

No.12

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Dear Friends,

Following on from last week's talk on the person of Jesus and looking at the time and place in which he lived - the better to understand him - today Fr Tristan is going to consider the greatest truth of our Christian faith, namely the Incarnation, God taking on human nature to share our life, that we may share his.

We then turn to Bishop Robert Barron's Sunday Sermon from 8th November, 32nd Sunday of the year. The readings were : The Book of Wisdom 6 : 12 - 16; St Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians 4 : 13 - 18 and St Matthew's Gospel 25 : 1 - 13. The theme of Bishop Barron this week is "re-thinking the Spiritual Life". He lays down a challenge to us to reconsider how we approach our relationship with God. I would suggest that reading these scripture passages first would be a very good way to appreciate the bishop's talk.

Let us remember each other in our prayers this coming week - especially anyone living alone - in these difficult times.

God bless

John de Waal

What is the Incarnation? - Fr Tristan.

There are two major ‘beginnings’ in the Scripture. One is at the very start of the Bible in the book of Genesis, which begins: “In the beginning...” The second is at the start of St John’s Gospel which starts with the very same words. John is signalling that he is about to tell us about something new that God has done, something as radical, and in fact more radical than that which He did in creating the world in the first place. John, writing in the last days of his life, is reflecting on the extraordinary and transformative event that he was privileged to witness first-hand¹ - the coming of God in the flesh.

Of course, God has worked in the world since ‘the beginning’ that the writer of Genesis described, and in a special place in the people of Israel, to whom He revealed Himself through the giving of the Law to Moses, in wonders and miracles and to prophets. That is the revelation of the Old Testament. But at the start of the New, God works in the world in a new way, by becoming human Himself. This event is what we call the **mystery of the ‘Incarnation’**, or “becoming flesh”, and it is the central idea of the Christian faith. Understand the Incarnation, and we understand immediately what it must mean to follow Jesus – in fact, we cannot not become a Christian. Get the Incarnation wrong, and it will make it very difficult for us to understand anything about Jesus, the Church, or the Scriptures at all.

God became man It is such a mind-blowing idea that we cannot ever really fathom it. It is one of those “mysteries” that Catholics are quite at home with – not a puzzle to solved, but a truth about God that draws us in to Him, who is so much greater than ourselves, revealing it to us not by our own power, but by faith – faith, that fills us with wonder. We will never really understand it unless we reach heaven; down below, we have to take it on trust. Yet it is vital to think about the Incarnation, because it concerns every other aspect of Christian lives....to the extent that hopefully will become clear shortly.

“The Word became Flesh and Dwelt Among Us” – that’s how John describes the Incarnation in his first chapter, “new beginning”. Let’s take that phrase of St John’s and break it down.

¹ Jn 1:12; 19:35

“THE WORD...”

When we say “God became human”, we are making a true statement. But it is even more accurate to say that “*The Word* became human”. We must always remember that God one God in Three *Persons*: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – collectively known as the Trinity. The Father, Son and the Holy Spirit are not interchangeable – but neither are they in any way differently God. The Son is also known as “The Word”. This name, like the name “Son” itself, is based on the idea of *generation*

“Son” of course means a person who is generated, and “father” is someone who generates – we use the same words to talk about ordinary fathers and sons. But the Son is also called “The Word” because a word is also something in some sense “generated”. Try this experiment. Close your eyes and think of a beautiful island, or a snowy mountain or a crowded café in Barcelona. An image appears in your mind, which you can now convey by saying aloud: “island” or “mountain” or “café”. Each represents a kind of mental “word”, which we can give birth to in our imagination, and then through language. The Son is like that: He is a perfect *expression* of the Father ‘given birth to’ in reality. Except rather than just being a little piece of our reality, like my idea of an island or café, He is identical to the whole of the Father’s being (because God is infinite!)

It is only the Son/the Word who became incarnate – not the Father and the Holy Spirit. Thus Jesus Christ is fully God – but He is also only One of those Three Persons. **He loses nothing of His being God by becoming man. He is generated by the Father eternally, but is now *also and completely a man*.**

Many groups throughout history have denied the idea that Jesus *is truly God* by claiming He was just a man “adopted” as a special instrument by God, or just joined to him in a certain way. Some have claimed that He was not even that, but merely a prophet. Some go the other way and claim that Jesus is some kind of divine being, but that He was *created* by God, or proceeds from Him *at some point in history* as a subordinate, denying the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity. Historically, a very large group of those believing this were the Arians, who were very widespread by the time of the 4th Century, had a large hierarchy and structures, and whose church buildings can be seen in many Mediterranean countries today. Arianism was condemned as false by the Council of Nicaea in 325, the legacy of which is the “creed” or statement of faith which we stand and recite even today on Sunday’s at Mass: **“I believe in one God the Father almighty...and in one Lord Jesus Christ...born of the Father before all ages...begotten not, made, consubstantial with the Father...”** In our own time, groups that reject this core belief include the Jehovah’s Witnesses.²

² See Jehovah’s Witness official website: <https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/faq/jehovah-witness-beliefs/>

“...FLESH...”

So – the Incarnation means that it was really God who became man (Jesus Christ, the Son of God), and not that Jesus was merely adopted or “not quite God”. But what do we mean by “man” in this sentence? What does John mean by “became *flesh*, and dwelt among us”.

The Incarnation begins not with an adult human being walking around, but at the very start of human life. Jesus was *conceived*. In the beginning of course, there was nothing except God – He created matter in the first place: He did not need pre-existing material to work with (not that there was any!) We call this *ex nihilo* (“out of nothing”) creation. But in the case of the Incarnation, this is *not* what happened. God did not just create a random human body, or clump of matter to be His own. His whole purpose in the Incarnation was to truly become part of the human *genus*, and specifically, one of the children of Israel, part of His very own chosen people! It meant pre-ordaining to come at a particular place, in a particular time....and through a particular person. God became man, by coming into the world the same way as all men do – through a mother.

