



THE INCARNATE CHRIST

John 1:1-14

First Baptist Church, Raleigh, NC

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Several years ago, in a church school, some small children were constructing a manger scene at Christmastime. They had made from clay various figures to represent Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, the Wise Men, and the Shepherds. They had set up a small model cattle stall in which they arranged the figures. The teacher observed that one of the children continued to go over to the manger scene and stand completely absorbed by it. Noticing the puzzled expression on his face, she turned to him and asked: “Timmy is something bothering you?” “Yes,” he responded. “I would like to know, how does God fit in this?”

From the mouths of babes come striking questions that unsettle the mind. The Incarnation is at the heart of the Christian faith. It is the central doctrine on which our religion is based. The Incarnation is the grand miracle of the Christian religion. If you had to explain the Incarnation to somebody this morning, could you do it? Do you even understand the Incarnation enough to satisfy yourself? Remember, it is the central belief of our faith. It is the event on which the Christian faith is founded. Since it is so central to our religion, what do you know about it?

A Distorted Image

I am convinced that many of our traditional explanations of the Incarnation border, if they do not cross, the line of heresy. Our common views depict God as an alien, a remote being who is off someplace in distant space. Through the miracle of the virgin birth, this alien being comes into our world and takes on human flesh. He invades our world as an intruder. To use the words of one of the great preachers of a past generation, “At Christmastime, God walked down the staircase of heaven with a baby in his arms.” That is beautiful, but...is it what the biblical writers were saying about Christ? Even Wesley’s grand Christmas hymn which uses the image “Veiled in Flesh, the Godhead see,” borders on heresy, according to John’s Gospel. To many, Jesus only appeared to be a man. His flesh was only an illusion. He came into our world like a prince or king, who disguised himself as a beggar, and walked among us. That, too, is heresy. For many of us, our understanding of Jesus and the Incarnation is pictured like a sterling silver plate which has been overlaid with something less precious like copper or zinc. We see the copper or zinc exterior, but the interior is still composed of the sterling silver quality. Jesus is like that. The exterior appears

to be flesh, but the interior is divine. He only pretends; he is disguised or veiled as human.

I am aware that I certainly cannot answer all the theological questions concerning the Incarnation in a few moments. However, I think I can at least try to offer some hints in the right direction. We need to see if we can possibly grasp Paul's great affirmation in II Corinthians 5:19, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." Place those words beside the magnificent lines from John's prologue. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." What do these statements mean? Let us push forward for some clarity.

The Humanity of Jesus

Well, for one thing, the Incarnation tells us something about the humanity of Jesus. Whatever else you and I want to say the Incarnation means, the biblical writers understood it to point to the humanity of Jesus. The Incarnation is not a denial of the humanity of Jesus, but an affirmation of it. The New Testament clearly attested that Jesus was a man. The first heresy of the Church was a denial of the humanity of Jesus. The advocates of this heresy, which was called Docetism, believed firmly that Jesus was divine, but they refused to acknowledge that he was human. Much of our theology today is still docetic. We do not really believe in the humanity of Jesus. Much of our conversation about Jesus depicts him largely in images of simulation. Jesus only "seemed" to be human. His human body was not real and subject to the same conditions as other people.

When the disciples first began to walk with Jesus, they did not say: "Ah, here is God." They saw him as rabbi, teacher, friend—a fellow human being. Some of them even knew him when he was young and attended the rabbinical schools where he sat at the feet of the rabbis, heard the words of the prophets and read and memorized portions from the Psalms, Jeremiah, and other prophets. He later could quote them. They knew that he grew up in the household of Mary and Joseph. They were aware that he was a carpenter's son, and that he himself had been a carpenter. Later he drew upon the images which he had learned from his family and work surroundings. They saw him eat, grow tired, sleepy, and thirsty. Later they saw him bleed, suffer, and die.

