

Christmas 2021

Happy Feast of the Incarnation, the day when we celebrate the Christ mass or Christmas.

On this day, we remember how God came into the world as Jesus, as one of us,

As one who experienced the full range of the human condition.

He was angry at times, sad at others, sometimes happy, sometimes peaceful, sometimes bereft.

He had friends and enemies.

That is, all of what we experience, he experienced, as well.

We can only imagine that he sometimes caught a cold, sometimes had a headache.

In addition, the circumstances of his birth also make it clear that he is one of us, not someone superior and separate.

He was conceived out of wedlock to a relatively poor family.

This tells us a lot about God.

God could have appeared as anyone, but chose to come to us in a form that was not regal, exalted.

So much of being superior, of being a king or a high priest, you see, is performance.

It is an attempt to look like a god—without struggles or challenges—in order to lord it over others.

Ironically, if God had appeared to us like a god, that would not have been good news at all.

It would have sent the message that we humans are all failures, inadequate, less than, unlovable.

Our struggles, the battles that rage within us would not be meaningful, an integral part of the journey.

They would be signs of our inferiority, tokens of God's displeasure with us.

In such a world, our only recourse would be to try hard to appear perfect, the way kings and high priests do, to cover up our struggles, to be phony, ashamed of our own humanity.

Shame is not a Christian virtue.

If God had come to us as a king, it would have affirmed the Herods and the Pilates of the world who insist that some people are simply better, more worthy than others.

I read that one of the billionaires frequently in the news thinks that he is too creative to pay taxes.

That is for the little people who, unlike him, just cannot manage to do interesting things.

In reality, we are all capable of doing interesting things, of loving our neighbor as ourselves.

If God came to us as a king or a god, it would suggest that God loves some people more than others.

There is nothing about which to rejoice in that.

God instead comes to us as an outsider, from Nazareth, the backwaters of the Jewish nation.

Remember Nathaniel's response upon hearing about Jesus?

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" he sarcastically quips.

Nathaniel was expressing a common attitude of the day.

As a North Carolinian who lived fourteen years in southern California, I can identify as one who was frequently the target of such comments.

Can anything good come out of North Carolina?

Yes, and everywhere else that people are born.

Christ's coming into the world as Jesus tells us that our challenges are not signs of failure.

They are how we grow our hearts.

They do not make us unloveable, but are part of God's plan for us.

It is OK to be human, to struggle, to have a wide range of emotions.

We are not disappointing God when we do so.

The gospel is not about being perfect, but about engaging life's struggles in a meaningful way.

To drive the point home, Luke tells us that the angels first announced the good news of Jesus' birth to shepherds, the migrant laborers of their day.

Those at the bottom of the social hierarchy were the first to hear the good news because they were the most likely to embrace it.

Those busy *seeming* would not be interested in being told that God loves us for who we are and not for who we appear to be.

In Matthew's gospel, on the other hand, the first people to hear about Jesus were outsiders, non-Jews, foreigners.

Matthew demonstrates to us that no one is excluded from the love of God, and that includes you, so do not let the Herods and Pilates of this world get to you.

No one is incapable of what is truly important.

The message of the Christ coming into the world as Jesus is that God is not something outside of our struggles and suffering, something that saves us from challenges.

God is found *in* the struggles, in the everyday.

If we avoid all struggle and conflict, we avoid God.

God is in our mourning, in our rejoicing, even in our sinning.

We think of sin as something we should simply stop, but it is like pain.

It is something from which we should learn.

I am reminded of AA, which says of people who simply quit drinking without doing the emotional work, without growing their hearts, that they are “dry drunks.”

In other words, not drinking can be just another way of seeming.

Similarly, it is possible to stop sinning in the legalistic sense without a change of heart, without experiencing God who is always coming into the world, without sharing that grace with others.

We become self-righteous, fundamentally no better than we were before.

We just *seem* in a different manner—prim and proper and dead inside.

Personally, I would rather spend time with someone who is actively struggling with life's issues.

God is not someone out there whom we must please, but someone who already loves us, is already in our hearts, and we can find God in all the messiness there.

That is good news.

Salvation is not becoming other than who we are, but is embracing who we are, who God created us to be, and then passing on that grace to others by affirming them, loving them.

God is found not in seeming but in being, not in perfection but in challenges, not in answers but in questions, not in control but in play.

Even adults need to play, to experiment, to laugh.

This is the good news of the incarnation, of a God who dwells with us rather than above us.

God revealed Godself to us through the *life* of Christ, not through Christ's perfection.

We know God in the struggle.

The assertion that Christ was perfect is misleading.

It was perfection of process, not of being.

Christ dealt openly with the challenges that he faced and never tried to appear to be other than he was.

Someone once came to my office and said, "I'm afraid I've really messed up."

If God is among us, within us, then that person, through honesty and humility, has just opened up an opportunity for us both.

My response was, "I'm sure it is nothing that we cannot make right together."

In other words, together, we will find out where God is in this situation.

Together, we will engage in the process that reveals God.

It's always better to look for God together.

That is the good news of Jesus' birth.

Merry Christmas!