

Analects of Christmas Sermons preached at
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In reflecting on the first verses of the first chapter of St. John's Gospel, it becomes pretty clear, pretty quickly that an argument - theological and philosophical - is being made about just exactly who it is that the early church is coming to believe that Jesus is. Certainly, you know what we end up with in our creeds and catechisms: that Jesus is *both FULLY HUMAN and FULLY DIVINE!* Now just exactly how can that happen and how can that be? Over the centuries and millennia, the answers to such dilemmas often evolve: and not as "either/or" resolutions, but as "both/and" solutions. So we end up with the theological idea that Jesus, the Word of God, is both human and divine - not either one or the other, but both one and the other.

The writer of John's Gospel clearly is engaged in a philosophical approach which is based in an understanding of the "Word" of God which "becomes flesh:" meaning Jesus. He understands the "Word," or "Jesus" as having existed from before all creation, with God, (the Father, Creator) as a part of the Godhead. Now — Christians being who they are — who can be surprised that there has been a big fight about this since about the year 1052 - the time of what is called the "Photian Schism." Since then, the church in the east and the church in the west have disagreed on two words - or is that three words? - or even just one?: "and the Son," which in Latin is "filoque" which is really two words banged into one. The point being that the Eastern Church confesses that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father," and the Western confesses that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father *and the Son!*" Sheesh! Does that matter to anybody here? Really?

In our calendars and over the centuries, the church has taken the time and made the effort to emphasize and to "recall" different ideas - creedal positions - about Jesus, at different time of the year. Certainly, at this time of year we are most deeply invested in the business of remembering and celebrating the birth of Jesus - but way more importantly, the INCARNATION of God in Christ.

Now, there is a difference - a big difference between the two of these ideas. The first is simply a birthday commemoration for a Jewish boy born 2016 or so years ago. And, the odds are bad — it's about 364 to one — that we have the date right! Who knows? It's way more likely that the church has fixed the date of Christmas in response to pagan celebrations related to the shortest day of the year. Alas.

The INCARNATION, however, is that theological idea that somehow mysteriously, and really, God was present in a very peculiar and wonder-full way in Jesus. That means that the church developed the idea that God not only could, but would and did become a human being. That rolls off of our tongue very easily some 2000 years after the development of that idea - or theology. But let's pause a moment to consider what that means. Up until Jesus' time none of the "attributes of God" appears to be a very human attribute - apart, perhaps from the immutable anger of an old white man, with a white beard, somewhere high above the clouds, getting ready to throw lightning bolts of retribution at disobedient and non-compliant human beings. That, perhaps, was intended to be an early warning signal to prevent eternal damnation and punishment (or for the temporary sort of punishment in "purgatory"), for those who don't "come around" to God's way - or at least the church's way of thinking and believing and acting.

No one thought that God could be limited by time or space. In monotheisms, God certainly could not experience pain or loss. God was anything - and everything - which was NOT human, in the theologies and philosophies which were dear to people up until this time. Albeit sexed as a male in the human imagination, God certainly was not a sexual being: a man: except, of course, in classical mythology, where gods were often depicted as angry, or even stupid super-men, whose mistakes were often far too human.

So, here comes Jesus; and the church develops this idea that in Jesus, God is both "fully human" and "fully divine." And then, comes Christmas, the time that we take, every year to remember that, as a Church we believe, teach and

confess and emphasize the HUMANITY of Jesus of Nazareth - an historical being - born of a woman, Mary, in the same way that we are born.

Well, not exactly, according to the church....

Apparently, sex just seemed too human to someone who just couldn't tolerate the idea that Jesus was really FULLY HUMAN, as well as fully DIVINE. And then, along come ideas about virgin birth. What!?! What could be less human than giving birth without first having sex? Now that is simply IMPOSSIBLE and NOT human! [Well, in fact, "virgin birth" is a theoretical possibility among humans. But a woman's ovum, excited to divide and produce a human would always result in a haploid female: that is the child would always be a female and a female with only half the number of genes of a sexually conceived person!] And, ideas about virgin birth give birth to ideas that if Jesus was conceived without sin [read sex], then so was his mother - and then the whole thing gets out of hand - and we are no longer faced with the ideas about Jesus "as one of us," but ideas about him and his family as special people who in no way resemble me or the family from which I came. All my ancestors had sex. How about yours? As unimaginable as that may be to us — we all know that that is a fact. And that fact is one that is universally applicable and pertains to ourselves, and everybody else in the world. So why not Jesus? If, in fact, the Good News is that in Jesus, God is present with us and like us in all things (except sin, of course!), I ask, why must we be so very insistent on a virgin birth?

