

*Jesus before Christmas*

Well, another Christmas has come and gone. By now, the presents have all been unwrapped. Visiting family have gone back home. Christmas dinner has been eaten. A lot of us have already taken down the Christmas tree and put away our decorations. The excitement of Christmas took weeks to build to a crescendo...and now it's over. And many people are breathing a sigh of relief, eager for life to return back to "normal," to the way things were before the Christmas craziness got going. A week from now, you probably wouldn't even be able to tell that we just celebrated one of the most important holidays of the year. You wouldn't suspect that something as momentous as the commemoration of our Savior's birth had just taken place a few days before. "Next to a circus," Frank Hubbard once quipped, "there ain't nothing that packs up and tears out faster than the Christmas spirit."

Now, I'm not trying to criticize our culture. I don't suppose it was any different after the first Christmas. With the exception of a handful of shepherds in the surrounding hill country, pretty much nobody outside of Jesus' immediate family even took note of the event. To most of those alive at the time, he was just another baby born to some peasant family in a backwater region of the Roman Empire. Anything but remarkable.

That fact doesn't stop us today from thinking that night must have at least felt different. I mean, we can't help but wonder, Did the sky have to hold back the thunder? Did the moon find new reasons to glow? Did the joy ricochet off the mountains until it filled up the valleys below? Did the walls of the barn start to tremble with a glory they could not contain? Were the sheep as amazed as the shepherds at the angels filling the sky? Did anyone wake the next morning with the feeling of peace they could not explain?

By all accounts, no, nothing of the sort happened. There was no great fanfare to welcome Jesus, no royal parade, no mountains breaking forth in song, no trees pulling up their roots to dance in joy. No, as far as we know, the first Christmas came and went without anyone much noticing (save the shepherds and Magi of course). The first Christmas was a day like any other.

From the perspective of pretty much everyone alive at the time, nothing happened that hadn't happened a million times before. From another perspective, though, things couldn't have been more different after that first Christmas. For hidden beneath the normalcy and humbleness of Jesus' birth, God accomplished something amazing, something stupendous, shocking, something never before done. God became human, took on flesh. Up to this point, God had relied on various intermediate ways to communicate with us: visions and voices from heaven, a burning bush, an angelic messenger, miraculous interventions. But with the birth of Jesus, God revealed himself as a man, as one of us.

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." That is how John puts it in the prologue to his Gospel. The other Gospel writers use genealogies, Old Testament prophecies, and stories of miraculous conceptions to introduce Jesus; John sets up Jesus by going further back, way back before all of that, before Bethlehem, before the Jordan River, before Israel even. "In the beginning

was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” These words, when spoken, sound like a sort of incantation or, better, an invocation, a calling to mind of a great and profound mystery—a mystery we know as the Incarnation of God, the Word of God, God’s Son, made flesh the Holy One taking on human nature, the Infinite constraining itself to a finite body, divinity uniting itself to humanity.

By immediately identifying the child born in Bethlehem with God, John makes it clear that Christmas is not the beginning of the story of Jesus. Jesus may have been born some 2000 years ago, but he was begotten of the Father long before that, before there was even such a thing as time. He was with God in the beginning, before the beginning.

Indeed, in the opening to his Gospel, John prompts us to think back to the book of Genesis, to the first chapter of the first book of the Bible. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” Genesis says. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God,” John declares. Not only was He with God before creation, Jesus was involved in creation itself, working with God to fashion all that is. As “the Word,” the *Logos* in Greek, the logic, Jesus was the fundamental principle of order, the pattern, if you will, with which God made creation. “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” He is the “blueprint” for the universe, we might say. And now, at Christmas, that blueprint has taken form within the architecture of creation, becoming part of the world itself, part of history, part of humanity.

In setting up Jesus this way, John wants to make it impossible for his readers to think Jesus is simply "a great moral example," or a wonderfully insightful teacher, or even "the greatest person who ever lived." John doesn't give us that option. Jesus, according to John, is God in the flesh, God's supreme act of *self-revelation*.

In the Bible, you see, the nature of God, who he is and what he is like, is not something arrived at by delving deeply into the depths of our psyches, as we like to believe today. It is not stumbled upon during long walks in the woods, immersing ourselves in nature. It is not something that arises out of our common human experience. Rather, our understanding of God is determined by the fact that God took the initiative and made himself known to us, revealed himself to us.

