

Advent: Celebrating the Incarnation

Our New Testament Scripture is Philippians 2:1-11. In this letter, Paul is writing from prison, calling the church to joy, humility and a servant attitude toward one another. He points them to the supreme example of Jesus Christ, who was willing to undergo the humility of the incarnation—the submission of the eternal Son to human birth, life, rejection, suffering and death on a cruel cross. This passage, beginning with verse 6, is either a hymn composed by another writer in the church, or is a hymn written by Paul himself.

Read Philippians 2:5-11.

⁵ *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,*

⁶ *who, though he was in the form of God,*

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

⁷ *but emptied himself,*

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸ *he humbled himself*

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross.

⁹ *Therefore God also highly exalted him*

and gave him the name

that is above every name,

¹⁰ *so that at the name of Jesus*

every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ *and every tongue should confess*

that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

CS Lewis said that the incarnation of Christ is “The Grand Miracle.” The in-fleshing of God, the eternal Son, the second Person of the Trinity, is the central miracle around which all the other miracles of the Bible, including the resurrection of Jesus, revolve like planets around the sun. For example, the formation in the womb of Mary of the God-Man is what gives meaning and significance to the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. The birth of Jesus was very typically human. It was his being conceived in the womb of a virgin, who was impregnated by the Holy Spirit, which was the miracle. But even the Virgin Birth is subsumed under the grander concept that eternal God the Son, Co-Creator of the universe, could be, in the words of Luther, “compressed into the size of a man’s hand.”

Theologians agree that the incarnation of Christ is the most amazing miracle of the entire Bible, “more amazing than the resurrection and more amazing than the creation of the universe. The fact that the infinite, omnipotent, eternal Son of God could become a man and join himself to human nature forever, will remain for eternity the most profound miracle and mystery in all the universe.

Paul is concerned to encourage the Philippians to experience joy—the robust joy of the Christian life. One barrier to joy seems to have been disunity and disagreement that created a rift in the church fellowship. It seems that some in the church were driven by selfish ambition. Paul says they needed to experience the “secondary miracle” of unity and humble, selfless serving that is based on and derived from a relationship with Jesus Christ. They needed to understand the grand miracle of the incarnation, which will enable them to experience the miracle of a change of attitude, bringing real unity and joy into their fellowship. The incarnation of Christ tells us that God stoops to us, humbling himself to come down to earth to meet us at the point of our need.

In our text, Paul speaks of the miracle of divine humiliation. Paul would say this miracle was not only that God *could* become a man but that he *would* become a man. Christ willingly submitted and subjected himself to take upon himself our humanity. As John said, the Word became flesh and made his dwelling with us (John 1:14). Paul is citing the incarnation of Christ as the supreme example to us, and we’re called to humble servanthood. Christ “emptied himself,” i.e. “made himself nothing” (NIV, 7). He was born into poverty, and lived in obscurity for the first 30 years of his 33-year earthly life.

Humility was not a popular virtue in first century Philippi. In the Greco-Roman world the norm was the attitude espoused by the great philosopher Aristotle, who said high-mindedness is a proper virtue and humility is a “dog virtue.” Nor are weakness and humility popular virtues in our culture. But Paul says, if we would be like Jesus and follow the way of the cross we’ll die to pride and take the way of humble service to others.

It was necessary for the Son of God to come to earth and serve us in order to bring us salvation. Jesus said he didn’t come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). And, he said “For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10).

The humanity of Jesus means also he’s able to sympathize with us in our weakness (Hebrews 4:14-16). In his human body Jesus became weary, hungry, and thirsty. Even after his resurrection, his body remained tangible. He had a human mind that developed from infancy through childhood, into adulthood. He experienced the full range of human emotions, and was so human that probably for the first thirty years of his life, his divinity went unrecognized, which is why the people of his hometown of Nazareth had trouble accepting his messianic claims.

Yet, even though Jesus was human and tempted as we are, he remained sinless (Hebrews 4:15; 2 Corinthians 5:21). In the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11), Jesus’ temptation covered the gamut of assaults upon every human appetite and desire of the flesh and spirit. But he was victorious over every temptation, even that last assault of Satan in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46). In his humanity Jesus Christ is able to be our sympathetic High Priest (Hebrews). He now knows how we feel, and feels with and for us as one of us.

And, Jesus Christ will be a man forever. And in heaven, we'll see and fellowship with him and be able to place our hands in the nail prints in his hands and side, as he invited Thomas to do (John 20). We'll dine and feast with him, as did the disciples after his resurrection (Luke 24). Jesus Christ is God incarnate. As Paul says, in him the fullness of God dwelt in bodily form (Colossians 1:19; 2:9).

Our text from Philippians does not say Jesus gave up his divinity while incarnate on earth, but rather that he divested himself of heavenly glory and divine privileges. Our text says he didn't cling to divine prerogatives to be above suffering, abuse and neglect. As Paul says, citing Jesus as our supreme example in serving others, he did what was needed to serve us and meet our desperate need, in order to save us from our sin (Matthew 1:23).