The Eastern (Orthodox) Church, you know, does not follow the same trajectory as the Western (Roman Catholic) Church in promulgating the idea that if Jesus was immaculately conceived, so was his mother. Rather, the Orthodox Church acknowledges Mary as a daughter of Adam, and therefore a sinner. However, because of her emphatic "yes" to God's ridiculous request to her to become pregnant with his word, his child, his love, and because of her faithful example of *believing* in her Son, despite her difficulties in *understanding* him, she becomes the first human to be assumed into the Godhead - a process Eastern theologians call **theosis**. Now this idea makes more sense to me, as a child of Adam, a sinner. Here, in Mary, we have a human being [now, I can identify with that], who is young, unsophisticated, caught in a sociological and ecclesiastical bind, pregnant, and too young to be so, nobody knows by whom, maybe even a married man, but most probably not by Joseph - and in the midst of all of that human mess, Mary says "yes" to God! Now that's stuff I can identify with. That's the reality out of which you and I come and the realities within which you and I live. Do we really need a mystery any larger than that of human birth itself? Is there any greater manifestation of the mysterious and Divine, Almighty presence in our world than the scientific reality of human reproduction manifested in the way God, God's self, has surely provided for us to get here? So, for me, subscription to virginity, in order to believe in what it was that Jesus said as holy, is simply not necessary. I get it that, after the fact, those who were trying to emphasize Jesus' extraordinary life and message came to believe that, if they were going to confess that he was, in fact, a part of the Godhead, that the tradition should be clear that he was special - very special - from the get-go. That I get. But to require me to believe that part of the tradition as "scientific fact" to "get" the point of the Gospel message that Jesus proclaims, and believe the way that he lived out what he believed and thought, simply doesn't compute for me.

I am much more interested in Mary as a real and absolutely human model for me - and for all humans - for us. She embodies the faith and the surprise that results from that faith which might be in store for us if we, along with her, agree to be fleshly containers, for a living God, as ridiculous as that may sound. It is as ridiculous for us as it was for her to say "yes!" to God. But that is our faith!

In a few moments, we will go to the altar to receive the Sacrament. Having just opened our ears to the Word of God, we will then open our mouths to receive the Word become flesh in the bread and wine that is for us the Body and Blood of Christ. Can you imagine that act as being impregnated by God to become the bearer of God's self in the world today - just as Mary did in her day? "What," you say, "me with all my sin? I'm neither worthy nor able to do that!" Oh, yes you are! Just as was Mary: a humble, female, human being. Mary believed that it is God who made her worthy to become and too be the Christ-bearer, if she were to say "yes," and to be willing. The question for us is not whether we are worthy, but are we willing.

The title "Theotokos," which is given to Mary in the Eastern Church translates into English as "The God-bearer." Sometimes in the West, that comes out as "Mother of God." As a Protestant male, I have more trouble with the latter

than the former. I cannot be a mother - at least biologically. But, I surely can be a bearer, a carrier, a supporter, a presenter. In the East Mary is seen as a "pointer" and a "caresser" of Jesus. In the two great styles of icons which depict her Mary is either pointing to her son and her God on her lap or caressing him, cheek to cheek - which was perhaps her final gesture to his dead body at the deposition from the cross. Is there anything about "pointing to" or "caressing" Jesus lovingly that either you or I is incapable of? That kind of Mary works as a human example for me to follow - virginity notwithstanding.

When I was in Dublin, in August, I worshiped at St. Patrick's Cathedral there - the Protestant Cathedral. We knew it was Protestant - because as we entered the church for worship, the gift shop and ticket booths for tourists had been closed. The ushers were announcing to us as we arrived that the church was open for worship. I am sure the expectation was that we would stay for worship and not just be free loading tourists making noise during worship. They announced our welcome to worship by saying: "It's not Catholic. Is that alright?"

What impressed me most there is a large window in the north transept of Charity serving the needs of humanity. It's a relatively new window and filled with color. But, the focal center of the picture is a very white spot, right near the middle of the picture. Charity - depicted as a woman - is holding an infant, who is facing away from us but whose face is seen in profile. The centrally-important white spot - right in the middle of this large stained glass window - is his naked little butt: his little white heinie.

Surely, this is a thinly-disguised artistic representation of the universally understood Christian depiction of "Mother and Child" known to us as "Mary and Jesus." In the window, surrounding this mother and child are all sorts and conditions of people seeking aid, assistance, succor and help. I have no trouble - in fact, I prefer - seeing in this expression a theological affirmation of the Incarnation of God in the person of Jesus, born of Mary, who comes bare-bottomed and fully-human, to address the needs of the world as only God can do - and in the only way God can be understood by us - as a man.

