The Incarnation

CHRISTMAS SERVICE BY CANON H. P. LIDDON D D.

"And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us"—John 1: 14

Christmas Day, we are all agreed, is the greatest birthday in the year. It is the birthday of the greatest Man, of the greatest Teacher of Men, of the greatest Benefactor of the human race that ever lived. It is this, but it is also much more. For on his day was born one who whilst he is truly Man is also, say, immeasurably, more than man, he who was born on this day did not begin to be when he was conceived by his human mother, since he had already existed from before all worlds, from eternity. His human nature, his human body, and his human soul were not, as is the case with us, the whole outfit of his being; they were, in truth, the least important part of it. He had, I repeat it, already lived for an eternity when he condescended to make a human body and a human soul in an entirely new sense his own by uniting them to his divine and eternal person. And then he wore them as a garment during his life on earth, as he does now in the courts of heaven. And then the apostle says that "he took upon him the form of a servant," and that "he took not on him the nature of angels, and took on him the seed of Abraham." And so in the collect for to-day we plead that he took our nature upon him, and was at this time born of a pure virgin. And it was in this sense that he became or was made flesh. After existing from eternity, he united to himself for evermore a perfect and representative sample of the bodily and immaterial nature of man.

"The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." It is, perhaps, not surprising that from the early days of Christianity men have misconceived or misstated what was meant by this central and mysterious truth of the Christian creed—the Incarnation of the Eternal Son. In truth, the misconceptions have been, and are, many and great. Some more Christians have been announced to hold that two persons were united in Christ, instead of two natures in his single person; sometimes that the human being was confused within the finite as are when he assumed; sometimes that God ceased to be really himself when he took to him man's nature; sometimes that the human nature which he took was absorbed into and annihilated by an on with the deity. All of these misconceptions of the true sense of the apostle's words have been considered and rejected by the Christian church. And "The right faith is, that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man. God of the Substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds, and Man of the Substance of his mother, born in the world; perfect God and perfect Man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting; equal to the Father as touching his Godhead, and inferior to the Father as touching his Manhood. Who, although he be God and Man, yet is not two, but one Christ." Such real was, and is, this union that all the acts, words, and sufferings of his human body, all the thoughts, reasonings, resolves and emotions of his human soul, whilst being properly human, are yet also the acts, words, sufferings, the thoughts, reasonings, resolves, and emotions of the Eternal Son who controls all, who imparts all the value and the elevation which belong to the Infinite and the Supreme. Thus, although Christ suffered in his human soul in the garden and in his human body on the cross, his sufferings acquired an entirely superhuman meaning from the person of the eternal world to which his manhood was joined. And so St. Paul goes so far as to say that "God purchased the church with his own blood," meaning that the blood which was shed by the crucified was that of a human body, personally and forever united to God the Son. It was, perhaps, inevitable that the question should be asked how such a union of two natures—natures which differ as the creator differs from the creature, as the infinite differs from the finite—was possible. It might, perhaps, be enough to reply that with God all things are possible—all things, at least, which do not contradict his moral perfections—that is to say, his essential nature; and most assuredly no such contradiction can be detected in the Divine Incarnation. But, in truth, it ought not to be difficult for a being possessed of such a composite nature as is man to answer this question; perhaps such a being as man might have been reasonably expected never to have asked it. For what is the Incarnation but the union of two natures—the divine and the human—in a single person, who governs both? and what is man, what are you and I, but samples, at an immeasurably low level, of a union of two totally different substances—one material, the other immaterial—under the control of a single human personality?

