

THE INCARNATION

In a few weeks time we shall be celebrating Christmas, the Feast of the Nativity (the Incarnation). Our familiarity with it can blunt our awareness of the enormity of it – God became Man, ‘Emmanuel’, God with us.

The Christian belief in the Incarnation is quite staggering. The more we know about the universe, its vastness, its age, the more it is a mystery that God its creator could have chosen this planet, this race, this age (only two thousand years ago) to send his Son, Jesus, to it. It is a scandal, a stumbling block, a trip-wire, which has tripped many people. Lots of genial Christians are in fact crypto-Arians, willing to admit that Jesus is the most sublime of God’s creation, but drawing the line at the assertion of the Incarnation. So straight away our faith is being tested. So we can say, ‘Lord, I don’t understand, but I believe’. We are agnostic for the reason that we live by faith.

It is so easy to put the Incarnation into an historical box as an event which took place two thousand years ago, a sort of ‘one off’ intrusion into the world, instead of seeing it as the presence of God into the world - NOW.

The Incarnation, God becoming man, is quite central to our life as Christians. Jesus, God made man, shares our humanity with us, he shares his life with us. He comes to us as a friend, a lover (‘Love one another as I have loved you’ – John 15:12), not as a God of Fear, a lawyer God sending down rigid laws and commandments, who seeks to punish us. Rather he comes as a one who forgives our sins asking us to forgive one another. Jesus undermines the fortress built on fear. ‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and still you do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father’ (John 4:9). Jesus shares his life with us, our poverty, our pain. He comes to touch our hearts in the deepest craving of our being and who says – ‘Come, follow me. Do not be afraid, it is I’, a phrase repeated so many times in the Gospels. So Jesus shares his life with us NOW.

But we will say we cannot see God, we cannot touch him. We are all like St Thomas – ‘unless I see the holes the nails made, unless I can put my hand into his side I refuse to believe’ (John 20:25). I like the story of the child who cries out to its mother after having nightmares, and the mother says: ‘There is no danger, you are protected by your Guardian Angel and God is there to keep you safe’. The child is inconsolable – ‘I want something with skin on it’. We all want something with skin on it, and that is the point. There is so much with ‘skin’ on it if only we were aware. Indeed it is through material things in this life that we do touch and meet God; preeminently it is through other people –

‘When I was hungry you gave me food...when I was sick or in prison you visited me’. Human love is divine love in disguise. The great Eastern mystic, St Symeon the Theologian (died in 1022) wrote: ‘The hands of mine are the hands of God. The body of mine is the body of God – because of the Incarnation’. What a challenge! Our faith must be exteriorized in what we do. We, each one of us, are ambassadors of God, the presence of God for others. As Mother Teresa said: ‘Look for the lonely, the unwanted, the unloved, first in your own family and then elsewhere, and be God’s love to them’. God’s delight is to be worshipped in the way we treat each other, listen to each other, forgive each other, hence St Augustine’s comment – ‘Make humanity your goal and you will find your way to God’.

We live in a sacred world. The eighteenth century Jesuit Jean Pierre de Caussade coined the phrase ‘The Sacrament of the Present Moment’ by which he meant that we always meet God in the present moment, and so in a sense all life is sacramental. Most notably St Francis of Assisi understood this; he had an acute awareness of the presence of God. In the same way St Augustine saw in nature the ‘Vestigia Dei’ (footprints of God’). I think we can relate to that – for example when we sense the vastness of the universe on a starlit night, or the majesty of the ocean, ... or at the other end of the scale the extraordinary ordered world of ants, bees, etc. Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary at the outbreak of the First World War, had an extraordinary rapport with the natural world. He used to escape from the affairs of state in London to his little cottage on the banks of the River Itchen in Hampshire. He and his wife Dorothy used to keep a diary (later published as ‘The Cottage Diary’) which was left open on the table in the hall. One entry read; ‘It is one o’clock and I have just arrived here, and I feel as if my heart was too full and might burst: the place is so sacred’. That is a wonderful phrase - ‘the place is so sacred’. He too had an acute awareness of the presence of God. Listen to St Thomas Aquinas: ‘God is beauty itself, beautifying all things. God puts into creatures a kind of shine, a reflection of God’s luminous ray – which is the foundation of all light’. So beauty is the ‘radiance of the divine’ – a sort of sacrament. So when we perceive beauty we are drawn to God, just as plants turn towards the light. Everyone will have their own perceptions of beauty, maybe it is the slow movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, or Botticelli’s Mystic Nativity or the clear light of a spring morning – but beauty always points beyond itself, it draws us on, we long for it to continue but we cannot hold on to it.

All life is sacramental since the Incarnation. We need to heighten our sensitivity to beauty. Silence, I think, is a pre-requisite. Our duty is to remind people of their dignity, their sacredness; remind them of God’s presence and God’s love for them. Yes, all life is sacramental. The Church’s Sacraments are ‘peak’ moments. It is the purpose of the sacraments to underpin all this. God’s presence is there through visible signs. The sheer physicality of the sacraments is so important.

In Baptism it is the washing with water; in Confirmation it is the strengthening with the spirit through anointing; in Confession it is the outward sign of God's forgiveness through absolution. In the Eucharist, the Mass, it is the outward sign of bread and wine ('my Body for you' 'my Blood for you'), food for the journey. St Ignatius of Antioch called it 'the sacrament of immortality'. Br Roger of Taize recalls taking his leave of the old Patriarch Athanagoras in Istanbul. He left the old patriarch standing in his doorway – 'He lifted his hands as if he was offering the Chalice at the Eucharist and said - the Cup and the Breaking of Bread, there is no other way – Remember'. The Liturgical Year gives us the framework, and devotions like the Angelus give us reminders of God's presence. And yet suffering too – God's presence alone makes sense of it (but that is another whole subject).

Our whole awareness of all this is sustained by prayer – silence - being with the one who loves us, being receptive.... Prayer is an act of AWARENESS. Without specific times of prayer our perception of the presence of the Incarnate God will be blunted.

So we return to the first point. The INCARNATION is not a 'one off' event of two thousand years ago, but the presence of God in our world NOW. Listen to the last words of St Matthew's Gospel – 'And know that I shall be with you always, yes, until the end of the world' (Matthew 28:20)

Our world is sacred; Jesus is very close to us; he loves us.

So we pray that our blindness may be cured.