

Sermon for Sunday, December 12, 2010
Dr. Dan Doriani
The Incarnation or Why the God-Man?
Phil. 2:5-11, 2 Peter 1:3-4, Heb. 2:14-18

1. The reality of the Incarnation
Meditation on the reality of Jesus' manhood

When Jesus was born, he became a man in every sense of the word. He took a human body, mind, and will. He felt wind and water, heat and cold, love and rejection with his senses, with his mind, even with his emotions. The only human trait he lacked was sin. Hebrews 4:15 says he "has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin."

As B.B. Warfield says, "He easily identified himself with men" (Matt. 4:4) and receives our humanity without protest. He is easy going with his humanity. He "came eating and drinking."¹

Jesus speaks familiarly and naturally of His body - his feet and hands, his flesh, bones, and blood. We see this most clearly after his resurrection, when his disciples were terrified to see him. He assured them, saying: "Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have" (Luke 24:39).

He also felt the range of human emotions – pity, love, desire, even desolation (Luke 22:15). So then, "Nothing that is human is alien to Him except sin."

Meditation on the loss Jesus endured

When we consider Jesus' loss, we may think first of his death and resurrection and that is wise, for his prime pain was his suffering and death. Today, let's consider with care how Jesus sacrificed when he became a man.

First, consider that he never had to confront sin - greed, deceit, or pride - in heaven. No one was cruel or malicious. The Lord wants us to think of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, for it inspires us to endure, even to suffer, with him and for him. But he endured more than the pain of the cross.

Because we know this life and love what is best in it, we can lose perspective on his sacrifice. After all, we get to see the Milky Way and eat fresh goat cheese with pita bread. Let me ask you to join me in a thought experiment:

Imagine that for some reason you became a worm. Worms, we must suppose, do not lament their condition. Worms are blind, but they don't know about eyes, so they don't know what they are missing. They lack ears, but they don't know about speech or music, so they are not wistful about their loss. Their friends don't have hands or feet, so they don't miss the delicate sense of touch or ability to run.

¹ Luke 7:34. Warfield, "The Person of Christ" in The Person and Work of Christ, 66-67.

If worms had self-awareness, they might even be pleased with the capacities God gave them. They are soft and flexible, yet strong enough to work through hard soil. They can detect nutrients, hidden in the soil that most species would miss. All of this would seem good, even splendid to a meditative worm. But a worm doesn't know what it's missing.

Even if worms are content, it would be miserable, even horrible for a human to become a worm, trading all human glories for the dark, silent, wiggling world of worms. We are thankful for worms in the soil, but we know their limitations. We watch them with pity after a drenching rain that floods them out of their homes. They blunder onto streets, where cars crush them, onto sidewalks where the sun bakes them in summer or the cold freezes them in winter. Even in the grass, birds come and gorge on them. We're thankful that we are not worms.

We're glad to be human. Yet an angel might see terrible limitations in human nature. We see poorly, move slowly. Our bodies age and ache and suffer irrational desires. And if we appear to be limited to angels, how might Jesus view manhood, with all its limitations?

Just consider time from God's perspective. The triune God created time. He knows all things past, present and future. He is present in our present, but not limited by it. But humans dimly remember the past and know almost nothing of the future. We have some clarity only in that shifting nano-second we call "the present." That would be terribly limiting to God. Because we're time-bound and sinful and rebellious, we often do things that are self-destructive. To Jesus we must seem as foolish as worms migrating to a sidewalk.

Last week, my wife and daughter sang a duet at a Christmas event. Both have strong, beautiful voices. The song was splendid, the harmonies close and complex, and their voices blended as the voices of relatives can. I closed my eyes and drank it in, but the song lasted three or four minutes. The moment is gone, receding.

I walk with my wife on a path near our home. The trail winds thru a little valley and we come to a natural cathedral. The trees thin a little, so the sun streams through in dozens of beams of light. When birds and bees dance in the light, when autumn leaves turn red against the blue sky, we want to stay forever.

God sees that red-leafed clearing forever. What we call that moment always gives Him pleasure. He beholds the rings of Saturn. The nebula, billions of miles long, iridescent clouds of sapphire, emerald and ruby, are always visible to him.

