

## Celebrating Incarnation

Merry Fourth Day of Christmas! As we all know from the old song, there are Twelve Days of Christmas: on the liturgical calendar, Christmastide lasts from the Feast of the Nativity on December 25 all the way to the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6. So, today is the 28th, and that makes today the Fourth Day of Christmas. We don't have four calling birds here this morning; but we do have scripture lessons and prayers that help us think a little more, ponder a little more deeply the meaning of this holiday season we are celebrating.

Out in the secular world, Christmas is already over. In popular culture, everything is geared toward the One Big Day, and after that it's all anticlimax: after-Christmas sales; stores accepting returns and exchanging items for what people *really* wanted under the tree; retailers gearing up for the *next* big holiday, Valentine's Day or even St Patrick's Day in some stores; financial news that holiday sales were "disappointing" and the recession is *still* worse than we thought. In the secular world, Christmas is already a memory. But in the Church calendar, we take a little while longer to celebrate Christmas: we take some time to think about what it really means, and why it really makes a difference to us, why Christmas is something that really and truly changes our lives. And that's what today, that's what this First Sunday after Christmas, is all about. On Christmas we celebrated *what* happened; today we celebrate *why* it happened. On Christmas we celebrated that Jesus was born; today we celebrate how Jesus' being born into human life has changed all of our human lives also. Three days ago we celebrated the Nativity; today we add to that a celebration of the Incarnation.

The deepest truth about the mystery of the Incarnation is that it is a sort of two-way street. It describes God's relationship to us, telling us that, in the Incarnation, God becomes human. But it also describes our relationship to God, telling us that, through the Incarnation, our human life becomes capable of sharing in God's divine life. Because of the Incarnation, our lives are taken up into a life that is larger than our own—and we become capable of living like Jesus, just as Jesus is capable of living like God.

To give you a sort of picture of this, I often think of it as being like a series of concentric circles—different degrees or intensities of life opening up into larger and larger spheres. We human beings have a kind of animal life in our bodies—we move, we breathe, we eat, we grow, and we share that kind of biological life with all sorts of other animals, fish and reptiles and birds and mammals. Biology is one level or sphere of life.

But in addition to animal life, we also have a mental life, a life of thoughts and feelings and aims and desires, a level of life that is able to be aware of the world around us and to respond to it with intention. That mental kind of life opens us up to a larger world than just the world of animal appetite and instinct. Mentality is another level or sphere of life.

Then, in addition to mental life, we also have a spiritual life—a way of living or an intensity of being alive that is able to reflect upon itself, a kind of life that is not only aware of the world, but is aware of itself being aware of the world. We human beings have a self-consciousness, we are able to step back a little from the sheer flow of experience, we can ask questions about ourselves, we can make choices, we can ponder decisions, we can respond in freedom, we can tell a difference between what is good and bad, what is right and wrong, we can imagine things that do not yet exist and we can work creatively toward bringing them into existence. We can make songs and poems and prayers; we can make friendship and compassion and love; we can make families and societies and communities. We have a spiritual life, and that opens us up to a larger world than just the world of mental analysis and intention. Spirituality is another level or sphere of life.

And, as Christians, we believe there is also a divine life—God's life—a degree of aliveness, an intensity of vitality, that takes up all the other circles of life and raises them to the *n*th degree. It is the life that is the Source of all life, it is the Root of all holiness and wisdom and creativity and compassion and love, it is the Origin of justice and peace and well-being and right relationships, it is the Word through whom all things are made and in whom all things hold together. The divine life is something we can only begin to be able to imagine in our limited spheres of animal and mental and spiritual life—and yet we believe it is within the sphere of that divine life that we live and move and have our being.

And the mystery of the Incarnation is that in Jesus, God took up everything of human life, everything of animal and mental and spiritual life that was in Jesus, and God took it all into the divine life, God wove those threads of human life into the fulfillment of divine purposes, God used the realities of human life to realize divine love and divine joy and divine grace and divine truth. And because God did that in Jesus, the Good News is that God is doing it in us, too: God takes up the animal and mental and spiritual spheres of our lives, and through *us* God lives compassion and grace and truth and joy and love into the world. The Good News of the Incarnation is that because God was born into human life in Jesus, therefore through Jesus our human lives are borne up into a life that is larger than our own in God.

That is the message we hear in John's Gospel today, when John says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... and the Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth." That's the part about divine life coming into our human life. But the relationship goes both ways: because the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, John says, therefore, "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." Because Christ has shared our life, therefore we are empowered to share his life, with all the grace and truth, all the light and life, all the power of love, that he has made known among us. Because the Word made flesh has given us power to become children of God, therefore our lives are taken up into a life that is larger than our own.

That is the message we hear in the Epistle, when Paul writes to the Galatians: "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" When we address God as Father, as we do every time we say the Lord's Prayer, "Our Father, who art in heaven"—when we address God as Father, then we are not just speaking on our own: it is the voice of the Son, it is the voice of Jesus, it is the voice of Christ made alive in us by the Holy Spirit, speaking within our voices, giving our voices depth and height and breadth to speak and shout and sing the glorious love of God. Because God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, therefore our lives are taken up into a life that is larger than our own.

That is the message we hear in the Eucharist we celebrate today, when we take the bread and wine and do again as Jesus does, so that we are fed with his Body and Blood, so that we are united with him in his sacrifice, so that with him we may enter the everlasting heritage of God's sons and daughters. In communion as members of Christ's Body, we are all caught up into Christ, so that our lives are taken up into a life that is larger than our own.

And that is the Good News we celebrate on this Fourth Day of Christmas. On this day between Nativity and Epiphany, we celebrate Incarnation, we take the time to ponder the *whole* meaning of Christmas, the fullness of the mystery: that in Jesus God became one of us, so that through Jesus we might become one with God. Today we give thanks that we can be alive with a life that is larger than our own—and that is a Christmas gift we can celebrate all year round. Amen.