

## **Christmas Day**

### **Fr Jonathan Jong**

Isaiah 52: 7-10

Hebrews 1: 1-6

John 1: 1-18

*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.*

Words from the Gospel according to St John, the first chapter.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

And the Word became flesh.

The doctrine of the Incarnation is Christianity's beating heart. From it flows our understanding of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; our view of the sacramentality of things; our vision of what it means to be human, made in God's image. Without the Incarnation, the Resurrection is the little more than a parlour trick and the Church little more than a fan club.

It violates my anthropological intuitions to say so, we who are so allergic to claims to cultural uniqueness: but there is nothing quite like the Incarnation anywhere else, this idea that God—the God who made all things, and who upholds the whole universe—this idea that this God of infinite power is born a human boy, wet and screaming, nursing and sleeping, teething and throwing tantrums; that God grows up, gets grubby and grumpy, nauseated, constipated, gets himself killed. This is—I don't know—something else. *A hint half guessed, a gift half understood*, or not at all.

I mean, gods that are *like* people are dime a dozen. Zeus and Thor, Shiva and Guan Yin, even Yahweh in the old days, were all anthropomorphised. Frankly, except on our very best days, even the God we imagine is likely a very powerful man. And shapeshifting gods are common too, including those who temporarily adopt human form. Zeus did this, of course, to nefarious ends; a bizarre passage in the Poetic Edda has Odin accusing Loki of having born children and “milked cow” as a woman on earth; even our own Book of Tobit has the Archangel Raphael take on human appearance to journey with the eponymous protagonist's son, Tobias. But none of this is quite the doctrine of the Incarnation, which begins not with a

humanoid god, but with a God radically other, so unlike anything in the world that the divine is beyond knowing and certainly beyond telling. God is the mystery to which all things owe their being, and yet it is this God who comes and shares in our fragility and finitude. And how fragile and finite indeed. Sea turtles break out of their eggs, and immediately dash for the ocean. Giraffes can walk within hours, despite their awkward gangliness. Human neonates, in contrast, are unable to lift up their own heads for the first two months of their lives. The Christ-child is, like all children, utterly dependent on others. This, we are shown rather than told, is what God is like: a baby in a manger, a man on death row.

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Of course, this is absurd. It makes no sense. Except that it is the *only* thing that really does make sense against a world in which might makes right; the value of things is reducible to their utility; and even people are means to our ends. The Incarnation is a repudiation of these poisonous ideas, lodged in our brains and our bones, our societies and their structures.

*This* is what true power looks like, not military might, nor media manipulation by monied interests, but a newborn in a world where infant mortality at the time is best estimated at 30%. It's a crapshoot, whether Jesus would have made it to adulthood, and then we killed him by popular vote.

*This* is the value of the world, such that the God who, by definition, has no *use* for it, made it anyway and then made it *home*, became part of it. How dare we treat it merely as our pantry, our gas station, our playpen, our theatre of war?

*This* is what a human being is worth, a homeless foreigner, a boy born out of wedlock, a criminal, tried and executed. The heir of all things, who reflects the glory of God, who bears the very stamp of God's nature.

The Incarnation makes *moral* sense, then, but in ways that run against our entrenched intuitions, either endowed upon by our biological heritage or calcified by our cultural history. Evolutionary theorists tell us that the strongest survive, by which they definitely do not mean those who lay down their lives for others. Economists have no other way to conceptualise value except in terms of use. Psychologists have shown

through decades of research that prejudice—suspicion and derogation of the other—is all but inevitable, baked into the way we process social information. The Incarnation renders none of these claims empirically false: it is not a scientific theory, after all. But it is a response to such a world as this that, far from escaping into denialism or cynical apathy, enters directly into these economic, political, psychological, and biological realities. The Incarnation is therefore an invitation for us to be defiant in hope, to resist being overcome by our own darkness, the darkness of the world around us. It is into this world that Christ is born, which comprehended him not, knew him not, received him not. And yet, the light shines. Perhaps this too is absurd, but if so, it is a necessary absurdity. To whom else can we go? Here is the Word of eternal life.

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The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth and from his fulness have we all received, grace upon grace and one day eye to eye we will see the return of the Lord.

In the meantime, it is the first day of Christmas, and there are—sons and daughters of the most high—(there are) good tidings to bring, peace and salvation to

publish. There is a Word we have received, to bring light to the world.

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**