God took the genetic material for His humanity from a member of the people of the Israel, a girl named Mary, betrothed to a man of King David’s line, Joseph, in an occupied land. Mary became God’s mother in the fullest sense: she provided the egg which would become Jesus and the uterus in which He would gestate for nine months, as well as His source of nourishment, education, and love in her marital home. The miracle is that there is no male genetic material provided in the usual way; rather “*he was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.*” (The Apostles Creed)

Jesus is also thus *fully man* – with everything that being a human being entails: *a human body united to a human soul*. He grew up from baby, to child, to teenager, to adult: he learned, ate, drank, had emotions, needs, friends. Some have claimed throughout history that being God, He merely took a human body, a bit like a pilot strapped into a cockpit to manoeuvre a plane – but this is not what the Incarnation means. He is not merely human in appearance.

But surely to become human means to be flawed, frail, sinful? No. All humans alive today are in fact sinful – we are wounded and tainted by effects of original sin. But humanity was not created that way. Precisely the reason the Son became human was to assume that which had been damaged, but restoring it to what it should be – he takes on true human nature, born into a real human family tree...but without the defect of sin. Jesus could suffer the punishments of sin (pain, sorrow, grief), and in fact He had to do so, but, being the person of the Son, God Himself, He was in no way guilty of causing them. As the image of the Father, in taking on human nature, He becomes the perfect man, imaging God. St Paul puts it this way: “For our sake, he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the

righteousness of God.” In other words, he could not heal our sinful flesh, without taking on that flesh – but in doing so, he paved the way for our own humanity to be united to God too.

“...BECAME...”

So Jesus is truly human, and truly God. But sandwiching these two ideas together is the hardest part! This is what is indicated by the word “became” in the “The Word became flesh”, or as it is sometimes translated “...was made flesh”. How do we understand this “becoming”? There have been many disagreements through history about this truth. Did Jesus’s divine nature evaporate, “shrinking down” to fit his human condition? Or was His humanity overwhelmed, dissolving into His divinity, like a drop of water added to wine? Is He a mixture of divine and human? Or rather a person with two parts, one human, one divine? Or two persons tied into one, or mingled? As we saw above with Nicaea, the Church has held many councils (gatherings of the bishops) over the centuries, whenever it becomes necessary to settle some of these disagreements. They are not merely meetings, but moments in which the a determination is made *infallibly*, such as Nicaea, or one that took place in 449, at Chalcedon, (today, a suburb of Istanbul). The Council of Chalcedon teaches us that Jesus is one person in two natures “unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably”. His personhood is that of the Word – the person of the Trinity proceeding from the Father, as we discussed above. His natures are two – but they are neither mixed together, nor are in they in any way separate, nor are they in any way diminished in contact with one another. I said this was the hard part! We don’t need to worry here about the details of this mystery – we can read the saints and theologians who have prayed and written about this over the centuries; but here at least we can acknowledge that as Catholics this is what we believe.

A FINAL REFLECTION

The Incarnation changes everything. When we read the Scriptures, every one of Jesus’s actions should be seen as God and man performing them. As we approach the season of Advent, and Christmas, we will be reflecting on this amazing and sobering truth in a very special way. Here is a short extract from a meditation that can help us begin to pray in thanksgiving for The Word Made Flesh:

“Yet for all [He was God], He was truly man:

*Our fellow in the manger lying
Our food within the supper room
Our ransom on the Cross, when dying,*

Our prize in His own kingly home.

I must, therefore, always be conscious of His humanity. I must realize that my sorrows are akin to His, that my difficulties are such that He will understand; that, although His strength is divine and is upheld by all the force of His Godhead, His compassion is thereby not less human; that He is God indeed from all eternity, but man as truly from the moment of the Incarnation: man to understand by experience, God to help; man to suffer and die, God that death and suffering may have infinite avail. Oh, the dignity of my human nature, that it, too, is clothed about the strength of God! Oh, the real union achieved in the Blessed Sacrament when I am one with Christ! No wonder Lacordaire broke out in accents of human love in his address to his Redeemer: "O Father, O Master, O Friend, O Jesus!" There is a real relationship of love between me and His humanity."

(From Fr Bede Jarrett, O.P. (1881-1934) *Meditations for layfolk*, re-published as *Classic Catholic Meditations to enrich your faith and help you pray*, 2004, Sophia Institute Press)

[Bishop Barron's Sunday Sermon.](#)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9vi24rHWGI>

Night Prayer (Compline).

Antiphon. Save us, Lord, while we are awake; protect us while we sleep; that we may keep watch with Christ and rest with him in peace.

Nunc Dimittis.

At last, all-powerful Master,
you give leave to your servant
to go in peace, according to your promise.

For my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared for all
nations, the light to enlighten the Gentiles
and give glory to Israel, your people.

Antiphon. Save us, Lord, while we are awake; protect us while we sleep; that we may keep watch with Christ and rest with him in peace.

A short time (if suitable) for silent prayer.

Concluding prayer.

Lord our God,
restore us again by the repose of sleep after the fatigue of our daily work;
so that, continually renewed by your help, we may serve you in body and
soul. Through Christ our Lord. Amen

Blessing. Lord, grant us a quiet night and a perfect end. Amen.

A Final Thought.

To seek God means first of all to let yourself be found by him.

He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

He is the God of Jesus Christ.

He is your God, not because he is yours, but because you are his.

(St Benedict - rule for a new brother).