Every morally beautiful act, every mother's sacrifice, every soldier's valor, is present to him at all times. Above all, God always sees His triumph over sin, grief, and death. But Jesus laid aside his glory when he entered this world and time. He limited himself in other ways. The infinite God became finite.

- No longer omnipresent, he stood in one place at a time.
- No longer omnipotent, he *had to eat, had to drink, had to sleep*, to retain human strength.
- No longer omniscient at all times, he had to ask questions. Sometimes he asked to engage people, draw them out. Sometimes it was to gain information.

For all this we should thank him, praise him, and love him more. So he entered the world of process, weakness, and mortality. To commandeer Shakespeare: Jesus is fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same

winter and summer" If you cut him, did he not bleed? He did indeed bleed. Why?

First Meditation on the reason for the Incarnation

The novel The Sword and the Stone tells the tale of a lad born to noble parents who died. He grew up wandering the castle of kindly Sir Ector as friend of nobles and servants alike. The lad needed a tutor and they stumbled upon the magician-philosopher Merlyn, who introduced the boy to all sorts of people, from knights to outlaws. He also turned the boy into an ant, a hawk, a fish.

It was interesting but limiting to take animal flesh, to be incarnated as these animals. Ants think only of food, duty and necessity. Hawks soar, but life is limited to the world of hunting. Fish move effortlessly in beautiful water; they never get sore feet or a sore back, but life is a constant quest to find food and a constant need to avoid becoming another fish's food.

These incarnations were part of Arthur's education; Merlyn wanted him to see life from every perspective, so he could be the Good King Arthur. The King Arthur legend follows Jesus' story. The hero's identity is long hidden and he becomes a wise king. Merlyn gave Arthur experiences as an ant, hawk, fish, and unwanted child to make him a wise and empathetic king, for the good of his people.

Perhaps the author drew on biblical concepts, expressed in Hebrews 2:17-18: "For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest.... Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."

But there is more. John says: "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his only begotten Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:9-10).

2. Objections to the Incarnation

The modern objection to his deity is common, for all miracles. Many people can't believe that God intervenes in this world. One liberal scholar said all the gospels ask, "Who is this man? Where is he from?" He is not, the author said sarcastically, "The invader from another world," but a man known and loved by the Father who sent him and told him what to do. "He is a man of power because he is a man of prayer."² Jesus is not the pre-existent Son of God incarnate as man, but a new man "who has transcended the ordinary reaches of humanity" and moves it "into new possibilities."³ Jesus, they say, is simply an exceptionally spiritual man. Thus the critic objects to the supernatural. The essential idea: we do not need a savior, we don't need God's intervention, because we can save ourselves.

The ancient objection to his humanity

Long ago, however, people objected more to the human Jesus. A heretical Christian cult, the gnostics, perverted a line in Paul that said Jesus "took the *form* of a servant." They said Jesus merely *appeared* to

² JAT Robinson, priority of John 349, 357-72.

³ Macquarrie, Jesus Christ in Modern Thought. Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1990, 65-67.

be human. He *seemed* to die on the cross but did not actually die, for he never really took flesh. The idea of God taking flesh offended them. The idea of him nursing and excreting waste was disgusting to them.

Tertullian, a great Christian from around 200 A.D., took on the gnostics, (especially Marcion) who "attack the nastiness... of the womb." Marcion mocks the womb, the immodesty and blood of birth, even the crooked or scrunched shape of a new-born infant. Tertullian replies: We should revere the process of birth, because all humans enter the world that way. More important, Christ himself cares for people born this way. His great love for us led him to humble himself by his bloody birth and bloody death.

Quotation:

Draw a picture of the **womb** getting daily more unmanageable.... Next go all out against the modesty of the travailing woman.... You shudder of course, at the child passed out along with his afterbirth, and bedaubed with it. You think it shameful that that he is beguiled by coddling." [You gnostics spit on this] "yet how were you born? You hate man during his birth: how can you love any man?" But Christ does care for man, "**curdled** in uncleannesses in the womb..." Indeed Jesus himself was willing to be born and "took nourishment" through "organs" the gnostics call "immodest" and ridiculous.

