

The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor

The Revd Dr J. B. Webster

St John's College, Durham

To believe in the Incarnation is to believe in the singularity of God. That is to say, to believe that the Word became flesh is to believe that the culmination of the ways of God lies in the particular series of events which make up the story of Jesus, in which God is as it were condensed in the span of a human life. It is here that God makes himself available for our acceptance or rejection, here in the tangibility of a life lived, of relationships sustained, of pain and betrayal and murder, that our affirmation of the reality of God is to be made. And so for Christians the first and second commandments can only be understood out of events of Christmas: allegiance to the uniqueness of God and refusal of idolatry are both corollaries of the fact that God affirms himself to be God in *this* way, as man. And in being God in this way, he judges, redeems and remakes that humanity which he has taken to himself. How can this be so?

Jesus

It was at one time the custom for each chapter of the Dominican friars to hold a solemn chapter meeting on Christmas Eve. One of the high points of the gathering, as it moved towards the midnight mass, was the reading of the martyrology. The martyrology is a book which tells the reader which liturgical feasts are celebrated on a particular day; and it is still common in monastic communities to include in the liturgy for a saint's day a short reading about the life and witness of that particular saint. On Christmas Eve, the martyrology tells again the story, not of a human saint, but of Jesus: the *Veni, Veni Emmanuel* is sung as the last of the Advent Antiphons, and the martyrology is read aloud by the cantor:

Be comforted, be comforted, my people, says your God. For in the year 5199 from the creation of the world, when in the beginning God created heaven and earth, in the year 2957 from the flood, in the year 2015 from the birth of Abraham, in the year 1510 from Moses and the going forth of the people of Israel from Egypt, in the year 1032 from the anointing of David as king, in the sixty-fifth week according to the prophecy of Daniel, in the one hundred and ninety-fourth Olympiad, in the year 752 from the foundation of the city in the sixth age of the world, . . . Jesus Christ, eternal God and Son of the eternal Father, willing to hallow the world by his most gracious coming, having been conceived by the Holy Spirit, and nine months having passed since his conception, was born in Bethlehem of Juda, made man of the Virgin Mary.¹

All other times are relative to this birth, all other events are relative to this one event. For intersected by this one event, the whole range of human history comes to take on meaning, shape and coherence.

What is so remarkable about that passage is the highly elaborate set of references whereby Jesus' birth is dated: by reference to creation, to the birth of Abraham, to the Exodus, and by using both the Greek and the Roman

Dr John Webster takes a look at the Incarnation, a subject more fully dealt with in his book "God is here" published by Marshall, Morgan & Scott 1983.



methods of computing time. Such elaboration is no mere rhetorical ornament. Rather, it is making a profound theological affirmation of the universal significance of this one obscure and rather messy birth. All other times are relative to this birth, all other events are relative to this one event. For intersected by this one event, the whole range of human history comes to take on meaning, shape and coherence. By this one event all times are judged: it is their norm, the measure of their worth. And so henceforth human time is not some sort of continuum to be measured by reference to our own experience; rather time becomes time before and time after Christ, *ante* and *post Christum*. For in this simple, concentrated event all times fall before the one time, which is God's time with us.

Something of this same theme pervades Luke's infancy narratives (and the same theme is found in a slightly different way in Matthew's use of Old Testament quotations in constructing his picture of the events surrounding the birth of the Messiah). In Lk. 1.57, we read of how "the time came for Elizabeth to be delivered": in 2.6, the same is said of Mary; and later on the same again is said of the circumcision of Jesus. It is as if Luke sees the events of Jesus' birth to be the coming together of all the threads of the ways of God with his people — seemingly disparate courses of events begin to mesh as "the time is fulfilled". "When the time had fully come", writes Paul, "God sent forth his Son" (Gal. 4.4). This is the moment, the point of which all the paths and plots of history converge.

But how does this happen? What is the culminating event, the point in time which becomes the axis of all other times? It is the birth of a child. The point to which all times are moving is human, nameable. Here lies the source of order and meaning in human history, the origin and ultimate ground of all that is: Jesus, born of Mary.

