
And Was Made Man

John 1.1-14

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 24, 2008 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

We're near the start of the movie. The camera pans round a dimly-lit control room, with a large screen on one side and row upon row of highly-trained consultants staring at sophisticated computers all around them. The men have sleeves rolled up a little and ties loosened, to show they're under pressure and working hard. The women are humorless and magnificently professional. The work stations emit periodic electronic beeps, to show they're at full output and being constantly primed with relevant data. Then, from behind one computer, comes a trembling shout. A tired but incredibly intelligent data analyst clutches a print-out and draws a crowd around a radar screen. With a sudden silence in the control room, and a crowd of analysts clustering around, nervously pointing to the bottom corner of the screen, beads of sweat appearing on his forehead, he says to his overwrought but compassionate boss, "See, there. That... that *thing*. We don't know what it is. We've done all the checks, captain, but there's no record of anything like this. It's alive. But *it's like nothing this planet has ever seen before.*" Cue dramatic music, roll opening credits over scenes of scrambled aircraft, hastily-convened presidential press conferences, and passionless voices broadcasting calls for calm. It may just be a blob on a radar screen – but you can be sure we'll spend the next 87 minutes finding out whether we can blow it up before it destroys us.

We're here tonight because we believe that Jesus Christ, born around 2000 years ago this night, is like nothing this planet has ever seen before. We've done all the checks, captain, but there's no record of anything like this. The first question asked of Jesus in the gospel of Mark is, "Have you come to destroy us?" The story of the gospels is that people treat Jesus like a space alien and try to destroy him before he destroys them. But Jesus isn't a space alien. Jesus is a love letter from God to humankind. Jesus is the place and the person where God meets us and we meet God. Jesus is humanity and God in the most intimate relationship imaginable: one flesh, one person.

After 20 years studying theology, I've come to the conclusion that there's one question that's more significant than all the others. It's not "Does God have a white beard?" It's not "What would Scooby Doo?" It's not about suffering or other faiths or who gets to heaven or unanswered prayer. This is the question: If there'd been no fall, if humankind had never sinned, would Christ still have come? Is the coming of God in Christ as fully human and fully God, what we call the incarnation – the event we celebrate at Christmas – the beginning of a rescue package that bails humanity out of suffering and sin and death and evil, God's down-payment on a deal that's finally clinched on Good Friday and Easter Day? Or is Christmas even more mysterious still? Why did Jesus come among us? It's a question that takes us into the very heart of God.

The great theologians of the early centuries came up with one succinct answer. They said "*He became what we are, so that we might become what he is.*" Jesus became human like us, so that we might become divine, like him. That's the classical answer to the question. I know a man who owned his own plane and lived beside an airfield. One day he was tuned into his shortwave radio and heard a distress call from a pilot in the skies above who was lost in bad weather and almost out of fuel. He tuned in and asked her what she could see. Quickly he realized where she was and replied, "I'm coming up to get you." When he drew near, he said on the intercom, "Look across – I'm right beside you, I'm not going anywhere, I'll be with you all the way." Not long later both planes were at the airfield and she was safely drinking cocoa at his house, shaken, but glad to be alive.

That's the classical answer. We're the pilot in distress, lost in bad weather and running out of fuel. "He became what we are, so that we might become what he is." Somehow the whole of Jesus' story, his birth, life, ministry, passion, death, resurrection, and ascension, is in that short phrase. "He became what we are, so that we might become what he is." Note that he didn't become what we are in every respect. He didn't become a sinner. But he became what we are in our human limitations, in being subject to pain, and suffering, and death. Like a New York firefighter climbing the stairs of the World Trade Center on 9/11, he came to where we were and, with a great bear hug, embraced us and brought us to where he is, brought us to safety at great cost to his own life, brought us home.

The classical answer shows us that in Jesus, we've seen what God and humanity truly look like. Jesus reveals what it means to be human, and what it means to be God. In Jesus, the wall between humanity and God is replaced by a window. God sees us, and we see God, like never before. And the mystery of Christmas is this: Jesus shows us that at the heart of what it means to be human is to be wrapped up in God; and at the heart of what it means to be God is to be wrapped up in humanity. This is our Christmas present.

