

## 2. The Word Made Flesh

Every year the world – and the Church – experiences Christmas, that curious amalgam of paganism, commercialism and Christianity which Western civilisation has invented to tide it over the darkest days of the winter. It would be easy to be critical. Yet, in a day of small things, the festive season, so called, has one advantage: it reminds the public of at least the name and the fact of Jesus Christ. The pity is that men seldom go beyond that and that the Church itself appears content to leave the supreme mystery of its faith only vaguely hinted at in the glitter and gaiety of what it calls its greatest festival. Christmas is a lost opportunity, a time when the world invites the Church to speak and she blushes, smiles and mutters a few banalities with which the world is already perfectly familiar from its own stock of clichés and nursery rhymes.

The question is still worth asking: What is this Christmas event which everyone hints at but no one talks about? The answer, of course, is the nativity; and the significance of that is defined for us by the Apostle John in one of the greatest statements in the New Testament: ‘The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth’ (John 1:14, KJV).

### The Eternal Word

The person of whom John speaks – the Word – is described in the preceding verses of the first chapter of his Gospel and the description contains several remarkable features.

First, the Word is eternal. His existence did not begin at Bethlehem. It did not even begin at creation. On the contrary, in the beginning, when everything created came into being, the Word was already in being, unoriginated, uncaused and independent of any other form of existence. There never was when the Word was not. Consequently, the nativity marks not the beginning of Christ's existence but the perforation of history by One from eternity. He is not the product of evolution or the precipitate of a particular genetic inheritance but the intrusion and eruption of the Eternal into the existence of man.

Secondly, the Word was Creator. All things were made by Him. He conceived and formulated the creation. He spoke it into being, moulding and building it with a sovereign artistry. This has important consequences both for our view of Christ and for our view of the world. The One who made all things is by definition possessed of awe-inspiring energy and power. He is, in John's view, the Almighty, 'the all-holding' One. Conversely, the ultimate energy is Christ. The creative force, the source of every other form of energy, is not impersonal, blind, capricious or malevolent, but Christlike. The creation expresses Him and in itself contains no un-Christlikeness at all. In that confidence we harness its resources, assured that all of them are at least beneficent, and move over every horizon, expecting to find not black holes of sterility and absurdity but coherent and fecund expressions of the mind of Christ.

Thirdly, the Word was God. This is the core of the Christian faith. Without it there could be no incarnation. But what are we really saying when we call Jesus God? We are ascribing to Him the greatest divine title of the Old Testament. He is *Elohim*, the God whose name (in the plural form) expresses the most intense and exclusive deity. He is the summation of godhead, the One whose being makes that of all other gods not only superfluous but impossible. But we are also saying that Jesus possesses all the attributes of God. He is eternal, omniscient, unchanging, omnipresent, omnipotent and holy in His mercy, righteousness and love. Beyond that, He performs all the characteristic functions

of deity: creation, preservation, government and final judgment. But above all, He enjoys every divine prerogative. The glory due to Him is precisely the glory due to God. Every knee is to bow. Every heart is to worship. Every tongue must bless Him.

This is the essence of our Christian devotion. The Church is not primarily an evangelistic, preaching community, far less a liturgical, sacramental one. First and foremost it is a community of doxology, of Hallelujahs! and Hosannas!, of bowed heads and adoring song. And that adoration is always Christwards.

Who is he in yonder stall  
 At whose feet the shepherds fall?  
 'Tis the Lord! Oh wondrous story!  
 'Tis the Lord, the King of glory!  
 At His feet we humbly fall.  
 Crown Him! Crown Him! Lord of all!

The historic Christian creeds enshrine this doctrine in the statement that Christ is *of one substance* with God the Father. The phrase (*homoousios*) originated with the Greek-speaking Fathers of the ancient Church and was distinguished not only from *heteroousios* (of a different substance) but also from *homoiousios* (of a similar substance). They repudiated energetically not only the idea that Christ was *different* from God but also the idea that He was *like* God. Instead, they insisted that He was God. He lacked nothing that entered into the definition of God. What God was, the Word was.

We must go further still. When we speak of Christ being of the same substance as God we are not simply affirming a generic identity between Him and the Father, as if they merely belonged to the same species. They are one and the same being: 'I and my Father are one' (John 10:30, kjv). Jesus is not a second God additional to the original One. He is Jehovah, the only God, the One who is there.

If this is so, then we must eliminate from our idea of the Saviour's deity every last vestige of subordinationism. Christ, in Calvin's phrase, is *autotheos*. He is God in His own right. He

does not derive His being from the Father. Nor is the Father the fountain or principle of His godhead. He possesses the very deity of the Father, including the attribute of self-existence. Otherwise, He could not be the Lord, Jehovah, the Being One.

