

## The Mystery of Christmas

Saint Athanasius of Alexandria wrote in the fourth century concerning the mystery of the Incarnation that "God became human in order that humanity might become divine." As we approach the celebration of yet another Christmas we are again reminded of one of the central mysteries of the Christian Faith, the mystery of God's appearance in human flesh for indeed that is the literal meaning of the Latin expression, "incarnation" or, rather, the "en-fleshment" of God.

In the person of Jesus of Nazareth God becomes for us a human being. As it is written by the first century writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, "He was made like us in all things save sin." This early Christian belief is not something that was made up by later generations of Christians or an idea that gradually evolved over the passing decades following the first century, but was something at the very heart of the Christian witness from the very beginning. "Beloved, I am not writing you an innovative instruction but the same instruction that you have had from the very beginning (I John 3:7 translation mine).

In the earliest written material of the New Testament documents, material written less than twenty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, we encounter this startling belief. Startling because it was a belief embraced by Jews whose transcendent monotheism would have made it very improbable for them to be inclined to invent such a notion as God becoming a living and breathing human being just like one of us. Yet this is precisely what we find coming from the testimony proclaimed (kerygma) by the friends and eyewitnesses of Jesus.

And just what exactly were they saying? Paul, a learned rabbi, quoting a very early hymn from the Christian liturgy, wrote that Jesus the Messiah "is the image (Greek: εἰκὼν, icon) of the invisible God; that in Jesus "all the divine fullness was pleased to dwell" (Colossians 1: 15, 19). And in another hymn that Paul quotes, "though Jesus was in the very form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, coming in human likeness, and found in human appearance" (Philippians 2). Likewise, the writer to the Hebrews asserts that Jesus is "the radiance of God's glory, the very imprint of God's being" in human flesh. But it is in the Gospel of John that we find the classic expression that the eternal Word, who is God, "became flesh and dwelt among us. We beheld his glory, the splendor of the unique one of God."

This, then, is what we are celebrating and bearing witness to at Christmas. But this is only a part of the mystery that we celebrate. Remember what Saint Athanasius said at the beginning of this reflection? "God became human in order that humanity might become divine." Herein is the meaning of the divine action of God in the incarnation. It is nothing less than the full identification of human life with that of the divine life.

This is the whole point. This is the Divine purpose behind this incredible mystery of incarnation. In the person of Jesus God partook of our humanity with all our frailty and limitations, even the dreaded limitation of mortality. In the person of Jesus humanity becomes a partaker of the divine nature with all its endless wonder and unlimited potentiality, even the potentiality of endless life.

What we are presently, are earthen vessels holding a hidden treasure of divine life ready to be given birth. As the Apostle wrote, "what we shall be has not yet been revealed. But we do know that when Christ appears we shall be like Him, and we shall see Him just as He is." And as Paul says, "At present we see dimly as through a clouded glass, but then we shall see face to face. At present we know only partially; then we shall know fully, even as we are fully known." This, my brothers and sisters, is the mystery that we are about to celebrate this Christmas.

This is the essence of the mystery of Holy Christmas: In the birth of Jesus divinity becomes human and in our new birth in Christ we, in our common humanity, become Divine! This is not only the mystery we celebrate in the Feast of Christmas; it is the mystery that we live out each day of our lives. May the Life of Christ be manifest in you this Christmas and always!

+Peter