

Incarnate Christianity

*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory,
the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.
(John 1:14. NRSV)*

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
6. who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be
exploited, 7. but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form, 8. he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of
death-- even death on a cross. 9. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the
name that is above every name, 10. so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in
heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11. and every tongue should confess that Jesus
Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
(Philippians 2:5-11. NRSV)*

Giving Up To Get Down

January 3rd 2010

John 1:1-14

Philippians 2:5-11

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Introduction:

I want to get right into the Word this morning, does that sound ok? Open your Bibles to
John 1:14.

14. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's
only son, full of grace and truth. (NRSV)

John skips the manger scene and the shepherds and the journey to Bethlehem and he gets
right down to business. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. God incarnates
himself in Jewish flesh to reveal his nature, his plan and his purpose for the redemption
of humankind. Wow! The incarnation is the most significant point of theology for the
church after the cross and the resurrection. So after the death and resurrection of Jesus,
the fact of the incarnation should have more influence on how we do faith and how we do
church than any other fact or theology. But does it? Do we even know what it means?
Have we lost the incarnation somehow in the weird, busy, commercial way that we do

Christmas? How do we get it back? Turn in your Bibles to Philippians 2:5-11. Biblical scholars tell us that this passage is actually the oldest known Christian hymn. This song represents early Christian belief and it centres on the meaning of the incarnation and it holds up the incarnation as a model for how we should do church. Listen:

5. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
6. who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
7. but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8. he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death--
even death on a cross.
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10. so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11. and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (NRSV)

Paul says: 'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus'. 'Learn to think like he thought', 'Do church in the way of incarnation'. So what is the incarnation way of doing Christianity? What might an incarnate church look like? I'm going to pull out a few rapid fire points which I won't have time to develop this morning. I'll be preaching a longer version of this sermon at OLC today and if you want to hear more you can either come at 1:00 p.m. or you can download it off the internet. Because of the time we've devoted to the baptisms and to communion, I'm just going to show you these points and then we'll spend the bulk of our time on the application side.

Downward Mobility

First of all I think that if we really understood the meaning of the incarnation and were truly guided by it we would certainly find ourselves practicing downward mobility. He was in the form of God yet he did not consider that as something to be grasped or held on

to but rather he gave that up and he came down. This has to be at the heart of Christianity, it has to be at the heart of how we practice faith and do church. But so often in North America it is not.

One of the great heresies of our day is the prosperity Gospel. The prosperity Gospel says that Christianity is about moving up. It is about accessing the power of heaven so that you can live *your best life now*. Teachers like Joel Osteen and others tell us that God wants us to be rich, he wants us to be blessed and he wants us to have it all now. The kingdom of God is here, you've just got to reach out and grab it. But the problem is that doesn't sound anything like Jesus who said:

24. "But woe to you who are rich, For you have received your consolation. 25. Woe to you who are full, For you shall hunger. Woe to you who laugh now, For you shall mourn and weep. (Luke 6:24-25. NKJV)

Woe means 'how awful for you' and 'how much you are to be pitied'. Those who are rich now are much to be pitied. Worldly wealth is like bread before the buffet table. It fills the soul with meaningless things and takes up the space necessary for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. That's why he said time and again:

"Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. (Luke 6:20. NKJV)

How fortunate you are to have space in your heart for the kingdom of God! The poor are perfectly situated to embrace the Lord. They have nothing else to depend on so they are ready to trust in God.

If the same mind that was in Christ Jesus is to be in us than we need to be committed to walking the path of downward mobility. Look at this little phrase from this hymn:

(he) emptied himself... (v.7)

Though he was rich for our sakes he became poor. To be an incarnate church we need to be able to say the same. We need to be able to say: 'Though we were rich, for the sake of the city of Orillia we became poor!' 'We gave up our place way up high on the hill and

we entered in. We gave up our vacations, our RRSPs, our savings accounts and our recreational properties so that we could reach and bless the lost. For a camel to go through the eye of the needle he needs to unpack and let some stuff go. We need to do some of that as a church; we need to empty ourselves of some of these blessings and some of these riches as proof that we believe in the kingdom of heaven. We need to do it because we are drowning under the heavy burden of our many things. We need to do it because he did it and he told us to follow him.

