

SERMON FOR CHRISTMAS C
ST MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS
FATHER JORDAN

Isaiah 9: 2–4, 6–7

Psalm 96

Titus 2: 11–14

Luke 2: 1–20

In December 2022 two weeks out from Christmas I found myself in a hospital room. I had just been diagnosed with appendicitis and was now awaiting surgery early in the morning. It is one of those situations where one faces something wrong with one's body. I am sure that many of you here have been in the same situation. Anxious, knowing that something isn't quite right with your body and desperately trying to not think about it too much. But it is a very difficult thing to do. For whether we like it or not we are embodied people.

In other words, we are our bodies, and our bodies are us. When they fail it brings this reality home more than ever. Christianity is a unique faith, not because we believe in the Divine or have Holy Books. But rather that at the absolute center of our faith is this very idea of embodiment. There are many ways to describe it, in the scriptures it is often referred to as 'the flesh'. In fact, in the Latin version of the

New Testament we find that evocative phrase 'Incarnation' In Carne, literally, in the flesh.

And this is in fact what our Christmas celebrations are all about. Flesh. It is perhaps not as an attractive image as our usual Christmas images. But there is no way round it, Christianity is a religion of the body.

We are reminded of this in our Gospel reading tonight we have those familiar and heartwarming images of the Christmas story. Mary with Child, a baby in a manger, no room in the inn, Shepherds and animals. What is so wonderful about these images is they are grounded in the every day lives of human beings. Yes of course there is the Angels, perhaps not an everyday occurrence for most of us, but nonetheless the power of Christmas is that God comes to us in the ordinary. And later tonight we will use the ordinary in an extraordinary way as we celebrate the Eucharist, bread and wine, every day things turned into sacred things. This is God's pattern of working in the world.

For beneath the tranquility and ordinariness of this birth scene we have a profound truth, that this child is not just another baby, but God incarnated, God in flesh. God with us, Emmanuel. When one truly ponders this, it is almost beyond our comprehension. Just as it has almost been beyond comprehension for countless Christians before us.

In the early Church, as Christianity slowly emerged many of its greatest thinkers wrestled with this idea that God could become a human being.

Origen, arguably one of the early churches great theologians when thinking of the incarnation often confessed himself 'quite as stupefied as the littlest child.' When he wondered that the Wisdom of God had entered the womb of a woman, and been born a baby, and cried for milk, the paradox of it all was too much even for him. As he wrote 'for since we see in Christ some things so human that they appear to share in every aspect in the common frailty of humanity, and some things so divine that they are manifestly the expression of the primal and ineffable nature of the Divine, the narrowness of human understanding is inadequate to cope. Overcome with amazement and admiration, it knows not where to turn.'

For these early church thinkers in a world of myths and miracles, the idea that God would become a human being stood out as uniquely radical and challenging. But wrestle they did, for this was the central message and indeed the power of the Gospel. That our God was not a distant God, a capricious God fed by sacrifices on an altar who didn't care for the affairs of humans, this was a God who was now one with us, even one of us.

As Irenaeus of Lyons writing in the 2nd century put it so simply yet profoundly 'He became what we are so that we might become what He is'. But how we might we ask could we become what Jesus is? He is God after all. So, what was Irenaeus saying?

Well simply, if we ask the question, who is Jesus? Well, He's the Son of God. And through Him we become sons and daughters of God. So, we become what He is.

So, when those early Christian thinkers stated, 'He became man so that we might become god', they weren't simply saying we get turned into God, but rather it's echoing the language of Psalm 82 to say that, by grace, in Christ, we are made like God the Son and conformed to His image.

He is divine by nature, yet by grace we are made 'partakers of the divine nature'. And this is in fact our Christmas faith.

The Irish poet Michael Longley sums this idea up beautifully in his wonderfully short poem, "Birth," *"The cosmos-shaper has come down to earth: / Mary is counting his fingers and toes."*

There's a confident simplicity to that single stanza. "Cosmos-shaper" is a startling, yet perfect, phrase. How else could we understand Christ? To shape means to influence, certainly, but it also carries a tactile sense; we

might imagine the scene from John's Gospel. "*While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.*" How Christ spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva, and smeared the clay on the eyes of the blind man. He shapes us, sometimes, by directly touching us.

Longley's poem juxtaposes that power with the gentle, fragile infant Christ. Mary, eternal mother, is also very much a human mother. In counting his fingers and toes, she is exercising instinct and caution, but also affirming her son's corporal form. Christ is with us as one of us: flesh and blood.

The beauty and power of Christmas is therefore found in the incarnation. The profound truth that God came to us in the fragility of a child. A fragility we all know too well. We see this fragility all around us, in our world, in the terrible conflict that currently ravages Jesus' own land, to the divisions that now separate us. And even our own bodies tell us this truth. Whether you are like me sitting in a hospital room contemplating your body and its frailties, or perhaps you are anxious not just for your health, but for loved ones, finances, the world or whatever it may be. May you know that God is with you not just in spirit, but also in body. Working his purposes out so that you may one day be like him just as he became like us. Why? Simply because

God loves you and desires that you might become like Jesus, and share in that eternal divine love that is beyond our comprehension.

As Origen put it, 'overcome with amazement and admiration, it knows not where to turn.' May you know that amazement and admiration as you come to worship the Christ Child this Christmas.