"He came down" to preach "the gospel. He cast himself down in all humility even unto death, the death of the cross." So he redeemed mankind at great price and out of his great love. By his birth, he restores [flesh] from every distress: leprous he cleanses it, blind he restores its sight, dead he brings it again to life." But why did he do it?

Why the Incarnation; he purpose of the incarnation

Why did Jesus take our flesh, our pain, weakness and darkness? Why join us? We are not his peers. Our bodies and minds are so weak, compared to his. Morally, we break his laws and give ourselves to vice that clashes with his virtue.

No one constrained Jesus to take our flesh. He chose it Why? Hebrews 2, quoting Psalm 8, considers this very question: "What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" Why did God rank mankind with the angels? Why crown *us* with glory and honor? Why take on human flesh and restore us as his children, governors of creation? Love. He loved us enough to choose the life of a child, then a carpenter, then a prophet, even though he knew it would end in a terrible death. Hebrews says Jesus "was made a little lower than the angels" (Hew. 2:9) and became a man. Here are four reasons:

- He shared our humanity in order to "taste death for everyone" (2:9). "Taste" here means to experience in full.
- He shared our humanity in order to bring us "to glory" (2:10).
- He shared our humanity in order to vanquish our enemy, the devil (2:14-15).
- He shared our humanity in order to become our perfect high priest (2:17-18). A priest has two tasks – to offer sacrifices for sins and to intercede for the people, and Jesus surely does both.

The incarnation was "fitting to God," Hebrews says. Jesus' birth fit God's character and purposes. Indeed, once humanity rebelled, God's purposes could be achieved no other way.⁴ God intended us to share in his glory, as the greatest of his creatures.

⁴ Lane, Commitment, 46-7.

The incarnation affirms the value of this life

Eugene Peterson in the book *The Contemplative Pastor*, says, "Matter is real. Flesh is good." Without a firm rooting in creation, "religion is always drifting off into some kind of pious sentimentalism or sophisticated intellectualism." The task of salvation is not to refine us into pure spirits so that we will not be cumbered with this too-solid flesh. We are not angels, nor are we to become angels. *The Word did not become a good idea...* or a moral aspiration; *the Word became flesh...* Things matter. The physical is holy."

In Genesis 1, God spoke "a world of energy and matter into being: light, moon, stars, earth, vegetation, animals, man, woman." Apart from creation, the life of faith has no structure, no root in reality.

The incarnation affirms that bodily life is good. It's good to work with our hands. Jesus worked with wood and stone for twenty years before he started his ministry. Every time he lifted a knife, a chisel, a hammer, he blessed the work we do with our hands. Jesus ate, drank, and slept as a tired working man does.

It's good to make music – whether the joy of singing or the discipline of using our hands, fingers, and lips to make precise and beautiful sounds on pianos, guitars, trumpets, drums, and saxophones.

Body life is good. We dig in the dirt then watch flowers, beans, tomatoes and peppers grow and grace our table. Many of us live sedentary lives. We move from our desk to the conference room and back. God did not create us to be a brain and a mouth on a stick. He made our bodies to move. I hope none of us forget the joy of feeling physical strength – push-ups, pull-ups and more.

A running child shouldn't irritate us. It should remind us of the joy of running, the pleasure of speed. There is nothing quite like swinging hard and hitting a ball just right, watching it go just where it should. Or the joy of passing a ball - football, basketball, soccer - to a teammate. We see joy in the physical among animals: elephants spraying themselves, ducks soaring down to land on a lake.

If we have too much food, we become sated and bored. But when hunger and friendship season every dish –what a pleasure it is, what a gift from God.

You know that the Old Testament commands various tithes and offerings. These went to priests, to Levites, and to the poor. They also went to feasts. God commanded Israelites to take a portion of their tithes and celebrate a meal in the temple, in God's presence. Moses said: "Buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, wine or other fermented drink, or anything you wish. Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice" (Deut. 14:26 ff.). No wonder Jesus said "Eat and drink in remembrance of me." So *live* this life. This is important, but there is more.

