

Kent A. Webber
January 6, 2008

"THE INCARNATE ONE"

John 1:1-3,14-18

Intro. - Today we begin a journey in the Gospel of John which will take us to Easter. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels, meaning they follow a similar outline and express a common viewpoint about Jesus. Although also a gospel, a good news document about Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection, John is distinctly different. Today we encounter one of those key differences.

Each of the Synoptic Gospels much more gradually reveal Jesus' identity as Messiah/Christ and Son of God. Here, even in the prologue of John's Gospel the writer immediately proclaims Jesus as the Christ/Messiah and the "only Son of God." (read John 1:1-3,14-18 on p.91 in the NT of the pew Bibles)

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The prologue begins with the "Word" or "logos" of God; the divine message of God. In Greek thought among the Stoics the *logos* was the rational principle

which held the world together. In Jewish thought the Word or speech of God was God making Himself known. The first Greek words of John's Gospel, "en arche," "in the beginning" are also the first words of the LXX's rendering of Genesis 1:1. In that first chapter of Genesis on each of the six days of creation, "God said . . ." and spoke creation into being. This *logos* or Word is with God, and is God, though a differentiation is made between the Creator and the Word.

"He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." This *logos* or Word of God existed prior to the creation of the world and is the means by which God created all things.

Notice also that four times the writer describes the *logos*, the Word of God as "he" or "him." So the Divine Word is not an impersonal force or power, but is personal.

In verse 14 the prologue comes to its climax when the writer says the *logos* "became flesh and lived (tabernacled) among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of father's only son, full of grace and truth. . . From his fullness we have all

received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."

"The Word became flesh." The theological word for that is "incarnation," from the Latin "in carnis" = in flesh. It's the radical claim that the divine Word of God assumed human flesh once and for all in the person Jesus of Nazareth. God entered our skin, our human existence in Jesus. C. S. Lewis calls the incarnation "the grand miracle" and writes, "The central miracle asserted by Christians is the Incarnation. They say that God became Man. Every other miracle prepares for this, or exhibits this, or results from this" (p.112; Miracles; c.1947; New York; Macmillan Co.). There is certainly some mystery in terms of our ability to fully understand the incarnation. What has seemed clear to the church for many centuries is that Jesus was one divine person with both a divine and human nature, in other words, who is both fully divine and fully human.

The claim made here that Jesus is the incarnation of God, "God the only Son" as John says in v.18 makes the Christian faith unique among the major world religions. Other religions have important leaders and figures such as Moses in Judaism, the Prophet Muhammad in Islam, and Gautama Siddharta in Buddhism. However, none of those leaders is believed to be the incarnation of God. Moses and Muhammad within their respective religious traditions are both recognized as prophets, spokespersons for God, but definitely not God in human flesh, and neither is ever worshipped. Buddhism is more a philosophy than a theology and doesn't require belief in any god or gods. Within Buddhism Guatama Siddharta was simply the first to become a Buddha, an "awakened one" by practicing the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path.

The one major world religion that embraces incarnation is Hinduism. However, Hinduism reverences hundreds of deities so that their claims are far different than the Christian belief that the one living and true God has revealed himself definitively in Jesus of Nazareth.

Speaking of incarnation within the Hindu tradition, the Dec. 22 edition of the SF Chronicle had a story on page 2 from Katmandu, Nepal about 10 year-old Priti Shakya, believed to be the incarnation of Taleju, a powerful Hindu deity. At the age of 4, a panel of judges examined her in a series of ancient ceremonies after which she was pronounced a goddess, and worshipped. However, this young girl will return to her home at the onset of menstruation, when a new goddess will be named. At that point Priti will be left to adjust to a life that – suddenly and absolutely – is supposed to be completely normal. So in this incarnation in the Hindu tradition, unlike the situation with Jesus, the incarnation isn't believed to be permanent but only temporary.

What does the incarnation of God Jesus Christ mean for us?

First, it means that God took the initiative in revealing himself and reaching out to redeem us. Jesus isn't our highest human attempt to understand and please God. Rather, Jesus is God's self-revelation. Jesus' name in Hebrew, Yeshua means "Yahweh saves" or "Yahweh is salvation." Jesus brings God's salvation to us. We didn't discover it. We didn't achieve it. We

simply learned of it through Jesus, God incarnate. As Paul wrote, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). So God is the initiator of a saving relationship with us.

Second, the incarnation means that as "the incarnate one" Jesus gives us a window into the mind and heart of God. No longer need we wonder what God thinks and feels. Jesus shows us. As Jesus says later in this same gospel, "If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him" (14:7). So the incarnation helps us learn what God is like. Two little boys were talking about God when one of them said, "I don't know much about God, but I know something about Jesus." "Yeah, what do you know about Jesus?" his friend asked. "Well, the main thing I know about Jesus is that He is about the best picture of God that anybody ever took." In Jesus, God has a face!

During the difficult days of World War II, for Christmas a mother gave her young son a framed picture of his father, whom he had not seen in three years. His mother then asked, "Son, what do you want most of all for Christmas this year?" The boy

looked at the frame, thought for a moment and said, "I want my father to step out of the frame." That is in essence what God did in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Third, the incarnation is a clear affirmation of our worth in the eyes of God. God cares so much for each one of us that He assumed our humanity in Jesus the Christ. We read later in this same good news document, "God so loved the world (God so loved you!) he gave his Only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (3:16).

Fourth, while affirming the full divinity of JC, the incarnation also affirms his full humanity. This means the incarnation allows God to personally experience what it's like to be limited to the space/time continuum and be an authentically human person. Not only do we learn what God is like through his incarnation in Christ. Now because of it, God learns firsthand of our human experience and limitations. God is no longer isolated from us or a stranger to our human experience. Theologian Douglas John Hall posits four conditions of creaturehood –

loneliness, consciousness of our finite limits, temptation, and anxiety, each of which Jesus experienced.

One of the earliest misunderstandings of Jesus was that he was a pure spirit figure and only appeared to be fully human. That heresy is called "docetism" and comes directly from the Greek verb "dokeo" meaning "to seem." Docetists said that while Jesus appeared to be human, that was but a mask, a disguise. Actually Jesus did not experience finite limits, but knew all things. Unlike us, he didn't need to exercise faith to have oneness with God and was unable to experience real loneliness or temptation or anxiety. On top of all that, Docetists said didn't have a real body which could experience pain.

Today we celebrate the Sacrament of the Eucharist which points to Jesus' death on the cross. The elements of bread and juice remind us of and represent the offering, the real sacrifice of Jesus' body and blood for us on the cross. The incarnation means that though fully divine, Jesus was also fully human and that he suffered physical, mental/emotional, and spiritual pain on the cross. He really suffered; he really bled; he really died in

order to express God's love for each of us and to offer us forgiveness for our sin. *How have you responded to that offer?*

Let us pray: Gracious God, we thank You that You loved us so much that You humbled and limited Yourself by becoming a real human person in Jesus of Nazareth. As you have given Yourself fully to us in Jesus' incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection, in response may we offer ourselves back to You with energy and enthusiasm to be Your faithful followers. In His Holy Name. Amen.