What can be more remote from each other in their properties than are matter and spirit? What would seem more incredible to human experience than the union of such substances as are matter and spirit, the union of a human body and a human soul in a single personality? And yet that they are so united is a matter of experience to every one of us. We only do not marvel at it because we are so intimately familiar with it. Day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute we observe each within himself a central authority directing and controlling on the one hand the movements and operations of an animal frame, and on the other the faculties and the efforts of an intelligent spirit, both of which find in this central authority, which we call a person, their point of unity. How this can be we know not; we know not how an immaterial essence can dictate its movements to a material arm or leg, but we see that, as a matter of fact, it does this, and we can only escape from getting into difficulties far greater than any that we leave behind by frankly avowing ourselves materialists, and denying that man has anything that can properly be called a soul; that he is anything more than an oddly agitated mass of bones and muscles. If we shrink from this we must recognize in the composite structure of our own mysterious being the means of answering the question about the possibility of the Divine Incarnation. As the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and Man is one Christ. He who could thus bring together matter and spirit, notwithstanding their utter contrariety of nature, and could constitute out of them a single human personality or being, he might surely, if it pleased him, raise both matter and spirit—raise a human body and a human soul to union with his own divinity under the control of his eternal person. Those who have taken every superficially the measure of the human nature of man ought not to find it hard to understand that for sufficient reasons God and man might be united in a single person, or, as St. John puts it, that "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." But what, it may be asked, can be asked, can be conceived of as moving God thus to unite him with a created form? Is not such an innovation of the associations, if not the conditions of his eternal being too great to be accounted for by any cause or motive that we can possibly assign for it? Now, here we are in a region in which, it need hardly be said, we dare not indulge our own conjectures as to the fitness of things; we do not know enough of the eternal mind to presume to account for its resolves by any suppositions of human origin. If we are to take a single step forward it must be under the guidance of revelation; but when men speak of the incarnation as an innovation on the eternal life of God so great as to be beyond accounting for or even speaking of, they forget a still older innovation, if the word may be permitted, about which there is no room whatever for doubt—they forget that after existing for an eternity in solitary blessedness, contemplating himself and rejoicing in the contemplation, God willed to surround himself with creatures who should derive their life from him, should be sustained in it by him, should subsist within his all-encompassing presence, and yet be utterly distinct from him. Creation surely was an astonishing innovation on the life of God, and creation involved possibilities which led to much else beyond. If God was to be served by moral creatures, endowed with reflective reason, with conscience, with free will that they might offer him the noblest, because a perfectly voluntary, service, this prerogative dignity necessarily carried with it the possibility of failure, and man, in fact, even in the very beginning of his history, did fail. That God should have created at all is, indeed, a mystery; that he should have created a moral world of which he must have foreseen the history is a still greater mystery; but that, having done this, he, the eternal justice, he, the eternal charity, should have left the handiwork to itself, would have been, had it been true, and it been possible, a much greater and, I will add, a much darker mystery. As God must have created out of love, so out of love must he bring a remedy to the ruined creature of his hands, though the form of the remedy he alone could prescribe. We do not know whether there were other ways of restoring the fallen race; probably there were, since God is infinite in his resources; but we may be sure of this, that the way adopted was the best. Of other remedies nothing has been told us; what we do know is the truth of that saying that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; what we do confess before God and man is that "Being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made, who for us men, and our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man."

