

Jesus: The Staggering Mystery of Christmas

The supreme mystery with which the gospel confronts us lies not in the Good Friday message of atonement, nor in the Easter message of resurrection, but in the Christmas message of Incarnation.

The really staggering Christian claim is that Jesus of Nazareth was God made man—that the second person of the Godhead became the “second man” (1 Cor. 15:47), determining human destiny. The second representative head of the race took on humanity without loss of deity, so that Jesus of Nazareth was as truly and fully divine as He was human.

Here are two mysteries for the price of one—the plurality of persons within the unity of God, and the union of Godhead and manhood in the person of Jesus. It is here, in the thing that happened at the first Christmas, that the most profound and most unfathomable depths of the Christian revelation lie. “The Word became flesh” (John 1:14); God became divine Son became a Jew; the Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, unable to do more than lie and stare and wriggle and make noises, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child. The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as is this truth of the Incarnation.

But, once the Incarnation is grasped as a reality, these other difficulties dissolve. If Jesus had been no more than a very remarkable, godly man, the difficulties in believing what the New Testament tells us about His life and work would be truly mountainous. But if Jesus was the same person as the eternal Word, the Father’s agent in creation, “through whom also He made the worlds” (Hebrews 1:2, NKJV), it is no wonder if fresh acts of creative power marked His coming into this world, and

His life in it, and His exit from it.

It is not strange that He, the author of life, should rise from the dead. If He was truly God the Son, it is much more startling that He should die than that He should rise again.

And if the immortal Son of God did really submit to taste death, it is not strange that such a death should have saving significance for a doomed race. Once we grant that Jesus was divine, it becomes unreasonable to find difficulty in any of this; it is all of a piece and hangs together completely. The Incarnation is in itself an unfathomable mystery, but it makes sense of everything else that the New Testament contains.

Who Is This Child?

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke tell us in some detail how the Son of God came to this world. He was born outside a small hotel in an obscure Jewish village in the great days of the Roman Empire.

The New Testament has two thoughts to convey about the identity of the baby.

The baby born at Bethlehem was God.

More precisely, putting it in the language of the Bible, He was the Son of God, or, as Christian theology regularly expresses it, God the Son—*The Son*, note, not *a Son*. The apostle John says this four times in the first three chapters of his Gospel, in order to make quite sure that his readers understand the uniqueness of Jesus, that He was the only begotten or one and only Son of God (see John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18).

John wanted to make it clear from the outset that the Sonship which Jesus claimed, and which Christians ascribed to Him, was precisely a matter of personal deity and nothing less. Hence, his famous prologue (John 1:1-18). The Church of England reads

it annually as the gospel lesson for Christmas Day, and rightly so. Nowhere else in the New Testament is the nature and meaning of Jesus' divine Sonship so clearly explained as here.

See how carefully and conclusively John expounds his theme. He does not bring the term *Son* into his opening sentences at all; instead, he speaks first of the *Word*. There was no danger of this being misunderstood; Old Testament readers would pick up the reference at once. God's Word in the Old Testament is His creative utterance, His power in action fulfilling His purpose.

The Old Testament depicted God's utterance, the actual statement of His purpose, as having power in itself to effect the thing purposed. Genesis 1 tells us how at creation "God said, 'Let there be' ... and there was ... " "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made ... He spoke, and it came to be" (Psalm 33:6, 9). The Word of God is thus God at work.

John takes up this figure and proceeds to tell us seven things about the divine Word:

1. "In the beginning was the Word" (1:1). Here is the Word's *eternity*. He had no beginning of His own; when other things began, He—was.

2. "And the Word was with God" (1:1). Here is the Word's *personality*. The power that fulfills God's purposes is the power of a distinct personal being, who stands in an eternal relation to God of active fellowship.

3. "And the Word was God" (1:1). Here is the Word's *deity*. Though personally distinct from the Father, He is not a creature; He is divine in Himself, as the Father is.

4. "Through him all things were made" (1:3). Here is the Word *creating*. He was the Father's agent in every act of making that the Father has ever performed. Here, incidentally,

is further proof that He, the Maker, does not belong to the class of things made, any more than the Father does.

5. "In him was life" (1:4). Here is the Word *animating*. There is no physical life in the realm of created things except in and through Him. Here is the Bible's answer to the problem of the origin and continuance of life, in all its forms: Life is given and maintained by the Word. Created things do not have life in themselves, but life in the Word, the second person of the Godhead.

6. "And that life was the light of men" (1:4). Here is the Word *revealing*. In giving life, He gives light too. That is to say, all people receive intimations of God from the very fact of being alive in God's world; and this, no less than the fact that they are alive, is due to the work of the Word.

7. "The Word became flesh" (1:14). Here is the Word *incarnate*. The baby in the manger at Bethlehem was none other than the eternal Word of God.

And now, having shown us who and what the Word is—a divine Person, author of all things—John indicates an identification. The Word, he tells us, was revealed by the Incarnation to be God's Son. "We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father" (1:14). The identification is confirmed in verse 18: "The only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father" (KJV). Thus John establishes the point at which he was aiming throughout. He has now made it clear what is meant by calling Jesus the Son of God. The Son of God is the Word of God.

When, therefore, the Bible proclaims Jesus as the Son of God, the statement is meant as an assertion of His distinct personal deity. The Christmas message rests on the staggering fact that the child in the manger was—God.

But this is only half the story.

The baby born at Bethlehem was God made man.

The Word had become flesh: a real human baby. He had not ceased to be God; He was no less God then than before; but He had begun to be man. He was not now God minus some elements of His deity, but God plus all that He had made His own by taking manhood to Himself. He who made man was now learning what it felt like to be man. He who made the angel who became the devil was now in a state in which He could be tempted—could not, indeed, avoid being tempted—by the devil; and the perfection of His human life was achieved only by conflict with the devil. The epistle to the Hebrews, looking up to Him in His ascended glory, draws great comfort from this fact.

“He had to be made like his brothers in every way ... Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted ... For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 2:17-18; 4:15-16).

The mystery of the Incarnation is unfathomable. We cannot explain it; we can only formulate it. Perhaps it has never been formulated better than in the words of the Athanasian Creed. “Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man ... perfect God, and perfect man ... who although He be God and man: yet He is not two, but one Christ; one, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh: but by taking of the manhood into God.” Our minds cannot get beyond this. What we see in the manger is, in Charles Wesley’s words,

Our God contracted to a span; Incomprehensibly made man.

Incomprehensibly. We shall be wise to remember this, to shun speculation and contentedly to adore.

Does the peace of God dwell in your heart?

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