That is to say, all that we know of God comes to us as a gift from God himself. If God did not choose, out of love for us, to reveal Himself to us, then we would not know God. We would be sitting in the dark, attempting to give form to shadows. We would be wandering in the recesses of our own limited imaginations of “God.” But God refused to remain aloof, vague, and distant, and instead revealed himself to humanity in Jesus. We don’t need to guess at what God is like any longer. In the man Jesus, “full of grace and truth,” we see the very image of God. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. Jesus is the fullest picture we are ever going to get of who God is, and he is all we are ever going to need.

This is the deep reality, the underlying truth of Christmas. You won’t find this truth on a Hallmark card or in an ad to sell toys or even spelled out in a creche. It is the reality that is at the root of all of our Christmas celebrations, what is behind our holiday cheer and good wishes. God cared so much about us, saw us wandering desperately in darkness. And wanting so badly to have us back, that He took off his royal robes, stepped out of heaven, surrendered his divine prerogatives, and condescended to become one of us. That is what he did in the Incarnation.

And he did this, not simply to hang out with us, to walk with us as we meander through life, but rather to lead us home, to lead us back to God, to restore us to him. “To all who received him, who believed in his name,” John writes, “he gave power to become children of God.” That is the end goal, the purpose of the Incarnation. He became one of us, that we might know him and he us. Becoming like us, that we might become like Him. As St Athanasius put it, “God became man that humans might become divine.” That is what this is all about, what Christianity is all about.

You know, every December, as we approach the start of the new year, you inevitably see articles in newspapers and segments on TV offering a “look back” at the past year. To be sure, the time between Christmas and New Year’s Day is a slow time of year for news, but more than that, it’s natural at the end of the year to reflect on all that has occurred—the major events in the country and in our family—and also to try to make sense of it all: What does it all mean? And where is it all going? And what am I doing in it? Of course, this questioning isn’t just something that happens at the end of the year; it’s something we face at various turning points in our lives: as college students trying to figure out their place in the world; at midlife, having reached a point in our career, wondering if this is all there is; in old age, looking back on our life wondering if the life we lived mattered. For some, the question of meaning and purpose is a low-level, lingering concern, something in the back of their minds. For others, the question is more acute. I’m thinking here of the 37 million in our country today who use drugs to numb their pain and the thousands who give into suicide in our country, people so despairing, so in pain, they cannot see the point of life, the purpose of living. For them, “What does it mean? Why are we here?” is an existential concern.

But to say to them “Jesus is the answer” can seem trite and simplistic and even insensitive. That is the “Sunday school answer.” You know, when the Sunday school teacher asks you a question, you can bet the answer is either Jesus, God, or the Bible. Yet Jesus *is* the answer. Jesus who came to reveal God to us, to reveal God’s purpose, who also shows us our purpose and destiny.

You know, back in the 1600s the Presbyterians in England and Scotland adopted the ‘Westminster Confession’ as a statement of faith. It was staunchly Calvinist, Reformed in its theology, and sharply critical at times of the teachings of the Church of England, the same teachings we hold to in the Episcopal Church. Nevertheless, there is one part of the confession that offered real insight, real theological genius. It is found in the first question the confession asks: “What is the chief end of man?” And the answer is “to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.” That’s a perfect answer. I can’t think of a better, truer response. There is one problem, though—the answer is redundant. To “glorify” someone or something *is* to enjoy them. You see, when you praise someone or something, you are expressing your enjoyment of it, your appreciation of it. If you, say, are walking in the woods and you come across a beautiful vista, you spontaneously praise it: “Look at how beautiful it is!”, or you’re a reader and you praise your favorite book: “What a truly great author!”, what you are doing in giving the vista or the book glory is expressing your enjoyment of it. To praise is to express enjoyment.

What this translates to ultimately is that our chief purpose, when we are most fulfilled, is when we delight in God, when we enjoy him. That is what makes us most happy, most satisfied, most *alive*. “The glory of God is man fully alive,” says St Irenaeus, another church father.

John is telling us that Jesus was just such a man, the only man who was fully alive, but also that that is what we are destined *for*, what God wants for us, what we are able to become in Jesus.

So, no, Jesus' birth may not have been glorious or spectacular or even particularly remarkable. The earth didn't shake, the trees didn't start singing. But that doesn't mean that it wasn't important, that it didn't change everything, that it didn't change everything between God and us and all creation. God's becoming one of us inaugurated a new state of affairs in the world, a whole new way of living and relating to God and one another. Truly, seeing God in the face of Jesus, experiencing God's grace and truth in him, cannot but affect us, cannot *not* change us, even radically so. It is for this reason that, even though we've put away our Christmas decorations, Christmas is not over, far from it. We are living proof that Christmas continues on. Thanks be to God!