Now, perhaps, some one is thinking to himself: "What is the exact appropriateness of much that has been said to the afternoon of such a day as Christmas Day?" Let us consider. In the course of his history man has by turns depreciated and exaggerated his true importance among the creatures of God. Sometimes he has made himself the measure of all things, as though his was the sovereign mind and the Creator, a being whose proceedings could be easily understood by him. Sometimes he has appeared to revel in self depreciation, placing himself side by side with or below the beasts that perish, insisting on his animal kinship with them, and anxiously endeavoring to ignore or to deny all that points to a higher element in his being. Sometimes, in a strange spirit of paradox, he has combined theories which ascribe to himself an origin and a nature as degraded as well can be, with assertions of his undoubted capacity to judge all things in earth and heaven. Just now the depreciatory account of man is the popular one, and we hear around us echoes of the language which was used on this subject by the early assailants of Christianity. Celsus, the Eclectic philosopher, who compiled his assortment of objections to the Christian creed about A. D. 170, insisted again and again that man is not really superior even to the more intelligent insects, since bees and ants organize themselves into states and cities, they organize rulers, they make war upon and peace with each other, it may be experience the same vicissitudes of fortune if they do not feel the same ambitions as human beings. Christianity, according to Celsus, has made man think too much of his own importance in nature. And some modern successors of Celsus go on to call attention to the insignificance of man's dwelling place. We are reminded that it is no longer possible to think of this earth as the centre of the universe for whose benefit all else exists, a palace around which a fair domain is laid out with a view to its beauty and usefulness, a comfortable home for the most favored of God's creatures, to light which the sun rises brightly every morning and the stars shine brightly every night. Man, we are told, can no longer look to the heavens above his head as the roof of the tent in which he dwells, nor can he confidently assume that an eclipse or a conjunction of planets has no other object than to assure him of some secret in his petty destiny. We now know that the planet on which we live is only one of the smaller satellites of our sun, while this sun itself is but one of thousands of the stars which are moving in an orbit, which it takes vast ages to complete, round some still undiscovered centre. As we gaze into the boundless spaces which astronomy thus opens on us, the insignificance of man's dwelling place becomes increasingly evident to us, and as we reflect upon it, it seems to involve and to make more and more evident the corresponding insignificance of man. And this impression about the small worth of human life is deepened by what may be observed of the vicissitudes to which men are exposed, not as individuals, but in masses. It is a commonplace that life comes to be held very cheap during the ravages of an epidemic such as was the plague; the imagination finds it hard to think that much real value can attach to the existences which to all appearance are so easily destroyed, and in such numbers. So again, the survey of the thousands of the dead and dying after a great battle like Solferino has for the time being filled the spectator with an overpowering sense that a man is too worthless a being to be cared for, that his luck is controlled by pitiless and mechanical fate. Every ocean steamship that sinks beneath the waves of the Atlantic; every coal mine that is the scene of an explosion, whereby scores of females round the pit's mouth are left without their breadwinner; nay, every vast collection of men such as you may see every day in the streets of London, each one of whom is solitary, unknown, perhaps unsympathized with in the great crowd around him—all these scenes help to deepen the sense of man's pettiness and to lead a large number of human beings to think of themselves and of others as leaves blown by the wind of destiny whither or why who can say. Of course, apart from the Christian faith, there is another side to the matter which nature suggests to us. When we look steadily at any one man, the feeblest, the most worthless as we may think, we become conscious of his having some titles even to a profound and anxious interest; his reason, his conscience, his character cannot be attentively examined, whatever be his history without revealing these titles. Whatever men may say in their more sombre moods, they do not really believe in all that some philosophers would tell them about the insignificance of man. Just consider the diligence with which a trial for murder is followed by thousands of readers of the papers. Here is a man who, before he became a criminal, threaded his way unnoticed through the crowd—one of the leaves, as we are told, which blow any whither before the winds of destiny. But this man is put on trial for his life and he immediately becomes an object of profound interest. Why, if he is really only an animal, whose deeds and whose death are alike prescribed by fate, an animal with no immortal part in him, with no endless destiny before him, why, if this is the case, should the question of life and death be followed more anxiously in his case than in that of an ox or a sheep? Why should the court in which his case is heard be crowded with listeners, the cross examination of the witnesses scanned with such jealous severity, the words that fall from the presiding judge scrutinized with such anxious attention, the reply of the counsel for the prisoner, the summing-up, the verdict of the jury—all waited for with such hushed yet irrepressible eagerness, the report of the trial read by thousands outside the court who have no personal knowledge whatever either of the victim or of the accused, no personal stake, however remote, in the trial? Do you say that this is to be explained by the widely-diffused appetite for all that touches on the confines of the horrible, that a sensation relieves the monotony of thousands of lives, and that those who do not need this relief still are not superior to the instincts of a vulgar curiosity? You cannot have attentively considered the seriousness—I had almost said the passion—with which a trial for murder is followed by persons who would not on any account give time and attention to cases of another kind if you say this. No, men are thus deeply moved when a human life is at stake because the future of a man's destiny is being weighed in the balance, because it is instinctively felt that much more is in question than the fatalism or materialism of some of our modern teachers would at all allow. At those solemn moments the depreciatory theory of man's nature and origin are forgotten; they give way to a higher and more adequate sense of his real place in the universe. Even the poor prisoner in the dock, who may, for all I know, be guilty of the crime laid to his charge, on whose countenance, it may be, vice has traced a history of a long and degraded ascendancy—even he, for the moment, represents the ineffaceable, indestructible greatness of man; he cannot be sentenced to die without stirring in us all that sense of our place as immortal beings among the creatures of God, now that he is hidden put it to the solemn proof by being pushed, forced violently across the line that divides the living from those whom we name the dead.