2 Peter, Athanasius and the Incarnation

Athanasius says God created mankind with a dignity but we turned from God and fell into violence, corruption, deceit, sensuality, and war. Originally, we knew God with "unembarrassed boldness."⁵ But we

⁵ Against the Pagans, (1971) 7-9.

lost our desire for God and our souls were "disordered and defiled by all kinds of desires."⁶ We clung to pleasures and the fear of losing them led to fear of death (21-23.8). The disorderly soul charges in every direction, following the senses (9-11.3). It forgets God and creates new deities to serve our desires (21-23.8). These absurd gods are guilty of adultery, murder, cruelty, violence, and drunkenness.

But God is morally excellent and kind, so he will not let his rebellious world perish or "dissolve back into nothing."⁷ Jesus prevented this by taking a real body. Then he sacrificed that body; he surrendered it to "death on behalf of all [and] offered it to the Father." By his death, Jesus abolished the power of death. His resurrection eradicated death and the fear of death. And he turned men back from their corruption.⁸ "By the grace of the resurrection, corruption has been banished..., we are loosed from our mortal bodies..., [and] obtain thereby a better resurrection." Athanasius says, "For he became man that we might become divine."

This is Peter's message and it says the Incarnation has a third goal: First, the Incarnation leads to atonement for sin. Second, the Incarnation affirms the goodness of this world. Third, by it we "participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption of the world." How do we participate in God's nature? We don't become divine or enter the Godhead, but we do become like God.

Follow Peter: In his divine power, God has given us everything we need – maybe not everything we *want*, but everything we *need* – for life and godliness. He states the means: He calls us through our knowledge of him (Christ), through his own "glory and goodness" or excellence – his virtue. Jesus called us to himself, to a holy life by his moral beauty and the beauty of his power.

Peter saw the glory of Christ, above all in the transfiguration. In his miracles – calming storms, multiplying bread. In the way he kept the attention of crowds, in the way his words stopped soldiers who had come to arrest him. The glory of Christ, seen in gospel stories, still draws us to him.

At one point, Peter was so overwhelmed by the power and goodness of Jesus that he declared, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5).

Jesus' person attracts us and his power gave us the ability to respond. In 1:4, Peter mentions Jesus' "great promises." Thus we have Jesus' person, Jesus' power, and Jesus' promises, all drawing us to him, so we "may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption" of the world.

Hear Peter's concern for corruption. Pagans were haunted by corruption – the painfulness, the brevity, the pointlessness of life. Life has more pain than pleasure. It's brief and miserable, pagans complained. As in the joke, "The food there is terrible – yes, and such small portions."

How does Jesus mission make us "participate in or partake of the divine nature"? We do not become gods, nor does God absorb us into himself. We participate in God's nature by gaining life eternal, even as

⁶ Pagans, 9.3

⁷ Pagans, 113-15.41.

⁸ Inc, 153.8; Charry, Renewing Your Minds, 92.

he is eternal. In ourselves, we are corruptible and corrupted, but thru Christ we become incorruptible. We gain this in full at Jesus' second coming, but it can start now.

Athanasius: People become like the gods they venerate. Pagan deities acted in ways that were illegal and reprehensible. They would murder, covet, lie, steal, and fornicate. They were lustful, cruel, violent and drunk. If the gods are cruel and immoral, the people become cruel and immoral.⁹

We don't worship Roman gods, but we do adore impersonal, directionless gods like money and possessions, achievement, power, and status. As a result, we become impersonal, caring more about possessions and achievements than people. Most societies put relationships above achievement and possessions, but we put people second, and suffer the consequences.

Jesus forgives us, liberates us and grants us life to restore our true nature and dignity. As we worship him and trust Him, we become like him. So Jesus is *the Father's ambassador, sent "to re-create all"* by entering our world.

"Moved with compassion... unable to endure that death should have the mastery... He took to Himself... a human body... like our own. He surrendered His body to death... and offered it to the Father." He did this out of sheer love for us. So he atoned for our sin, affirmed the beauties of this life and began to transform us, so we could be more like him.

God is good, kind, patient, merciful, true, generous. When we see and worship him, we became more like him and partake of his nature. His sacrifice leads us to sacrifice. His love leads us to love each other and to love him.

⁹ Inc, 269; 54; Pagans, 43.15; 67-71.25-26.