His disciples witnessed normal, human emotions in Jesus. They saw him become frustrated at them and ask: "Why could you not watch with me at least one hour?" They saw him respond with compassion as he looked at the multitudes of people and saw that they had deep needs. They saw him angry at the many changes in the temple when they perverted its sanctity by turning it into a "den of robbers." He wept beside the grave of Lazarus as he grieved for a friend. They heard him cry

in isolation and rejection, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” They heard Jesus turn to one who had called him good and reprimand him by saying: “Why callest thou me good? None is good, save one, even God.” They watched him pray before he ate; before he retired at night; and when he got up before dawn. He prayed by a graveside, before he chose his disciples, alone in Gethsemane, and on numerous other occasions. The New Testament clearly affirms the humanity of Jesus. Luke wrote that Jesus “increased in wisdom and in stature.” He grew like anybody else. The gospel writers affirmed that he was “born of the seed of David.” To deny the humanity of Jesus is to renounce the reality of the Incarnation.

A Russian novelist, Ivan Turgenev, records a vision he had about the humanity of Jesus. “I saw myself, a youth, almost a boy, in a low-pitched wooden church. The slim wax candles gleamed, spots of red, before the old pictures of the saints. There stood before me many people, all fair-haired peasant heads. From time to time, they began swaying, falling, rising again, like the ripe ears of wheat when the wind in summer passes over them. All at once a man came up from behind and stood beside me. I did not turn towards him, but I felt that the man was Christ. Emotion, curiosity, awe overmastered me. I made an effort and looked at my neighbor. A face like everyone’s, a face like all men’s faces. ‘What sort of Christ is this?’ I thought. ‘Such an ordinary, ordinary man. It cannot be.’ I turned away, but I had hardly turned my eyes from this ordinary man when I felt again that it was really none other than Christ standing beside me. Only then I realized that just such a face is the face of Christ—a face like all other men’s faces.”

The Word Became Flesh

Jesus was a human being. The Gospel of John declares, “The Word became flesh.” Flesh. The Word became a human being and dwelt among us. In the Greek, “dwelt among us” literally means “He pitched his tent among us” or “He tabernacled with us.” Raymond Brown, the New Testament scholar, observes that the Johannine concept of “pitching his tent” is rooted in the ancient Israelite view of God dwelling with his people in the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle represented the localized presence of God with his people. Ezekiel and other prophets predicted that one day God would make his dwelling with his people forever (Ez. 43:7). “When the Prologue proclaims that the Word made his dwelling among men, we are being told that the flesh of Jesus Christ is the new localization of God’s presence on earth, and that Jesus is the replacement of the ancient Tabernacle.”¹ No longer will God dwell in tents or in the temple, but he tabernacles in Jesus Christ. Our understanding of the Incarnation begins by focusing on the humanity of Jesus Christ.

Some Insight into God's Nature

The Incarnation also tells us something about God. All persons long to know if there is a God, and whether you and I can know him. If I can know there is a God, can I experience God, understand God, and discern God's way and purpose in the world and more particularly in my own life? There are some who say, "I will just look out on nature, and I will find God there." There are occasions when we see a beautiful sunset with the lovely colors it sends across the sky, or see the multi-colored leaves in the fall of the year, or look at a snow-covered mountain, or follow a stream as it flows down a mountainside, and we are lifted in spirit by the breathtaking beauty of those scenes of nature. Ah, they are so lovely! However, nature has another side. What about the angry power of a tornado that rips through a city and tears houses apart and kills people? An earthquake sometimes rips open the earth and swallows up houses and people. Hurricanes have come in devastating force and swept whole cities into the ocean. Can we see the loveliness of God in these natural events?

As we look upon our fellow human beings, we see some who are kind, loving, and compassionate. There are the Mother Teresa's of life, individuals who sit by beds holding the hands of a sick friend, who deliver bread to the hungry, and who lift up those who have fallen and are hurting. But...there are individuals who will stick a gun in your ear and pull the trigger. There are persons who will blow up a plane and kill the women, children, and every person on it without any remorse. Some persons can execute hundreds, thousands, and even millions, as the Nazis did in the Second World War, and not hesitate. We can rejoice and be inspired by the strong, healthy body of a young man or woman who is athletic. But when we walk through the hospital wards and see babies, children, young adults, middle age, and elderly persons who are racked with cancer, leukemia, diseased hearts, and other dread diseases, we know there is an ugly side to nature.