There remains, however, another factor. The Word was not only God. He was God *with* God. Christ is unreservedly God. But He is not the totality of God. The Father also is God and the Spirit is God. These cannot simply be different names for the same person or different faces of the same person. Otherwise, we could not have the Word with God or the Son sent by God or the Son forsaken by God. Equally, however, they are not different beings, giving us three distinct gods. They are, instead, three eternal distinctions within the one God; but distinctions of such an intensely personal kind that each loves the other and that together they constitute a triune life of which the very essence is love.

## Enfleshment

John expresses the idea of incarnation itself in the phrase ‘became flesh’. Two preliminary points deserve a brief mention.

First, John does not in the least suggest that in becoming flesh the Word ceased to be what He was. He was God. He continued to be God, retaining both His divine identity and His divine nature. The alternative is unthinkable. For the Word to have ceased to be divine would have meant a radical modification in the very being of God: a reduction from triuneness to ‘bi-uneness’.

Secondly, John speaks of Christ as *becoming* flesh. The traditional Christian expression has been that He *took* or *assumed* human nature. This is perfectly legitimate – indeed, it has express biblical warrant: the Lord *took* the form of a servant (Phil. 2:7). John’s word is bolder and emphasises both the totalness of the incarnation and the intimacy between Christ and the flesh. To have become flesh is to be flesh – a salutary reminder that humanness is not simply attached to Christ like a mask or a garment or an artificial limb. It is something which He is and through which He effectively expresses Himself.

To proceed then: at the most basic level, the incarnation means that Christ took a true human body, the same in all essential respects as our own. It grew from zygote to foetus to infant to child to adolescent to man. It had the same nutritional and environmental needs. It had the same chemistry, the same anatomy, and the same physiology. It was not an illusion, but was real and tangible. The incarnation was not a theophany – the temporary assumption by God of a human appearance. It was a genuine entering upon the possibility of all those experiences to which our bodies expose ourselves – hunger and thirst, weariness and pain, seeing and hearing, flogging, crucifixion, death and burial.

But the incarnation also meant that the Lord became ‘a reasonable soul’. He entered into all the psychological possibilities of human existence. We can view this from at least four different perspectives.

First, He had ordinary human affections, as is shown, for example, by the fact that He had His own friends, choosing twelve of them simply *to be with Him* (Mark 3:14), being especially close to three of them and probably uniquely close to one (‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’). He shows tender consideration for His mother, special affection for the rich young man (Mark 10:21) and compassion for His fellow country-men (‘He beheld the city and wept over it’).

Secondly, Christ experienced all the ordinary human emotions. He knew sorrow, amazement and grief. He was awestruck by the unfolding providence of God for Himself, angered by profanity and fearful of the approach of death.

Thirdly, He had a human faculty of choice. He is incarnate by His own decision. But He must also make decisions as the incarnate One. He chooses to humble Himself further, below the level of mere enfleshment (Phil. 2:8). He chooses not to turn stones into bread, not to worship Satan and not to throw Himself from the pinnacle of the temple. In Gethsemane, despite profound misgiving and fear He chooses the cup of sorrow. These are not the effortless, unconditioned decisions of deity, but the painful

decisions of humanness made on the basis of limited information by One conscious of creaturely frailty and fearful of the cost.

Fourth, our Lord had a human intellect. Not *only* a human intellect, but *also* a human intellect. On this human level there were things He did not know, the most notable being the time of His own return in glory: ‘about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father’ (Matt. 24:36). We should accept this without embarrassment. The human nature of Christ was (and is) no more omniscient than it was omnipotent or omnipresent. It was at every point dependent: ‘Behold my servant, whom I uphold’ (Isa. 42:1, ESV). This was as true at the intellectual level as at any other. Christ as man knew only as much of God (or of His own godhead) as God was pleased to reveal to Him: through general revelation given in the work of creation and providence, through special revelation given in the Scriptures of the Old Testament and through direct prophetic disclosure given to Him in His capacity as Mediator. Neither creation nor the Old Testament had anything to say as to the date of the Second Coming and Christ could only have known it if God had given Him a special word to that effect. Instead, the Father chose to keep it ‘in his own power’, presumably because this knowledge had no bearing whatever on the work of redemption.

We should beware, however, of thinking that this was the only point at which Christ’s human knowledge was incomplete. Immeasurably superior as His intellect is to ours, it is not adequate to searching out God. More readily even than Paul’s, it cries out before the Glory, ‘Oh the depth!’, the massive range and superb clarity of its vision serving only to render Him more conscious of the immensity of God. The paradox is, of course, that the deity which astonishes Him is His own. What He became stands in awe before what He was.

## Implication of the incarnation

It follows inescapably from John’s doctrine of the incarnation that the Mediator had two natures.