Christ became a baby in Bethlehem's manger, yet he also continued as God to uphold the universe by his powerful word. He was tempted as a man, but as God he cannot be tempted (James 1:13). He experienced death on a cross, and expired physically as each one of us will. Paul says Christ Jesus, in his incarnation, became obedient unto death, "even death on a cross!" This is the real glory of the incarnation. Had Jesus been obedient to be born, and live a perfect life, and give us his perfect teaching, and then stopped short of his death on a cross, we would still be hopelessly lost in our sins.

This was his dread at the Garden of Gethsemane. If there were any other way to bring us salvation, he would gladly have chosen that way. The cross meant he would suffer the wrath of God for all the sins of the world. He would be God's curse for sin, and the wrath of God would remain on him (Isaiah 53).

Several years ago, during a Belgian holiday tour, the guide explained that the evergreen tree, perhaps originating in Germany, presents a triangular profile. The three points, at the lower sides and then at the top, represent the three Persons of the Trinity. And the church came to use the Christmas tree as a reminder that Jesus, our Savior, died on Calvary's tree for us. Christmas without the cross is an empty, secular holiday.

The church in Philippi was in need of a radical attitude and mind-set change about the effect of Christ's humiliation. There were factions and ruptures in the fellowship caused by selfish ambition and worldly power grabbing among God's people who were known as followers of Jesus. Their factionalism appears just as petty as the grumbling among the disciples on the eve of Jesus' crucifixion as they argued over positions of greatness in the kingdom (Luke 22:24-30). Just as Jesus reminded them of his stooping to the lowliest place of servanthood and their call to follow his pattern, so Paul reminds the church of Jesus' supreme example. And he urges us to have the same attitude and mindset of Jesus.

The late popular commentator Paul Harvey told a story about a farmer who was an unbeliever:

It was Christmas Eve and he was warming himself by the fire, reading a paper. His family had gone to a worship service. His reading was interrupted by a loud thumping noise. He went to the door, thinking someone might be knocking, but found no one there, so he went back to his chair. He heard the sound again, and opened the curtain over the bay window to discover a flock of birds flying into the window. A snowstorm had caught the birds away from their shelter, and the warmth of the lighted windows (and probably the deception of their reflection in the windows) attracted them. The farmer realized these birds would freeze unless they could find shelter.

The man, who had declined to go to the Christmas Eve worship service because of his spiritual indifference, nevertheless felt concern for these birds. He opened the barn door and tried vainly to shoo them in, since his efforts only frightened the birds. He tried using a trail of breadcrumbs from the house to the barn, but that didn't work.

"If I could just communicate with them," he thought. "If I could just tell them I don't want to hurt them. If I could just make them understand that I want to help them. But I'm a man and they are birds, and we don't speak the same language. If I could just become a bird, they wouldn't be afraid of me and would trust me," he thought.

At that moment, Harvey said, the church bells rang in the distance, sounding a familiar Christmas carol. The farmer sank to his knees with a prayer to the God who had become a man in the person of Jesus Christ in order to show his love and provide the way of our rescue.

The incarnation is an important miracle because Christ can make a radical difference in our lives. He enables us to follow his example and to give evidence of his presence in the world today. You and I are called to consider the miracle of the incarnation of Christ as a pattern for us and for our thinking. We are called to serve Christ by serving others (Matthew 25:31-46).

Paul Harvey used to sign off his broadcasts with "now you know the rest of the story." But this isn't the end of the Incarnation story. Consider the wonderful "Therefore" of verse nine. Someone has said that whenever you see the word "therefore" in Scripture we need to understand what it's there for. In verses 9-11 we see the truth in the incarnation of Jesus Christ that "the way up is the way down." Because Christ descended to be with us and to die for us, God has lifted him to glory and honor. As believers in and followers of Jesus Christ we are called to die to self, taking up our cross of self-denial, and follow him in obedience. And we trust that, in the end, there will be a resurrection for us.

Imagine the glory that Jesus will receive upon the consummation of his kingdom, when "*every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*" (10).

Many believers around the world today are suffering overt, physical persecution because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Their suffering doesn't have meaning unless Jesus Christ is in the center of it, and is revealed and glorified through it. Such suffering will be rewarded and suffering believers will be lifted up in God's time and way. Jesus was encouraged in his obedience to death by the joy set before him.

James Boice told this story about...

"...a poor rice farmer, (whose) fields lay high on a mountain. Every day he pumped water into the paddies of new rice. And every morning he returned to find that an unbelieving neighbor who had lived down the hill had opened the dikes surrounding the Christian's field to let the water fill his own. For a while the Christian ignored the injustice, but at last he became desperate. What should he do? His own rice would die if this continued. How long could it go on? The Christian met, prayed, and came up with this solution. The next day the Christian farmer rose early in the morning and first filled his neighbor's fields; then he attended his own. Watchman Nee tells how the neighbor subsequently became a Christian, his unbelief overcome by a genuine demonstration of a Christian's love for others."

Where you and I live there are those who need to see the reality of the incarnation as Christ takes on your flesh, as you clothe yourself in him. I know I need more of this miracle of the indwelling Christ, who can and will live in me and as me.