Nature's Revelation Is Incomplete

We cannot always look at nature, especially its red claw of suffering, and see the love of God. But suffering, pain, disease, and death are also a part of nature. There are some who have looked out on the natural world and declared that God is absent—God is not here. Nature is incomplete. Nature itself, Paul says, is still moving toward redemption. It is not perfect. It will not perfectly disclose God to us. "For the created universe waits with eager expectation for God's sons to be revealed. It was made the victim of frustration, not by its own choice, but because of him who made it so; yet always there was hope because the universe itself is to be freed from the shackles of mortality and enter upon the liberty and splendor of the children of God. Up to the present, we know, the whole created universe groans in all its parts

as if in the pangs of childbirth. Not only so, but even we, to whom the Spirit is given as first fruits of the harvest to come, are groaning inwardly while we wait for God to make us his sons and set our whole body free” (Rom. 8:19-23, New English Bible).

John’s Majestic Picture

Many of us continue to see God as a vague oblong blur. We are not able to put any kind of face or personality on God. However, John gives us help here. In his Prologue he paints a majestic picture of the Word and God. Raymond Brown has said that John’s Prologue is most likely an early Christian hymn.² It soars like music. It literally seems to sing. As the writer depicts the Word in grand pictures and images, our spirits are lifted by the splendor of his declarations about God and the Word. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The Word was also light. He was the light which has enabled us to be enlightened. The Word is the light which has enabled us to see in the darkness. The darkness of suffering, pain, sin, and evil has tried to extinguish this light, but it has not been able to put it out. The light from this presence has sent its beams shining down through the darkness of the ages, and wherever its light is seen, men and women have turned to God.

What God Is Like

The Word reveals God to us. The Word has shown us what God is like. Jesus is the picture frame for the revelation of God. We look to Jesus Christ, the One who became flesh, to see what God’s nature is like. Through his teachings, Jesus has told us what God is like. He tells us that God is not remote, distant, abstract, unmoving, or uncaring. Through his life and teachings the Word reveals a God who seeks out the sinner, cares for the oppressed, and reaches out to those who have fallen under their burdens. God, like a shepherd, seeks the straying sheep, finds, loves, forgives, and brings him back. In the teachings, miracles, death, and resurrection, the Word reveals what God is like. The Word brought light into the world so we could see.

The gospel writers realized that they had not said enough about Jesus when they said he was human. His presence demanded more. They knew that something else had to be said about this Man. He had revealed God to them as no other one ever had. Lenore Johnson has a book entitled *Jesus Is*. Children between the ages of five and twelve were asked questions about Jesus and God. Their answers were recorded in their own words, and, when words failed, they put their ideas down with pencils, crayons, and cutouts. One small child, Elaine, age 11, said: “Jesus is the part of God you can see.”³ That’s what John was saying. The Word became flesh, and men and women were able to see something about the nature of God through this human being.

“In the beginning was the Word,” John wrote. In the beginning of God’s creation, the Word was present. Matthew and Luke began their gospels at Bethlehem. John began his story in the bosom of the Father. Matthew and Luke began their gospels dating the birth of Jesus during the reign of particular Roman political leaders. However, John began his gospel by saying, “In the beginning the Word was present with God.” The Word took on flesh—not concept, not proposition, not idea—He became flesh. The Word became person. The Christian religion is not primarily believing things about God but committing one’s life to a Person. Jesus Christ is Lord. It is to Him we give our allegiance. Here is the gospel in a nutshell. This concept contains the essence of the world’s greatest miracle: The eternal God focused the divine self in Jesus Christ.

