

Christmas Midnight 2006

The word is made flesh and dwelt among us. For the next few minutes I want to unpack that, and explore what seem to me to be some of its implications.

The Word

Word is not what we think of as word – it's much more. It's the name given to the system that underpins everything – God. It includes the laws of nature – part of God. The Greek word for it is *logos*, from which we get logical. So *word* in Scripture means something much bigger than what we mean by it. Word existed with God at creation – the big bang – the stardust out of which we are made, possibly.

Became flesh

- This *logos*, word, rational system, then becomes flesh. Jesus is human *logos*; the human form of God. Jesus is God. The human Jesus is the human expression of natural law. Jesus is the example by which we aim to live life. We need to listen to what he says, and act upon it. It's as simple as that.
- Incarnation involves a normal human pregnancy. God couldn't get *more* involved with human experience than that. From a one-celled embryo to a complex multicellular baby. God involves Godself in human affairs, in life on the planet, from one-celled embryo onwards.
- God does this in spectacular fashion by using an unmarried teenage girl, by announcing the birth to the lowest of the low, for that is what shepherds were regarded as. What messages does this give us about God's attitudes to those in society that we reject or despise?

And dwelt among us

- From conception to adulthood, Jesus participated in and suffered every human emotion, every human experience. Joy and laughter, sadness and weeping, luxury and privation, cruelty and pain.
- And what is more, he developed from embryo to adult over a third of a century. He developed as we develop. His thinking developed (in as far as we can tell) as does ours. He suffered the ravages of ageing just like you and me.

So what – 4 things

1. That God involved himself with human affairs, it seems to me, gives us divine approval, permission, to be human in the fullest sense of the word. We can simply be – we don't need to earn the right to exist. We can enjoy the good things of this life. Jesus' teaching tells us time and again that we are right to live life to the full, to make the most of what we have been given, and the situation we find ourselves in. There is nothing ascetic about Christianity, despite the fact that that is how it has often been perverted over the centuries into a religion of *shalt nots*. There is no need for Christians to be miserable killjoys – indeed, so to be so is, in my opinion, unchristian.
2. Christmas is for giving: God to humanity, Wise men to Jesus, and we to each other – and not just boxes of chocolate and toys. Because by giving to each other of our skills and love and respect and work, we are giving to God. Make no mistake about that.
3. The wise men followed a star, and so should we. We have permission to follow our star, to throw caution to the wind, to take risks. Herod tried to stop the wise men finding the prize, and the Herod parts of us sometimes try to pour cold water on the creative flames within us. Don't let us be like Herod: let's be creative and take risks.
4. This divine permission to be creative and fully human gives us permission to make mistakes. Mistakes are necessary for growth. And when we make mistakes, and who doesn't, we pick ourselves up, dust ourselves down and start all over again – if we recognise the mistakes as such, and intend to live a new life. We are forgiven. Not only is Christmas for giving, but also Christmas is for forgiving. And the most difficult part of this is forgiving ourselves.

So all we have to do is obey his teaching word for word, and rigidly follow his example? Well, no. Remember that from the moment of his conception and throughout his life, Jesus changed and developed, and his thinking developed. He lived and developed in the community. And if we want to follow his example, so must we. Communities change, world affairs change, and we need to interpret Jesus' teaching in the world in which we live. Christianity is dynamic, plastic; it is compassionate. It's not so much a matter of doing what Jesus did, but rather of doing what we think Jesus would do if he were in the position we are in.

The only fundamental rule is that we love neighbour as ourselves (not better than). In short, this means doing to others as you would like them to do to you, or put another, better, way, not doing anything to others that you wouldn't like them to do to you. When we look around the affairs of the country, the world, we don't have to look far to see what happens when this is ignored.

Summing up

The incarnation, that developmental process, means that

- we are right to interpret Christ's teaching in the circumstances in which we find ourselves.
- we are right to make the most of what we have been given, to follow our stars, to take risks.
- we have a Christian duty to enjoy ourselves, and do everything in our power to enable everyone else to enjoy themselves – not in the way that we would wish, but in the way that they would wish.
- and finally, we are forgiven. Forgiveness is there for the taking, in the air around us, we breathe it in and move through it. All we have to do is accept it and let it work with us.

Is not this wonderful news?