There are, of course, many other ways in which men show that they recognize the true dignity of their nature amid all its feebleness and degradation; but it must be owned that man's judgment about himself rises and sinks with the varying circumstances of his life, the varying moods of his mind. Left to himself, man has no very solid ground of confidence in any estimate that he may form; he oscillates with timid indecision between grotesque exaggerations and unworthy denials of his real place among the creatures of God. If he was to discover at once the greatness of his need and the greatness of his capacities, it must be by some standard utterly independent of himself; it must be by some event breaking in upon and elevating his collective life. As the divine incarnation united man's nature forever to that of the being who made him, so it restored to man his self-respect, while it also made him feel his moral poverty without God and the utter dependence upon God. But that human nature in which the eternal Word condescended and condescends to dwell can never be treated by a Christian believer as other than capable of the highest destinies.

Let us think, for a moment, of the life of our Lord upon earth as seen from this point of view, as putting such high, such exceptional honor upon human nature. The moral beauty of which mankind is capable appeared in the earthly life of Jesus as it never appeared before or since. Had man invented such a moral portrait, the invention would have been scarcely less a matter of wonder than the reality, but no literary creation could have made so deep and enduring a mark on generations of human beings as has been made by the life of Jesus; yet we can only surrender ourselves to its power on one condition—that we must frankly admit that it is the life of the Word made flesh no less truly than the life of the Son of Mary. A mere man might have been inspired to say: "Blessed are the poor in spirit," "Blessed are they that mourn," "Blessed are the meek," "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness," "Blessed are the merciful," "Blessed are the pure in heart," "Blessed are the peacemakers," "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake," but no mere man being humble and veracious, could have said of himself, "I am the life," "I am the light of the world," "He that hath seen me, hath seen the Father." Jesus says too much about himself if he is to be measured by a standard of merely human excellence; if he is only man we cannot say that all his language is either modest or truthful. All, indeed, falls into place if he is also the eternal Son of God, and in embracing this central this vital truth we recognize the supreme significance of his life as that of God manifest in the flesh. Embrace this truth, and it is not hard to understand how his death on Calvary might avail even for much more than the world's redemption, and how at his word weak and poor elements of water and bread and wine might become channels of spiritual blessings, contact with which would mean new power and life for the souls and bodies of men. Nor does it matter whether such a life as that of Jesus, radiant with the beauty, charged with the force of God, was lived on a large sun or on a small planet. The moral world has, after all, no relation to the material; the perfect moral being is not impressed as some of our physicists would seem to be by mere material bulk. If it is true of God that "He hath no pleasure in the strength of an horse, neither delighteth he in any man's legs," so it is true that since the heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain him, the vastest stars and suns have no more claim, on account of their size, to his regard. When he united himself to a human form in and through which to achieve the elevation and the redemption of his human family, he chose the scene where the divine world be best achieved; he chose the little planet on which we his moral creatures live; he chose as his birthplace not Rome, not even Jerusalem, but Bethlehem, though it was little among the thousands of Judah; he did not abhor the Virgin's womb.

And, therefore, Christmas Day is the second birthday of the human family. No other day in the year reminds us more persuasively of the greatness of man, of the greatness actual or possible of every human being; nothing that can be said about man's capacities or his progress, his prerogatives or his rights, approaches even distantly to what is involved in God's so having loved this world that he gave his only begotten Son to take our nature upon him. Already, while he is upon earth, we see the meaning of his appearance in the irradiated lives of those around him. Why is it that poor fishermen like Peter and Andrew, and peasants like Simon, Jude and James, and tax gatherers like Matthew, are far more to us than the great soldiers and statesmen who ruled the Roman world? Why is the poor, half-witted, penitent Magdalene infinitely more interesting to us than the proud ladies of the Roman court? It is because the wonder-working touch of the Word made flesh has already begun to create in this poor country folk the first samples of the new humanity in which human nature should recover its lost dignity, its lost self-respect; it is because they would say, each from his place in Paradise, as one of them has already written down upon the pages of the everlasting Gospel, "We beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

Surely Christmas Day, as the birthday of human greatness, should kindle in us the sense of our true human dignity, should nerve us to claim and protect it. Father of glory, give us the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him!