Jesus Reveals God to Us

Listen. Listen to the declaration which John’s Gospel declares that Jesus said about himself. One of the disciples, Philip, interrupted Jesus in his teachings one day and asked: “Master, Master, Master, if you would show us the Father, we would be satisfied.” “Philip,” Jesus said. “Have I been with you so long and you still do not know me? Anyone who has seen me, has seen the Father” (John 14:8-11). WOW! What a claim! “Jesus is the part of God you can see,” says the child. Jesus said, “I and the Father are one.” Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus makes his great “I am” declarations. We need two words in English to express Jesus’ meaning. In Greek one word is sufficient, but it is a very emphatic verb. When Jesus said, “I am the light of the world,” it needs to be translated something like “I—I am,” to stress the emphasis. “I—I am the light of the world.” Listen at these claims. “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life”; “I am the Door”; “I am the Resurrection and the Life”; “I am the Bread of Life”; “I am the True Vine”; “I am the Good Shepherd”; “I am the Alpha and the Omega.” I. I am. Jesus put himself at the center of his teachings. What the Word was God was. We look to Jesus Christ to see what the nature of God is. Through him, God has spoken and acted. This Man, the Word, was a window into the heart of God.

When I hear a person say that the Christian faith is dull, or boring, I find those comments almost hilarious. They disclose how little that person understands the Christian faith. Dorothy Sayers, the writer, expresses her bewilderment at those who feel that Christianity is dull or leaves them cold. She believes that the gospel message is the most exciting, tremendous and amazing story that the world has ever heard.⁴ “The Word became flesh.” God was in Christ. What an unbelievable claim! If you are bored with the Christian religion, that is your problem. It is the most exciting fact that has ever happened in all of creation. God has come into history through Jesus to make himself known. It is a breathtaking message!

The Word Was God

John continues: “And the Word was God.” What does that mean? Does it mean Jesus equals God? Was all of God “poured” into Jesus Christ? Of course not! The gospels show Jesus praying. To whom was he praying, if all of God was in Jesus? In the Prologue of John, there is no definite article before the Greek word for God, *theos*. By omitting the article, John has shown that the Word is not identified with God. If John meant that the Word was THE God, he could have written it that way. The Word is divine, but not ALL of God. Paul’s phrase was “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself” (II Cor. 5:19). To speak of Jesus as divine is not to say that the total being of God was in Jesus.

Let me try to illustrate that truth. Several years ago my family went to Pensacola Beach, Florida, for our summer vacation. We rented a small place on an inlet. This inlet was a part of the ocean, but it was not all of the ocean. The water in this quiet inlet was salty just like the rest of the ocean. It was ocean water. However, it was only an inlet; it was not all of the ocean. But it was ocean, nevertheless.

Jesus was divine. God was in Christ, but Christ was not the Father. All of God was not in Jesus. He prayed to his Father and drew strength from his Father’s presence. Karl Barth, the noted German theologian, claimed that the God-Man was the only man who claimed nothing for himself, but all for God. Jesus Christ emptied himself of all that one could seek for self so that God might be all that he could be through him. Is this not what Paul is saying in these powerful lines from Philippians? “Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:5-8).

A Great Mystery

You and I can never completely understand the Incarnation nor explain it. All of our analogies will be faulty and inadequate. Trying to explain the mystery of the Incarnation is almost like asking an ant, as the ant walks across a great painting by Van Gogh, to interpret the painting for you. You might ask: “Now Mr. Ant, tell me what you think of this painting.” The ant might be able to tell you something about the roughness of the textured surface, or the difference between a dark or bright color, but the ant’s perspective would be very limited. Now you may not like the image of my depicting us as ants, but I could have chosen other insects! Hopefully, this crude analogy makes a point. Like the ant, our perspective is limited. All we have to do is look in the realm of medical science, and we can see how limited our

knowledge is. When a cure for some dreaded illness or disease is discovered, the doctor or scientist often asks: “Why did we not see this before?”

