

January 1: Solemnity of Mary Mother of God/

29th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST — Tone 4. Forefeast of the Theophany. Sunday Before the Theophany. THE CIRCUMCISION OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. St. Basil the Great, Archbishop of Cæsarea in Cappadocia (379). Martyr Basil of Ancyra (ca. 362).

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Today in both the Eastern and Western traditions, we are still celebrating Christmas—we are still within its octave, its eight-day period. We are also remembering the circumcision of the infant Jesus, in accordance with Jewish custom and Law (the Byzantine Gospel reading, in addition, commemorates the visit of the boy Jesus to the Temple when he was twelve years old). And we are focusing on Mary who, Luke tells us, “kept all of these things in her heart”. There are a lot of pieces to today’s celebration, but they all, in one way or another, are continuing the theme of what it looks like when God comes among us, when God comes into our midst— what we, in theological language, call the “incarnation”. I’ll get back to this in a minute

But I would like to begin somewhere else. I’d like to begin with a Christian version of a Buddhist koan. A koan is one of those almost incomprehensible sayings used by Buddhist masters in order to upset and to overturn the thinking of their disciples. Koans at first sight don’t seem to make much sense, but only because our minds have become heavy and brutalized and brittle. So their goal is to stretch the mind, to get us thinking in other categories, and to make us more flexible and supple in the

way we approach things.

So this is the Christmas koan that I want to be with: “You are the glory of God. You are the place and the space where God chooses to dwell in this world. Spiritual life- no, simply “life”- is nothing more or less than to allow that space to exist where God can dwell, to create the place where God’s glory can manifest itself.” Let me say it again, “You are the glory of God. You are the place and space where God chooses to dwell”.

That may not sound very much like the life we often live, but it’s what Christmas is all about. It’s what Mary is all about. Because at the heart of our world, at the heart of each one of us, God wills, desires, craves, hungers, and longs to dwell. God rejoices over this world with a joy which is unspeakable, a joy which liberates and sustains, a joy which cleanses and redeems the lost potential of each human heart and of all creation.

What we call the “incarnation”- God joining Himself to this world, interlocking His life with our life in the events of Bethlehem, in Galilee, in Jerusalem, is not an isolated wonder. It’s like a central focal point in a network of divine initiatives which spreads out into the whole of human history, into the entire universe. The story of Jesus is the story of the meeting of God and humanity, but it’s a story that is not yet finished. The Christian story is the story of a God who can reach outside Himself and dwell within His creation- Mary is the pre-eminent model and image of this- and it is a story

of human beings as creatures who can also reach out of ourselves and dwell in God. In fact, we only become ourselves by going beyond ourselves. We human creatures have an infinite and unbounded capacity for God. God can joy in us, and we can joy in God.

The once-for-all event of the coming of the Messiah and Word of God in Jesus was an event that opened the way towards a future, whose fullness we have only begun to glimpse. [**Roman:** St. Paul told the Christian community in Galatia that when the fullness of time came, God sent His Son born of a woman, born under the Torah, and then God sent His Spirit into our hearts so that we- all of us- might be able to call out to God “Abba, Father” and receive “adoption” and become “heirs” of God, no longer slaves, but “heirs” like the eldest son who stands to receive the inheritance.] [**Byzantine:** The writer of the letter to the Colossians reminded that community that in Jesus the fullness of the Godhead dwelt bodily and we then are “complete in him”.] What this means is what I began with: “You are the glory of God. You are the place and space where God chooses to dwell” in this world. This is the terrible and powerful implication of Christmas.

Our task and vocation as sons and daughters of God, rooted in the Christmas event, is to discover how “life” is nothing more or less than allowing that space to exist where God can dwell, creating the place where God’s glory can manifest itself.” This is an awesome task and an awesome responsibility. How is the joy of God, the delight of God in humanity and in creation to be made known right now in history, in

this world in our time and place?

We cannot hide from ourselves the fact that the forces which fight against this are frightening in their power. But our work as Christians is to awake to the historical moment in which we find ourselves, to speak God's Word into our context, and to create the space where the divine presence can be known. Keeping vigil and being watchful, as we await the coming of God's Kingdom, is not just about kneeling in cozy, warm, candle-lit churches. It's about being awake to what's happening around us and discerning the times.

To "live incarnationally"- which is the Christian task- means to act *as if God were right here in our midst now, at this very moment*- it is to act this way because *God is present!* To "live incarnationally" is what happens when very ordinary people like you and me take the tasks that lay to hand in our daily lives and treat them "sacramentally", that is, treat them as pointing to a greater reality which lay beyond them. To "live incarnationally" is to live with a sense of allowing the extraordinary to break in on the ordinary, regardless of what the ordinary is, whether its work or money or economics or politics or school or whatever. This is an approach to life which we are in danger of losing, because for lots of Christians God has been reduced to a few little areas of life that we label as "religious" or "moral" and the rest of life is then left to other forces and influences.

But what would this "enfleshed God" of Christmas present in our midst say, for

example, about the 46 million people who live in poverty in one of the wealthiest countries in the world? What would this enfleshed God say about Colorado having the fastest-growing child-poverty rate in the nation; it's climbed 72% since 2000? What would this enfleshed God say to the practical materialism which governs our society through an ideology that makes considerations of financial profit and loss determinative at every level of society and that has little regard for things which are not subject to profit and loss forms of measurement. And what would this enfleshed God say about the way we treat the poor, the old, the weak, the wounded, those who are different or other or on the margins? For some people, for some Christians, God has nothing to do with these things; God has other concerns. And yet Jesus' very strong words in the parable of the Last Judgment about whatever we do or don't do to the sick, the hungry, the poor, the imprisoned are done not just to them, but to Him. That's a pretty "incarnational" or "sacramental" way of approaching life and the problems of life.

When we look around ourselves, and maybe when we look *inside* ourselves, what we often see is a frightening contempt for what is human. And underneath that, what we are really looking at is a frightening contempt for God. One cannot truly believe in the God of Christmas without a deep and real concern for the creation and the human family. A god who is isolated and disconnected from this world might have little concern about these things, but not so the God of Bethlehem, the God of Mary, the God born in an animal stall to poor parents sheltering in a barn on a cold night.

Only as we rediscover in our own hearts and in our own lives the Christmas mystery of God and humanity indwelling one another, making their home in one another, will we begin to understand how everything is connected, how that things like mysticism and politics can no more be separated from one another than can the Eucharistic Table and the Sandwich Line. We may want to separate them, but the God of Christmas, the God of Mary, will not allow that.

“You are the glory of God. You are the place and the space where God chooses to dwell in this world. Spiritual life- no, simply “life”- is nothing more or less than to allow that space to exist where God can dwell, to create the place where God’s glory can manifest itself.” If there is anything that Christmas and Mary can teach us, it is certainly that.

Merry Christmas!/ Christ is Born!

Sources

A.M. Allchin, *Participation in God* (1988)

Nora Gallagher, *Things Seen and Unseen. A Year Lived in Faith* (1998)