Humble Service

The second thing I think we'd see a lot more of in the church if we had the mind of Christ and walked the path of incarnation is humble service. Philippians 2 says he:

emptied himself, taking the form of a slave (v.7. NRSV)

We need a return of the towel in the church amen? Over the Christmas break I got reading an interesting book. Its called '**The Rise of Christianity**' by Rodney Stark. Now Rodney Stark does not love Jesus and is not a Christian author, he is a sociologist. He wrote this book not to promote Christian virtue but rather to answer a question that has puzzled historians for 1700 years. How did a small Jewish sect numbering no more than 3000 people by the year A.D. 60 become the majority religion in the Roman Empire by the year 300? Think about that for a moment. In the time of the Apostle Paul there were just over 3000 Christians, the historians estimate. None of the churches he wrote to had more than 100 people in them, except perhaps the church in Rome. 250 years later there are at least 30 million Christians. How did that happen? Even scholars who don't love Jesus wrestle with this as one of the most amazing miracles in history. Do you know what the near consensus answer is? The reason for this growth according to historians is the ethic of humble service within the early Christian community.

Christians were famous for providing basic nursing to their own sick and elderly, something pagans did not do. The pagans had no concept of life after death and so they

rarely would have contact with sick people, fearing to catch whatever they had. They left their old and infirm to die in isolation. The Christians not only cared for their own poor but would also go into the homes of the sick and dying pagans and would nurse them. There were two great plagues in the Roman Empire that decimated the population. The first was during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, made famous to modern people through the movie Gladiator. During that plague 30% of the pagan population died. The Christian death rate was less than 10%. Why? Well you and I might talk about the Holy Spirit and we might quote Psalm 91 but the historians will tell you it was because basic nursing cuts down mortality rates by 2/3. There was another plague 50 years after that and again 30% of the pagan population perished and again good Christian men and women, with no thought of their own lives changed the sheets, emptied the chamber pots and spooned broth to their sick pagan neighbours and yet still their mortality rate was less than 10%. This became pretty convincing evidence of the superiority of our God and of our faith and it resulted in a massive conversion of pagans to Christianity. Pagans wanted to be part of a society where the rich cared for the poor and where the healthy nursed the sick. They wanted to worship a God who had power over disease and whose servants acted like they believed it.

A church that lived out the incarnation of Jesus Christ would enter into the hurting places in this world and would serve sacrificially, even at the cost of their lives.

Intimate Association

There is far more we could say about this but at least one more deserves some attention.

Philippians 2:6-7 says:

though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
7. but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness. (Philippians 2:6-7. NRSV)

When God wanted to share the message of the Gospel, when God wanted to disclose the mystery of his purpose and the fullness of his nature he didn't send a text message or start a blog, he incarnated the message. He took on flesh and dwelt among us. There is no such thing as 'distance proclamation' in the kingdom of God. All evangelism must be incarnate, it must be fleshy and it must be intimate.

As Christians in North America we have really struggled with this. A few years ago I led a mission trip of high school students into downtown Toronto. We were going to work with an organisation called Urban Promise that was started by Tony Campolo. We did our training and orientation in a big cavernous downtown church called: 'The Church of The Crusaders'. That may be the worst name ever for a church but that's where we were. The church could easily have sat 500-600, and as I looked at the black and white pictures of the congregation in the lobby it was clear that it once had. Packed out pews full of well dressed white people holding hymn books in their Sunday best. I asked the pastor how many attended now, he told me between 25-30 people, mostly old ladies who drive in or take the subway in from the suburbs. He told me that all the people had moved away when they made some money and when the city started getting black and multi-ethnic. Good Christian white folk didn't want to live beside Koreans and blacks and immigrants. So they moved to Mississauga and Ajax and Milton and they started churches there where the poor folks couldn't find them. Now the church was in ruins and the building next door was a strip joint. The old ladies had to walk under a neon sign featuring a rather amplified dancer on their way to church. That's an interesting commentary on what happens to Christianity and what happens to our cities when we ignore the incarnation.

