all the weaknesses of humanity – by turn sleepy, sneezy, grumpy, happy, bashful, and so on – and in his humanity, he affirms our worth to God as fleshly creatures. He came to us in all our weakness and humiliation because he loved us, in the flesh. But he is also wholly God, with all the cosmic power of deity, and in his divinity he reminds us that without his work tearing down the veil between time and eternity, body and spirit, we are incapable of reaching God. No, the doctrine of the Incarnation makes no sense, but it is just this nonsense that explains Christ. Without it, he's just another divine avatar, dropping in for a visit, or just another bodhisattva. Our doctrine of the Incarnation tells us that he's more than both.

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Final word: The Incarnation is more than just a doctrine, though. It has direct and comprehensive implications on the rest of our faith. Over the next three weeks, I'm going to talk about some of those implications – why the Incarnation matters. For now, though, let me close with . . . part of a hymn: "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail th'incarnate Deity, pleased with us in flesh to dwell, Jesus our Immanuel. Hark! the herald angels sing! Glory to the newborn king." We close now with one more meditation.