The Christian faith characteristically brings together the transcendent and the familiar. If that strange coincidence of absolute and particular is a hallmark of the Christian gospel, it is primarily because of the Incarnation, because of the Word made flesh. The background of that idea of the "Word" or "Logos" is a complex affair, and one where there are few certainties. Some scholars see one of the fragments of background material in the beliefs of the Stoic philosophers, who used the idea of the "Logos" to express a belief in an inherent principle of rationality and order in the universe. The universe is infused by a principle which makes it intelligible, its order able to be recognised and

affirmed by man's rational mind. The early Christian theologians exercised very great wisdom when they took this concept over (and in so doing changed it utterly): for by it they state how the order and intelligibility of the universe is fleshly and nameable: Jesus.

Here, as always in the Christian faith, so much hangs on so little — this little scrap of history, this perilously obscure birth, surrounded by the whiff of scandal, is the ultimate point of the ways of God into mankind. And this is the point that we are to return to if we would learn both who God is, and who we ourselves are. God became man that man might become man.

God

Christmas is the celebration of the humanity of God. That is to say, it is an invitation to discover in the human reality of the child Jesus the very being of God himself. This particular, fragile human form is not a cloak under which God hides: rather it is his being laid bare for us. The language of "concealment" or "laying-aside" of the glory of God is simply inadequate: we have to do with *revelation*. And if that is true, then God can properly be said to be a "human" God, a God who expresses himself in this singular human way.

The story of Christmas is not, then, a mere narrative illustration of a doctrinal point. Rather, it is a character-description of God, a story which identifies who he is and the kinds of relations which he bears towards his creation. In theological terms this means that the events of Christmas furnish a severe corrective of habitual ways of conceiving of God's transcendence. The acute difficulties which Christian theology often experiences in this area are, in part at least, to be traced to the way in which theological traditions confuse the affirmation of God's transcendence with the affirmation of his remoteness. God is God, and therefore does not become incarnation — or at least when he does so, it hides, and does not reveal, his character. But if the Christmas story points us to the heart of God's relation to the world, we are led to affirm that his freedom is precisely his freedom to come near. His freedom is not the negative freedom of independence, of refusal to have anything to do with the world. Rather, his freedom is his freedom to choose to be God by becoming man. And in so doing, he expresses and does not contradict the true character of his divinity. Concentrated here for us is the mystery of God, "the uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor floor".

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If all this is so, Christmas is a festival of protest. The Christmas miracle initiates perpetual protest against inhuman gods; it spells the end of idols. No less than any other, the Christian religious imagination is a fertile source of idolatry, of pictures of the divine which, far from according with his revealed nature simply project our fears or fantasies and so obscure the real character of the one with whom we have to do. And so we make God into a source of oppression or accusation, so that the presence of God becomes the origin of guilt and failure and self-disesteem. Or again, we envisage God as a source of consolation — a little light in the darkness of worldly reality, an attempt to convince ourselves that things aren't as bad as they seem. Christmas, indeed, is often peopled with these consoling idols — Dickensian characters, dispensing light and magic, sparkling gods who vanish all too soon. But the

Christmas God is not a distant accuser, a remote threat: he is here. Nor is he a consoler: his nearness is not a comforting night-light for frightened children, but the nearness of a charged mystery. In his very proximity, we are faced with his utter inscrutability and unknowability. Familiar and yet unspeakable, he is "more distant than the stars and nearer than the eye" (T. S. Eliot).

This is one reason why silence is important in the celebration of Christmas. One of the chief functions of silence in a liturgical context is the relinquishment of control. Speech is one of our ways of managing the world: those things of which we speak are those things which are to some degree known, grasped, those things upon which we have some purchase. Silence, on the other hand, is an admission that there are mysteries which we cannot grasp or locate by the use of language: they are unfathomable, ungraspable. And the events of Christmas are such that in part at least we are reduced to silence. In the Dominican Christmas Eve liturgy, the friars prostrate themselves in silence at the first mention of the name of Jesus in the martyrology. I sometimes wonder if our celebration is too affirmative, if we are too ready through our praying and singing and preaching to take upon our lips the name of the Unnameable: "Before the mysteries of the birth and death of the Word what else is there for us to do other than to fall down and keep silence for a while? This silence is not the kind of ascetic silence that makes a guru out of the environment around us: it is, rather, that variety of silence which is laid upon us by the sheer marvel of the thing. Christians, and especially Dominicans, have to say things about God and what belongs to God: they have to make words of the Word. But our first response must be the silence of being so overwhelmed by the wonder of it all that we feel there is nothing we could possibly say. Words worth anything will normally be born out of that silence."²