Having the mind of Christ means ever moving in the direction of the poor, the sick and the lost. It means refusing to use our abundance to purchase isolation from the lost – rather it means using our abundance to buy souls and to lift up the lame and to light up the darkness.

Transition:

We could probably pull a few more things out of that beautiful hymn but we don't have time and I want to personalise this just a little bit. I think God has been moving us inch by inch onto this path over the last two years but there are a few stubborn strongholds that we need to break for us to make the move complete. I want to use what little time we have left this morning to talk specifically about three things I think we need to let go of, three things we need to give up in order to get all the way down into the path of incarnate church.

Giving Up To Get Down:

The first thing we need to let go of is:

1. The high ground

I mean this in two ways, first of all I mean this literally. We need to stop thinking that everything God wants us to do is going to happen in our church, in our beautiful building high on the hill. We have a great location and a great building and I am thankful for that but God did not give us this building as a cage he gave it to us as a tool. We are going to use this building as a resource centre for our ministry and for the ministry of other churches but we are not going to turn it into a holding tank for more and more beautiful people to hide in until the Lord comes back. This is not a hiding place it is a resource centre. We will meet here to encourage one another and then we will leave here to minister to this city where this city lives. We will split, cluster and disperse so that we can bring the Gospel to where the people are.

I also mean this figuratively. We must give up the high ground in terms of control and condescension. Too often we North Americans fall into the trap of thinking that we must be right because we're rich, far too often Christians think and act the same. We think: 'We're the church with the money therefore we must be right'. But the Bible says the opposite is likely to be true:

24. "But woe to you who are rich... Woe to you who are full... (Luke 6:24-25. NKJV)

Jesus says that it is something of a handicap to have money, it makes it harder to hear from the Spirit and harder to be filled with all the fullness of God. We have already had to repent as a church for the damage done by our arrogant certainty. 3 churches in this city were abnormally born because of our arrogance. 3 churches born unnaturally and outside of the Lord's blessing because it rarely occurs to us that we may be wrong. We understand now that rich isn't always right. We've missed a lot of things. God has been kind and he has been gracious and he has given us mercy. We need to go forward in the posture of the humble servant. It is our privilege to serve and to partner and TO LEARN from other believers. We invited pastor Mike onto our staff because we believe that we can learn from him and from his people. We have surrendered the high ground and we stand prepared to be blessed.

2. Our grip on heritage and history

Let me explain what I mean here. I am not saying that history doesn't matter or that heritage is insignificant, but I am saying that we cannot hold it so tightly if we wish to move into incarnate ministry. Jesus did not consider equality with God as something to be grasped, but that doesn't mean that his pre-existent unity with the Father was a bad thing – it was a good thing he had to give up to incarnate himself in the human story. So it is with our history and heritage. They are good things it is time to let go of.

Heritage is rather like your season ticket at a baseball game. It is the viewpoint from which you have grown used to seeing the play. Several years ago my brother had seasons' tickets to the Blue Jays and he was kind enough to give me tickets from time to time. They were right behind home plate, about 15 rows up. That's a unique place to watch a game from. You can see the pitches coming in and it is amazing how fast they are and how much movement there can be on the off speed pitches. You get to call balls and strikes along with the umpire and everyone groans or boos if he misses a call. Sitting behind the home plate makes baseball a game about pitcher and hitter. But I've also sat

