

Hark, The Herald Angels Sing

Favorite Christmas Carols

"Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; Hail the incarnate Deity! Pleased as man with man to dwell, Jesus, our Immanuel." What on earth does that mean?

I was once Pastor of a church that had a Presidential visit. Jimmy Carter, former United States President, chose to come and worship in our church. I wasn't here then, but people in the church still talk about that day. Arrangements had to be made way ahead. There were security guys all over the place. The bomb squad checked the place out with dogs. Police were everywhere. The congregation were all instructed about what to do and where to sit. It was a big deal. And that was just for a former President. When the incumbent President of the United States comes to visit a country, it's a huge operation. Setting up for scores of print and TV journalists. Catering for hundreds of support staff. Emergency medical backup in place. Security background checks on every person involved. Bomb squads. Sniffer dogs. Police snipers on the rooftops. Traffic logistics. Creating no fly zones for aircraft. It's a nightmare in logistics and planning. All that for the President of the most powerful nation on earth.

God's Visit

How would you like it if God gave you the job of designing a plan for his Son to visit earth? What if God said to you, "I have an idea. I'm going to make a 15 year old teenager pregnant. She's going to have to take a long ride on a donkey just before she gives birth. She has never had a baby before. There is this little town called Bethlehem. It's in a dirty little backwater country called Palestine. Bethlehem is going to be jam packed with visitors and so my Son will be born in a dirty cowshed out the back of a pub. He's coming as a vulnerable, helpless baby. Oh, and what's more, there will be this insanely jealous, bloodthirsty King called Herod who will be trying to kill him. What do you think of my plan?" Wouldn't you say "God, are you crazy?" I think God might reply "It's the only way he can come to earth without frightening the socks off people."

God in our clothing.

Long before the movie "Bruce Almighty" came out, the concept of a man playing God was explored in a movie called "O God!", starring George Burns and John Denver. The movie was theologically distorted and irreverent in parts. But there's one scene where George Burns plays God. He makes an appearance to the supermarket manager, dressed as an old man, wearing tennis shoes and a fishing hat. When asked why he looks the way he does, Burns answers, "I picked a look you could understand." That's a pretty good description of the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem. God picked a look we could understand by having His Son born as a human being.

This is how John describes the coming of Jesus to this earth. ***"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made....The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth". (John 1:1- 3 & 14 NIV)***

Christianity is Unique

The first part of verse 14 says that ***"The Word became flesh..."*** This is the single, most unique quality of Christianity that makes it different from any other religion: God became flesh. Every other religion in the world starts from a different point than Christianity. All the religions of the world tell us that through whatever means we can, we have to reach God. The heart of the Christmas story is that God did the unthinkable, and came to reach us, living on our earth as a man. Jesus is the visible word of God. Theologians call this truth the Incarnation. In simple terms that means that the Son of God, who created all things,

became a soft baby. That's a staggering thought. The Son did not cease to be God when He became a man. He added manhood but He did not subtract his Deity or Godliness. He was fully God and fully man. He was the God-man.

God Camped with Us

The Message paraphrase puts it this way. **"The word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood."** For 33 years God moved into our neighbourhood. The New International Version says that Jesus **"made his dwelling among us,"** which literally means, "to make one's tent." I love that, because I understand camping. How many of you would call yourselves "campers"? I'm not talking about woosy camping where you go to a hotel with hot showers, and flush toilets, or where you sleep in a cabin with a roof over your head. I'm talking about real camping, where you wake up in the morning with all the blood in your feet because you slept uphill, and where the tent leaked and your bedding is all wet, and where the sugar and jam are full of ants. Real camping is when the mosquitoes keep you awake half the night and the other half of the night you lie awake wondering if the tent is going to blow down. Real camping is pitching a tent in the dark, having stones under your mattress, and a toilet you dig yourself.

"And the word became flesh and pitched his tent among us." That's what it literally means. Jesus sets up camp with the people of earth, in spite of the fact that he's got a much better arrangement already available. When Jesus became a human being, God was setting up camp with humans. In the incarnation, God was pitching his tent among his people. He was setting up camp with us. Think for a moment about the significance of this image of God pitching a tent rather than say, inhabiting a building. Tents are temporary. They wear out. They only give partial shelter from the elements. The same things can be said about humanity. Human life is temporary. Human bodies wear out. The human condition gives only partial shelter from suffering. But Jesus came to be a real human being, experiencing mortality, pain, frailty, suffering, and humiliation.