So Christmas Day is the birthday of true human brotherhood. We may understand that great sentence of the apostle that for the new man, renewed after the image of him that created him, "There is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond, nor free; but Christ is all, and in all." At the manger of Bethlehem we may dare to look forward to that union of human love, of human hearts, of which the noblest of our race have dreamed again and again—a brotherhood which has sometimes been recommended in abstract argument, which has sometimes been dictated by revolutionary terrorism, but which, to be genuine, must be a perfect, free movement of hearts and wills drawn toward each other by supreme attraction. That attraction we find in the divine child of Bethlehem, born that he might redeem, that he might regenerate the world, and all the courtesies and kindnesses of this happy season between members of families, and members of households, and members of the same parish, between the rich and the poor, and the old and the young, are rightly done in his honor, who, by coming to reveal to us what we may be in him and through him came to unite us with each other in union with himself. If the idea is still, as heretofore, only too far from being realized, if we hear of jealousies between classes, of rumors of wars between powerful countries, which is the negation of that which he came to do, let us look to it that our part, however humble it is while we linger on this passing scene, be that of men who have heard, to some purpose, the angel's song in the meadows of Bethlehem: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace and goodwill among men, in whom God is well pleased."

Plain Truth for Those Who Need it.

BY REV. THEODORE L. CUYLER.

A lancet is not a very pleasant instrument, and it inflicts momentary pain; but it often brings permanent relief from a dangerous sore. We never like to be disturbed with plain sharp truths; yet they are indispensable to our salvation. The Apostle Peter's first discourse to the people of Jerusalem had nothing sensational or dramatic about it. He set forth Jesus Christ with straightforward directness, pressed His claims on them as both "Christ and Lord" and then told them that "with wicked hands they had crucified and slain Him." The Holy Spirit sent these plain truths home to them so keenly that they were pricked in their hearts, and cried out "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Their understandings were enlightened, their consciences were awakened, and they were convicted of their sins. The sword of the Spirit, when it is not muffled by any cotton-battings of compromise or garlands of rhetoric, will pierce sinners' hearts. The very best thing that could have happened to those Jerusalem sinners was to be convicted of their guilt before God; and it is the greatest possible favor and mercy to every impenitent man or woman to send the sharp arrows of truth into their consciences. A brief pain here may save endless pain hereafter.

Do we all preach as faithfully as we ought? If a physician were called to our house, and detected the first symptoms of a typhoid fever in any one of our family, and went away without any hint of warning or proper prescription, we should say he was worse than a fool, and might turn out a homicide. Is it not a still graver crime to conceal from an immortal soul its deadly disease, and the immediate necessity of calling in the Divine Physician? It will be a terrible thing for us pastors and Christian parents and Sunday-school teachers to be confronted at the day of Judgment by those from whom we have concealed the truth, or have failed to warn with loving fidelity.

Perhaps some unconverted person may pick up this paper, and his eye may rest on this paragraph. My friend, an honest word with you. Your conscience tells you that you are a sinner. If you should deny this you would deceive yourself, and make God to be a liar. A look at yourself in the mirror of His Book would reveal the fatal marks as plainly as any spots which a doctor detects on a typhoid patient. Sin means missing the mark; you have missed the highest aim of life, which is to serve God, and you will therefore miss heaven. God has marked out a straight path for you, and you have chosen a crooked path, and at the end of its windings is perdition. He has loaded you with mercies; that goodness ought to lead you to repentance. Perhaps you were once dangerously sick and promised God if he would spare your life you would give it to him; and you have broken that promise. Under plain faithful sermons you have again and again promised your conscience that you would live a different life. Such facts as these ought to pierce your heart like a knife.