Then, the week after Thanksgiving, you know I went to Italy with the Pettinatos, After a couple of days in Rome [where we saw the Pope at the Angelus, on the first Sunday in Advent], we went to Florence, where we spent most of our time. Florence, as you know, was the center of the Italian Renaissance and is still the home and repository of much of the art with which we associate the Renaissance. There I was reminded of a wonderful monograph, by Leo Sternberg, a recipient, some years ago, of one of the McArthur genius awards, which allowed him to pursue his studies for a couple of years without having to worry about raising an income. His work is entitled: "The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion." One of the points that Sternberg - who I suppose is a Jew - makes is that in Renaissance painting there is no reticence about painting Jesus as a boy, with a penis - which is clearly visible. Sternberg argues, and I think quite rightly, that in our day we often ignore or refuse to acknowledge, or even see in these paintings, the fact that Jesus had a penis. As recently as the late 1970's the church altered the celebrations on the first day of January from "The Circumcision and The Name of Jesus," to simply "The Name of Jesus." That's significant, since circumcision can't take place without genitalia. And if there is any proof of humanity - it is genitalia! Why, you might ask, did the church circumcise its own commemoration on the eighth day after the birth of a Jewish baby we claim to be Jesus? Sternberg not only has a point, he has a good one! Often we do not see what is there for us and for our salvation. Further, Sternberg points out that in virtually every Renaissance depiction of the Visitation of the Magi, usually the eldest Magus is bent, kneeling and peering directly between the Holy Infant's legs - which are often being spread apart by the Virgin's fingers - to find and inspect the proof of his humanity: his penis. That penis will be - or perhaps already has been - circumcised and provided the infant with unnecessary [except for cultic and cultural reasons], exquisite pain and blood-curdling screams. Circumcision, also caused him to bleed, for the first time. "The blood of Christ. Shed for you!"

The point of all this is not prurience. These are all significant theologically-charged events and images provided to counteract heretical ideas that this baby was not *really*, a human being. That is to say that he was not really human - because he was really Divine. Therefore, he was not able to feel real pain, or to bleed real blood, or to empathize and resonate with real human emotions and be able to understand the real human condition as intimately as any other real human being. How could God ever be hungry, angry or sex-driven? The formal name for this anti-incarnational heresy is Docetism. It has always attracted those who simply cannot believe that God could possibly become a real

human - so they come up with ideas of Jesus as a sort of “Bionic Man.” He looks, and walks, and talks, and acts like a duck, but he’s not a duck! Their suggestion is that Jesus is a sort of Divine fraud, or charade.

But what we come here to celebrate is Jesus, a real human being with a heinie and a penis and a mother and a father, with flesh and blood who experiences pain and knows what we feel - because He does too!

Now that’s the mystery of the Incarnation. That is probably a premise which will not lead to “understanding” as much as it will lead to “believing.”

And so, we gather, yet again, to grasp what our role is in all of this: to ask why we are here. Well, we believe, as we are taught by St. Paul, that together, we, in our fleshliness, constitute the living Body of Christ in the world today. That is the foundation of our faith: that God, in fact, is not and cannot die, as long as faithful people agree to be what Jesus was — a fully-human being, brought into being by a fully-divine God, to give flesh to that God, in this world, for as long as we live. And, it seems important to me, that as we acknowledge, accept and celebrate our humanity in healthful, truthful ways, we become ever-better equipped to embody a living God, in the world today. And if that is simply too much for you, perhaps you could simply identify with Mary and just “point” to and “caress” the God you may find on your lap as she found God on hers.

You remember that our congregation’s Mission Statement is:

“To welcome all people to embody the love of Christ.” Simply put, we say that our mission is to welcome real, fleshly human beings to come together to experience God present with us - so that together we might make God known to be alive, and in flesh, in the world today as we share what we have received - the full, unconditional and eternal love of God for us and for all people. When that is the case, the words we sing in our Christmas carols start to make more sense, especially when we sing: “Be born, in us, today.”

Christmas then is way more important than a tired old birthday party for a guest of honor who has died thousands of years ago. Rather, for us, Christmas is the celebration of the possibility that every day, we may become the fleshly containers of a living God, who is known still be alive to us as he was known to his disciples, after his death burial and resurrection - on the road to Emus. When faithful people break bread - as we will do here, shortly - they know that even in the unknown stranger who has joined them along their journey down the road of life, they may see the risen and living God in flesh with them.