So the classical answer to the question of why Jesus came is, he had a job to do: to rescue us from sin and human limitations that we might come to share the divine life. But for all that the classical answer shows us about who Jesus is, it leaves one important question unanswered. Was the incarnation something that came out of God's overflowing joy or out of his frustration and disappointment? To me this is the most important theological question of them all, because the answer takes us to the very heart of God. If there hadn't been a fall, would Jesus still have come?

The answer is, yes yes yes. Yes Jesus would have come if humanity had not rejected God. Because God has shaped his whole life to be in relationship with us. God determined, from before the foundation of the universe, never to be – except to be in relationship with us. The incarnation comes out of the abundance of God, not out of the weakness of humanity. Jesus isn't some kind of hand grenade God lobbed into the earth's atmosphere to make an explosion of love, joy peace, forgiveness and eternal life. Jesus isn't a device. Jesus isn't just a solution to a problem. Jesus isn't simply a piece of divine technology that backs up our hard drive when we crash. Jesus is the embodiment of there being nothing in God that is not committed to be in relationship to us, whatever the cost, and there being nothing in us that isn't made for relationship with God. Jesus is what we were really made for and what God is really all about.

Round about the beginning of December, people stop talking about the economy and the basketball for a moment, and feel bold enough to ask each other a really personal question. "Where are y'all planning on being for Christmas this year?" Of course they don't think of it as a personal question. It sounds like just a request for information, as in fact all personal questions do. And we hide the personal dimension behind mundane inquiries about the best interstate route to Minnesota and whether it's worth changing flights in Cincinnati because Chicago can be terrible this time of year. But the reason it's personal is that Christmas involves a lot of sitting around doing not much, a bit of cooking, a bit of walking, a bit of playing games, a bit of just being together. Things we don't do much of the rest of the year. You can't hide behind email and getting ready for work next day because there isn't any email and there isn't any work next day. So you'd better make sure the people you're spending Christmas with are people you can just hang around with. In fact saying "I want to spend Christmas with you" is saying to someone "I don't see you as work or as some kind of means to an end: I see you as someone I just want to be with for your own sake. I want to be with you even if we're hanging around doing not much." It's probably the least intense way of saying I love you. Chances are the people sitting either side of you tonight are people you deeply love, even if you maybe don't put it into words very often. Not necessarily admire, not necessarily are attracted to, not necessarily find easy, not necessarily agree with on their choice of spouse or on your parenting technique, but nonetheless people you just want to be with and enjoy for their humanity and for the glimpse of divinity you see in them.

It's the simplicity and humanity of *these* relationships, not our great achievements, that characterize our true identity. Because this is the way God loves us. We are not God's achievement. We are not a project God is constantly tinkering with in the garage till he gets us right. We are simply the ones with whom God wants to share his life. God doesn't have a working relationship with us. God and humanity are not on a professional footing. *God wants to spend Christmas with us* – because he's shaped his whole life simply to be with us. Of course God wants us to turn to him in faith and reverence, to order our lives as ones of righteousness and truth that issue in deeds of transparent kindness and costly generosity. *But even if we don't, God loves us anyway.* That's what Christmas shows us once and for all. And the way to celebrate Christmas is to love God back – not for what he gives us, for life and eternal life, for forgiveness and healing and hope and salvation, not out of gratitude or fear or admiration or wonder, but simply for his own sake, *the same way he loves us.*

So when there's a great commotion in the control room, and a jumpy data analyst holds out a trembling hand and points a nervous finger and says, "See, there. That... that *thing*. We don't know what it is. We've done all the checks, captain, but there's no record of anything like this. It's alive. But *it's like nothing this planet has ever seen*

before,” what there’s never been before isn’t just a unique divine-human phenomenon, two natures in one person. What there’s never been before is what’s revealed in Jesus: the news that God has shaped his whole life to be in relationship with us, and that he’s chosen to draw us into that relationship not by force, not by guilt, not by threat, not by necessity, but by beauty, by joy, by the winsome simplicity and vulnerability and magnetism of a tiny child. That’s why Christmas is the focal point of every year: because in this manger, in this baby, in this divine yet human flesh, we see God’s determination *to be with us forever*, come what may. That’s the heart of it all.