The Son of God has so loved you as to endure for you the agonies of the cross, and has been for many years knocking at the door of your heart, and entreating you to let Him come in with countless blessings and the joy of a life everlasting. You have put Him off with miserable excuses. "I have no time," is one of them. It takes no more time to do right than it does to do wrong—no more time to secure heaven than to make sure of hell. "I expect to repent and be a Christian before I die." To tell the Lord Jesus Christ that, is only adding fresh insult to past injuries. He may not be willing to accept the fag-end of a life devoted to greedy self, and He may withdraw His Spirit from you entirely.

Another excuse is, "I am as good as some church-members." Very likely; for not every church-member has been truly converted, and many who have been are now wandering from Christ and need a reconversion. Their sin is no excuse for yours. If your note were protested at the bank, would would hardly dare to say "It is just as good as Mr A——'s, who swindled his creditors, or Mr. B——'s, who ran away to Canada." I admit that there is a shameful amount of sinning committed by church members; you will say that they ought to repent of it. So they ought, and so ought you to repent of your sins. Every day only adds to your guilt. The Word of God describes the punishment of lost souls as a "flame that is never quenched." That is probably a strong figure of speech to describe the remorse of those who rejected Christ and die impenitent. Every sin you commit is a coal of fire which you are carrying, to add to that accumulated flame of self-torture. It is sin that makes hell, and no flame will burn yonder in the next world which you do not kindle in this world. And the place to put out the fire is here, and the time is now. Repentance does not mean tears; it means turning from sin to Jesus Christ. If you will do this, instead of a scorching flame of remorse your soul will be warmed with the blessed, purifying flame of love, and joy in following the Saviour.

Perhaps you may say "I offer no excuses; I need none; I am quite satisfied with my present condition." Then let me apply a test, as the doctor applies his thermometer to the fever patient! The test is: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy all heart, and thy neighbor as thyself." Can you stand that test? Jesus says "Deny thyself and follow Me." Do you agree to that? Will your pride and your self-hness and your temper and your will all subscribe to that? If not, then you are satisfied to be a breaker of God's commandments, and to be a rejector of the sinner's only Saviour!

Now, my friend, I have told you some plain truths. If they "prick" your heart, do not try to pull them out; those people at Jerusalem were wiser than that; they cried out "What shall we do?" The answer was, to repent and be baptized into Christ for the remission of their sins. They received the advice gladly and obeyed it. It was quick work, as it always will be when a sinner obeys the Holy Spirit. You need just two things to save you—repentance and faith. The only effectual repentance is to abandon your sins; the only effectual faith is to join your heart to Jesus Christ. Go to Him by yourself. One honest hour with Jesus is worth years of sermons and services. The true "inquiry meeting" for you is between you and your too long slighted Saviour. Sin will damn you! Jesus will save you!—*Evangelist.*

—"What does an archdeacon do?" a lady asked of me a few days ago. The same question was put to Dr. Farrar himself when he was in our country. "The question," he answered, "was once raised in the House of Commons, in some debate on the established church, and nobody could tell. At length a committee of inquiry was appointed. This committee visited various ecclesiastics, and held several sessions, but could obtain no light. At length it was asked Lord Palmerston, who always knew everything, and who solved its problem at once. 'What is an archdeacon?' What does he do? Why, an archdeacon is a clergyman who performs the archidiaconal functions.' The committee reported accordingly, and the House was perfectly satisfied. And that is all," concluded Dr. Farrar, "that I know about the matter."—*Dr. Johnson, in the Watchman.*

—Constantly look up. Be on the watch for chances to rise, like a bird let loose, though but for a moment, into the open air. Such is the nature of holiness. Being from God, it is ever seeking to revert to its source. The heavier the pressure of a mundane life upon it, the stronger is the force of its compressed aspirations. Such pressure is like that of the atmosphere on water, which seeks through crevices in its encounter, the level of its fountain. A spirit like this will demand the habit of fragmentary prayer for its own holy indulgence; and will demand it with an importunity proportioned to the superincumbent weight of earthly cares.—*Austin Phelps, D. D.*

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