in many other places in the stadium and I know that each seat makes the game different. When I take my kids to the game I like to get seats on the first or third base lines so that they can try and catch foul balls. When you are sitting on the base lines baseball is all about keeping your eyes open so that you do not get knocked unconscious and having your mitt on so that you can grab a free souvenir for your kid. I've also sat in the corporate boxes. My father's company shared a box for the 1992 world series and I got to sit in it twice. That was an entirely different experience. Baseball from a luxury box is all about free hot dogs and nachos. The main point of the game appears to be maximising consumption of free items and you only watch the game when the roar of the crowd alerts you to an important event. Every seat changes the game. But its the same game. So it is with Christianity. Our church was born in the Baptist box. Christianity for us was born as a reaction to dead, formalised European Protestantism. Our Anglican fathers had abandoned the principals of reformation and so we were born as self described radicals, having a deep desire to stay true to the Biblical ideals of faith. We held our Scriptures close as a guard against liberalism and formalism. We invented congregational polity – which means voting on EVERYTHING because we remembered how the bishop would bully us and make us do things against conscience. That was our seat and that seat made the game seem a certain way but we need to understand now that there is more to the stadium than this seat. We need to move around a little because God needs us to have a bigger view and a more mature understanding of his will and his purpose.

Today we begin our partnership with OLC – we are joining them in their seat and in their aisle. We're about to learn the game from their perspective. Why do they worship so loudly? Why do they emphasise prophesy so confidently and fearlessly? We worry that it will usurp Scripture. Do they worry about that? Why do they value speaking in tongues so highly? Does it cause disruption in their services? We value it too, we just like it more in the closet than in the service. We're curious to see how it works there. Why aren't they afraid of leadership? We sure are. Aren't they worried that their pastor will start acting like a bishop and will bully them into working against conscience? These are some of the questions we will have as we get used to their seat. When we've

exhausted them with our questions we'll have them back to our section and explain our vantage point to them. Together we will gain a much broader appreciation of the game.

3. Our possessions

There is one more thing we will likely have to give up to get all the way down into the path of incarnation: our possessions. There is a story in the Bible that seems to make this clear, the story of the rich young ruler. He asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus spoke to him about obedience and holiness and then he said this:

"There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." 23. But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. 24. Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! (Luke 18:22-24. NRSV)

We all know that this story is not teaching that you can buy your way into heaven. Jesus didn't say that. The Bible is uniform in declaring that salvation is by grace through faith. But the Bible also says that faith has to be proved through works. Put your money where your mouth is. You say you believe, prove it. Show me your faith by your works. Jesus says the rich have to prove their faith by using their money to bless the poor. Wow. That's hard. It sounds like anything we hold onto through this life can and will be used against us in a court of law. We understand that we have to give an account before the Lord for the quality of our faith do we not? We also understand that many people who consider themselves Christians will have their faith declared inadequate. The Bible says that in Matthew 7:

22. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?" 23. Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers." (NRSV)

I have a dreadful suspicion that many Christians will have their surplus possessions plunked down onto a table that stands before the judgement seat of Christ only to have the accuser read from Scripture:

17. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? (1 John 3:17. NRSV)

Or maybe he'll read from James 2:

If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 16. and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? 17. So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2:15-17. NRSV)

And the Lord will have no option but to honour his Word and declare that person's faith invalid and dead. Brothers and sisters I plan to leave nothing on that table for the strengthening of the enemy's case. I want to shut his mouth with charity and generosity. I want the accounting of my life to reveal that I denied myself, that I lost it all in pursuit of the Gospel, that I took up my cross, forsaking its poverty and shame and I followed my master. And I want to take as many of you with me as I can, by God's grace. A church that takes the incarnation seriously holds its possessions very loosely.

Conclusion:

The path of the incarnation feels to me like a road we've yet to travel. I don't know where it will take us but I feel in my Spirit like we begin today. I know that God has called us into partnership with the Orillia Life Centre to give and to receive. And I can tell you that we are going there not just to help but also to be healed. This is where it begins. Where it ends, God only knows. Let me pray with you.