A Limited Perspective

Our vision is limited in so many ways. How can we possibly expect to get our limited mind around the concept of God coming incarnate into the world through Jesus Christ? We can never totally or fully comprehend it. It is a declaration of faith. The early disciples did not understand it all. I am troubled by some of the early church councils’ declarations which tried to say too much about God and Jesus. “Our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God truly man...of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood...recognized in TWO NATURES, WITHOUT CONFUSION, WITHOUT CHANGE, WITHOUT DIVISION, WITHOUT SEPARATION....”⁵

Although you and I might not understand nor use such precise language about Christ as this ancient creed has formalized, it is trying to say in technical theological and philosophical language the church’s attempt to understand the mystery of John’s phrase “And the Word was God.” At times I am not sure what that theological language means. I sometimes think it is utter nonsense! The disciples made their declaration about Christ on faith that he was both man and God. In Jesus Christ we see man as he was created to be. But we also see within the life of Jesus the divine.

A Personal Word

When I was a student in seminary, one afternoon I discovered a bird which was trapped in the dorm where I was living. I saw the bird flying about in a room. It was just an ordinary blackbird. As I walked toward the bird, it began to flutter about and tried to find a way of escape out of the room to get away from me. It was frightened by the hands that moved toward it. I reached for it several times, and it continued to escape my grasp. It flew against the wall and against the window pane trying to find an exit of escape. I thought to myself, “How can I tell this bird that I want to help it? I want to set it free. Oh, how God wants to tell us how he loves us and wants to help us. But we do not understand. Would I have to become a bird to communicate to him my message?”

When I finally held that bird in my hands and walked down the steps, I felt its heart pulsating in its body. It was so frightened by me. As I opened my hands and set that bird free, I thought about the Incarnation of God. Had he tried to communicate with men and women before, as I wanted to do with this bird, and God was unable? Did God finally become one of us so He might communicate His love to us? Would I...would I have to be able to speak bird talk before I could tell that

blackbird that I meant to love and help him?

As inadequate as this image is, does it not point to the truth of the Incarnation? Listen to Paul: “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” “He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.” “The word became flesh,” John declared, “and dwelt among us...we have beheld his glory, glory as the only Son from the Father.” “Jesus cried aloud: ‘When a man believes in me, he believes in him who sent me rather than in me; seeing me, he sees him who sent me. I have come into the world as light, so that no one who has faith in me should remain in darkness’” (John 12:44-46). To see him is to see the Father. He is God’s communication to us. He is light. Why walk in darkness?

Loving God, we confess that we cannot really understand the Incarnation, but we really do believe that You have come in Christ and have made yourself known. O God, teach us how to respond to your love as we have seen it expressed to us through Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John, I-XII* The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1966), 33.

² *Ibid.* 20f.

³ Lenore Johnson, *Jesus Is...* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 3.

⁴ Dorothy Sayers, *The Greatest Drama Ever Staged* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938).

⁵ Henry Bettenson, Editor, *Documents of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 72-73.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, sometimes we confess that we, too, feel forsaken like our Lord. We feel forsaken, abandoned, isolated and alone. There are times when we want to scream: “God, where are You?” You seem so far removed from us, so silent to our needs, so unconcerned, so remote, so distant. Our agonies and burdens press down upon us, and You do not seem available or concerned. You are so far removed from us that we want to cry rivers of tears. Sometimes we simply want to whisper. We long to whisper our concerns, hopes, and dreams to know that You hear and that You care.

O God, we do not want this distance to be between us. Is it of our own making? Is it something that we have done? Show us Your nearness, Your available presence. Forgive us, O God, for the sin which always separates us from You.

May we learn from our own Lord's suffering and agony that You are always present and near to us, seeking to meet our needs even when we do not know it. We open ourselves now like fertile soil to let Your spirit rain the love of Your grace upon us. Bathe us in the sunshine of Your radiant love. May our spirits grow warm as they are embraced by Your presence this hour. Through Jesus Christ our living Lord, we pray. Amen.