Man

Barth was fond of referring to Christmas as the gospel of God. But he was also equally fond of seeing Christmas as the reconstitution of human nature. "Christmas", he once wrote, "is where we come from". For if Christmas is a protest against idolatrous pictures of God, it is no less a protest against inhuman pictures of man. Christmas transforms who we are, because the events of Christmas are *for us*. "Unto *you* is born this day a Saviour" (Lk. 2.11). Preaching on that text in Basel Prison on Christmas Day 30 years ago, Barth said this: "There he is, our great God and Saviour, and here we are, human beings, and now it is true that he is for me, is for us. It is impossible to hear his story without hearing our own. It is the great transformation that has been worked in us once and for all, the great joy it has released in us, and the great calling we have particular subject and agent, and orthodox Christology has no desire at all to deny that. But alongside this we need to retain a proper sense of the representative, even vicarious, nature of Christ's humanity. His human reality is not his alone, but effects the rebirth of other human realities, as they find their life in him.

received to set out on the way he shows us."³ Christmas, in other words, is not simply revelation. It does not simply impart new knowledge of who God is, but effects a transformation of our reality. For in this man, humanity is both remade and given new possibilities. In his birth is our birth: our wasted ways are restored, our endless capacity to undo our own lives is itself undone.

It is something like this which lies behind the orthodox emphasis that at the incarnation the Word of God assumed "human nature", that he became not simply "a man" but "Man". The thrust of that affirmation was in no way to deny that Jesus was "a man"; clearly he was a

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At the beginning of the last war, Dietrich Bonhoeffer began to circulate a series of theological letters to former students of the Confessing Church Seminary which he had run at Finkenwalde before its closure by the Nazis. In the first of those, sent out at Christmas 1939, is a remarkable passage on this theme: "The body of Jesus Christ is our flesh. He bears our flesh. Therefore, where Jesus Christ is, there we are, whether we know it or not; that is true because of the incarnation. What happens to Jesus Christ, happens to us. It really is all our "poor flesh and blood" which lies there in the crib; it is our flesh which dies with him on the cross and is buried with him. He took human nature so that we might be eternally with him. Where the body of Jesus Christ is, there we are; indeed, we are his body. So the Christmas message for all men runs: You are accepted, God has not despised you, but he bears in his body all your flesh and blood. Look at the cradle! In the body of the little child, in the incarnate son of God, your flesh, all your distress, anxiety, temptation, indeed all your sin, is borne, forgiven and healed."⁴ If Bonhoeffer is right, then one of the effects of our celebration of Christmas should be a profound uneasiness about our settled pictures of ourselves. Christmas should unsettle us not only about the character of God but also about our own characters. For it is here, in this particular event, that God inserts into the heart of our affairs that which gives them meaning.

And so: what have we celebrated at Christmas? We have celebrated that event in which God became man that we, too, might become men and women. We have celebrated the humanity of God along which path alone lies our own humanity. In the Bible God begins to speak in cosmic events or in historical happenings, in earthquakes and volcanoes and winds and floods, in the escape of a motley crew of slaves from Egypt, in some people's being allowed to go home from exile in Babylon. The story becomes increasingly human until in the end it is a history of Immanuel God-with-us, God living a human life. It ends with the complete humanity of a person of whom it can be said that anybody who sees him sees the Father. It ends with one in whom can be seen the source, ground and significance of all that is, primordial Being, the condition that there should be anything at all; and in this man we can see also that this ground of being and granite of it may be addressed in personal terms as Father. We can now call 'our Father' to the wellspring of nature and the Lord of history. Jesus is the en-man-ment of God, and in him the world and history are humanised. Jesus, as John Donne would say, contracts the immensities and focuses the infinite. He is God focused to a point. He is the face of God. In him immensity was cloistered in the dear womb of Mary and at last men knew what it was to be a man."⁵

References

- 1) G. Preston, *Hallowing the Time* (London 1980) 48-50.
- 2) *Ibid.*, 50.
- 3) K. Barth, *Deliverance to the Captives* (ET London 1961) 26.
- 4) D. Bonhoeffer, *True Patriotism* (ET London 1973) 30.
- 5) G. Preston, *God's Way to be Man* (London 1978) 22f.