

Christmas Day
(Isaiah 52:7-10 / John 1:1-18)
25.12.2018

The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.

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We could say that in these words – which never cease to amaze us – we have the expression of something absolutely central to Christianity: belief in the incarnation; God’s sharing in our human condition. Jesus is fully *God with us*. He is *God with us* fully.

Our faith in the incarnation concerns not only the earthly life of Jesus two thousand years ago, it concerns our lives today. God is with us in our flesh!

Becoming incarnate, embodied in Jesus Christ – the child born of Mary – God accepted life with all its limitations... with its ups and downs, with its rough and tumble, with its blessings and graces, its challenges and difficulties. He accepted everything pertaining to a human existence.

Jesus experienced fully the various stages of life He traversed: infancy, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood and adulthood. Although Jesus could barely be said of have attained middle-age, and His life was robbed of Him before He achieved old age, nonetheless, because He engaged Himself to live in such solidarity with the human race, we can take it that He is fully conscious of what those who have attained these stages in life are experiencing as they make their way through them.

John’s gospel – the account in which we find the declaration *the Word became flesh* already in the Prologue (the text read this morning) – is a Good News story which continually draws to its readers attention Jesus’ full espousal of our human condition. John insists upon what the Creed affirms: namely, that, in Jesus, *God was made man and came to dwell among us*. The Epistle to the Hebrews reminds us: *He was like us in every way*.

Standing in *Manger Square* in Bethlehem in May 2014 Pope Francis drew attention to the fragility of the Christ-child who was born there. I quote from his meditation of that day: *The Child of Bethlehem is frail, like all newborn children. He cannot speak and yet He is the Word made flesh who came to transform the hearts and lives of all men and women. This child, like every other child, is vulnerable; He needs to be accepted and protected.*

If that is how it was for Jesus – God made man – why would be afraid to admit to our own fragility and recognise our own needs – especially the longing which is there within all of us to be accepted and our right to be protected?

The Fourth gospel stresses Jesus’ need for food and for drink, for quiet and for sleep, not only in His infancy, but throughout His earthly life. This same gospel account also accentuates Jesus’ attention to other people’s plight; it draws attention to His efforts to reach out to others to offer them the assistance they required.

All I have been saying so far speaks to us of the ordinariness that God took on when He became man in Christ-Jesus. It also points to something else which it is extremely important for us to grasp: the fact that we need look no further than our own ordinary human experience to encounter God!

God is to be found everywhere; He is present in the most banal. We aren’t obliged to look to the extraordinary, the spectacular and the miraculous to find the Lord. In the words of the spiritual theologian Ronald Rolheiser: *God is now to be found where we live – in our kitchens, at our tables, in our words, in each others’ faces*. If only everyone of us coming together to

celebrate today's feast realised that God is to be found not in the extraordinary alone (in solemn liturgies like that which we are celebrating) but also in the routine of our daily existence!

At a certain level, Jesus of Nazareth was evidently just a very ordinary man. That is precisely what made His claim to be the *Son of God* so incredible to those who did not believe in His divinity. Many of the religious people who were expecting great signs, such as the restoration of an earthly kingdom, just couldn't get their heads around the discreet ways in which Christ acted and the disarmingly simple words He spoke.

There is surely something very significant about the fact that the Sacred Scriptures don't describe what Jesus looked like. Can this not be understood by us as a legitimate sign that Jesus' appearance just wasn't considered worth describing? We can take it that Jesus must just have simply looked like everyone else around, hence, even after the resurrection, He was mistaken for a gardener, a cook, a traveller.

All this points to one thing: the fact that the Incarnate Word was a person like us; a person of flesh, like you and me. In the words of Fran Ferder: He was *a baby who gurgled and burped, a child who ran in the wind, a youth filled ideas and flooded with feelings, a blue collar worker with calloused hands, a neighbour who slept and ate, laughed and cried, fished and visited, a friend whose arms knew how to hug, whose genitals felt desire, whose heart craved for love, a person like us!*

What does that have to say to us? Where does it leave us?

I believe our recognition of the full humanity of Jesus should reconcile us with our own humanity; it should reconcile us with our *being* of flesh, our human *being* in all its dimensions... and yet how readily we shy away from and try to flee our human condition – sometimes wanting to deny it. Perhaps the greatest Christian heresy at work within our lives is the rejection of the implications of the incarnation of Jesus Christ for our own humanity.

I believe a strong invitation is addressed to us on this Christmas morning: it is a call to encounter Christ not only in the beauty of our solemn liturgy, or even in the sense of wonderment awakened by our extravagant feasting and celebrations elsewhere, but beyond that to recognise Christ to be present in the more mundane activities in which we engage ourselves each and every day.

We should seek to be attentive to all the ordinary people with whom we interact, recognising that God lives in them. For example, we should be able to recognise Christ to be as present in the person we meet over the counter in the newsagents as He is in the priest who stands at the Altar Table.

There was a time when bishops, abbots and certain clerics of rank were addressed with the title *Lord*. Let me dare to claim that this title could be given to every baptised person. We could and should think of every person we meet as our Lord – a sacrament of Christ. Each one of us is a sacrament of Christ. We must remember that. You and I are called to reflect Jesus to all around us by our whole way of being. I cannot emphasise this enough. Once we recognise it to be true, then everything changes for the better in our lives. Why? Well, knowing who we are is the foundation on which we build our lives. Everything else in life stems from this basis. Our foundational consciousness informs the way in which our lives are structured; it informs our whole way of being and of doing; it affects our overall approach to life and all our actions.

A fundamental question for us Christians is this: *How do we see ourselves?* Related to that question another arises: *How do we perceive others when we look at them?* Do we see ourselves as God sees us? If we are *in Christ* – to use one of Paul’s favourite expressions – then this is how we will see ourselves: *in Christ... and Christ in us!* Through our whole way of being we will manifest that we have become configured to Christ. Christ’s values will be ours and ours will be His.

While the Prologue of St John’s gospel might sound rather majestic to our ears with its beautiful poetic construct, in fact, its message could not be any simpler or any clearer. What John says to us in this famous text read every Christmas morning is that the Lord our God is to be found wherever we are in life. He is not only present in the spiritual high points of our lives, in the extraordinary mystical experiences we may be graced to savour, but in the simple reality of our everyday living. Our God is with us *in our rising and in in our going later to rest*, as the Psalmist reminds us. The Lord of all things is with us in our every action: He is with us in our eating, drinking, sleeping, walking, sitting down, working and recreating... All these human activities are already Christ’s actions. The challenge for us to allow them to become so all the more consciously by believing Christ to be in the most ordinary. The potential for true greatness is to be discerned in genuine humility; there it must be acknowledged and rejoiced in.

Instead of endlessly drifting through our days, thinking of them as fairly insignificant, somewhat superficial, even quite non-religious, the challenge is to make everything we experience in life as an occasion to be in union with Christ. We can do that by creative acts of the will.

Christ encountered in the Eucharistic bread we share around the altar in this Christmas liturgy can be discerned to be just as present to us in our gatherings later today at our family dining tables.

In the words of C S Lewis: *God can show Himself as He really is only to real men. And that means not simply to men who are individually good, but to men who are united together in a body, loving one another, helping one another, showing Him to one another.*

The Word became flesh and lived among us.

May we discern His presence everywhere we go today; in every situation of our lives as they are. May we give flesh to the Lord by the love we share with others.

May we be graced to see God in and show God to one another in our couples, families, communities of life... everywhere we are brought together with others.

Amen!