Most summers during our marriage, Lyn and I have gone camping, usually at a beach. Sometimes when we are camping we get visitors who come for the day. They drive up in their comfortable cars. They might stay to lunch and have a swim with us, but they head off at the end of the day back to their comfortable houses, hot showers and sleep master beds. But Jesus didn't come to our earth as a day visitor. He came to live with us. He came to experience life as we know it. You see, when you are camping you get to know all the other campers around about you. It's difficult to be private when you're camping. Everyone can see what you're doing. Everyone can hear what you are saying. You know who snores at night and who yells at their kids. You get to be very familiar with people you camp with. That's why Jesus pitched his tent with us. He wants to be on familiar terms with us. He wants to be close. He wants a lot of interaction. The reason he wants to be close to us is because he loves us.

The Love-Sick King

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once told this story. "A certain king was very rich. His power was known throughout the world. But he was most unhappy, for he desired a wife. Without a queen, the vast palace was empty. One day, while riding through the streets of a small village, he saw a beautiful peasant girl. So lovely was she that the heart of the king was won. He wanted her more than anything he had ever desired. On succeeding days, he would ride by her house on the mere hope of seeing her for a moment in passing. He wondered how he might win her love. He thought, I will draw up a royal decree and require her to be brought before me to become the queen of my land. But, as he considered, he realized that she was a subject and would be forced to obey. He could never be certain that he had won her love.

Then, he said to himself, "I shall call on her in person. I will dress in my finest royal garb, wear my diamond rings, my silver sword, my shiny black boots, and my most colourful tunic. I will overwhelm her and sweep her off her feet to become my bride." But, as he pondered the idea, he knew that he would always wonder whether she had married him for the riches and power he could give her. Then, he decided to dress as a peasant, drive to the town, and have his carriage let him off. In disguise, he would approach her house. But,

somehow the duplicity of this plan did not appeal to him. At last, he knew what he must do. He would shed his royal robes. He would go to the village and become one of the peasants. He would work and suffer with them. He would actually become a peasant. And that's what he did. And he won her love by becoming like her.

What Does It Mean....?

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." What does that mean in reality? What did it mean for Jesus? It means that he gave up his honour and glory, he let go of his position, he relinquished all of the riches of heaven, in order to become one of us, in order to save us from our sins. He gave up that glory in order to become a human baby. Not even an adult. That would be humility enough, to give up the glory of heaven to become a man. But instead he became a helpless little infant.

But think of it: the baby Jesus, completely at the mercy of Mary and Joseph. Unable to feed himself, unable to move about, to communicate. Unable to do anything except eat and sleep and fill his pants. And here's the irony of it all. He is dependent upon the man and woman he made to now take care of him. If they had only known who he really was, Mary and Joseph would have bowed down and worshipped him, just like the shepherds and the wise men. But instead, Jesus had to rely on them. Those hands which had formed galaxies and set the stars in place, those hands that had spun the earth on its axis, now just waving around, ineffectually. The mouth that had spoken the universe into existence, now just babbling and cooing. The sovereign Lord of creation, had now become the very picture of weakness and powerlessness and inability – a little baby. Not even a royal baby, not the son of a king; not a wealthy baby, the son of money and privilege. But instead, a peasant child born to poverty, raised in very humble circumstances. Surrounded not by God's holy angels and the glory of heaven, but instead surrounded by sinful, fallen human beings and a stinking, dirty barn.

He took on our illness.

Have you ever known anyone who suffered from a serious illness? Perhaps a young person with a disease that is progressively debilitating, so that they know over time they're going to become less and less able to care for themselves. If you talk to those people, one of the things they fear most is losing control. The thought of becoming dependent on someone else, is the scary part. Perhaps at first needing someone to drive them places, and later to prepare meals for them, and then eventually having to rely on other people for the basic necessities of life – to dress them, and feed them, and bathe them. Then the finality of being completely dependant on others for absolutely everything. From being completely in charge, to completely powerless. That's what it was like for Jesus. From being the Creator of the universe, completely in charge, to being a helpless baby. Yet Jesus voluntarily took on this kind of complete helplessness, the kind that we fear so much.

Why?

All of this raises one simple question. Why? Why would he do that? The answer to the question is you. You are the reason he did it. He loved you so much that he was willing to give up all the glory of heaven, and come and live on this earth, die on a Cross for your sins, so that you could forever be in close relationship with the God who made you and loves you. As the Carol says, **"Born to raise the sons of Earth, Born to give them second birth."** The only thing for Jesus that makes his incarnation worthwhile, is when we respond to his love for us. If you would like to know how you can do that, there are people here who would love to talk about that with you. Find someone you trust, and ask someone how you can be in relationship with this Jesus who came to earth to be your Saviour.

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