

# The Emmanuel Scandal

*A sermon on John 1: 1-14; Luke 2: 1-20 & Matthew 1: 18-25 by Nathan Nettleton, 24/25 December 2022*

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## Message

The particularity of Jesus's identity scandalises our tribal sensibilities, but our attempts to erase such details in favour of a more "universal" truth inevitably fail to convey the good news of God with us.

## Sermon

At this time of year, there is often a story in the newspaper about the Melbourne Zoo, and it is almost inevitably accompanied by a picture of a chimp, orangutang or gorilla opening a Christmas present. Although this year it is probably baby elephants.



Back when she was in her early teens, Acacia was reading one of those articles a few days before Christmas, and wondered out loud why the animals were getting their presents early if, as it said, the zoo was going to be open on Christmas day anyway. "Perhaps the animal world has a different Christmas day", she suggested.

That little speculation set off a chain reaction in my head, and I ended up thinking about the possibility of God not only becoming incarnate as a human being, but perhaps also, or even instead, becoming incarnate as an Orangutang or an Eastern Barred Bandicoot, which of course could well happen on a different day.

Now such thoughts will no doubt have me in trouble again with some well-meaning Christians. They will think that such thoughts are a scandalous blasphemy and unworthy of an ordained Christian pastor. It probably won't be the first time they've thought such things about me, and they may well be right as often as not, but actually, the idea of God becoming incarnate as spotted tree frog or an orange bellied parrot is probably no more of a scandalous blasphemy than the message of the incarnation of God in Jesus, and the apparent scandalous blasphemy is very much the point of it all.

If you've never felt any offence or discomfort over the particular details of the when, where and who of the incarnation – of God becoming flesh among us – then there is a fair chance that you have managed to miss the point altogether, which, by the way, will not leave you without plentiful company.

Perhaps I can explain this by pointing to a long running controversy in the world of religious art. Some of you will be old enough to remember the shock felt by many Christians when art works first began to appear that depicted Jesus, not as a blue-eyed sandy-haired anglo, but as an obviously middle-eastern man with black hair and dark skin. People were scandalised by

the implication that Jesus might not be so much one of us, as one of them. After all, the incarnation is supposed to be about God becoming one of us.

So too for some time now in many many parts of the world, as the era of colonialism has come to an end and people in various places have begun to try to rethink their newfound faith in Jesus without the imposed foreign trappings of their colonial overlords, they have begun to produce art works that depict Jesus as one of them; as a Mexican farmer, or a Chinese villager, or an Sudanese labourer. We have seen a range of examples of such pictures on the slides with our carols tonight – nativity scenes set in different cultures all over the world.

Now in many many ways, these localised interpretations of Jesus are good and right and very very important. It is absolutely vital for the health of the Church in such places that they break free of the imposed imagery of the colonial powers and grasp the truth that God, in Christ, became one of them, and that who they are and where they live does not put them any further from the grace and mercy of God than anybody else, but is in fact honoured by God and dignified by God and even inhabited by God.

But as much as there is something very very right about such depictions, there is also something wrong with them; potentially just as wrong as the old blue-eyed anglo Jesus pictures. Because there is a danger that when we overly identify Jesus with the particulars of our lives and our situations and our identities, that we can fall back into the subtle but common and dangerous heresy of thinking that the incarnation means God is one of us, as opposed to being one of them. And if we do that, whoever we are, then we make Jesus an accomplice in the cause of tribalism, nationalism, rivalry and division, instead of the bearer of the good news of reconciliation and peace on earth.

There is an unavoidable tension here, and it is a tension that we have to live with and avoid trying to too easily resolve one way or the other if we are to really grasp the meaning of Emmanuel, God with us. For yes, the message of Christmas really does mean that God is one of us, but yes it really does also mean that God is one of them.

And this has always been, and will continue to be a scandal and a stumbling block to many. We all tend to think that surely if God was choosing to become human, then God would choose to become like one of us, not one of them. And so everybody ends up getting their noses out of joint when confronted with the particularity of the when, where and who of the incarnation.

Anglo-Europeans, as well as the native peoples of other parts of the globe, are offended by the proclamation that God became Middle Eastern flesh. Arabs are offended by the proclamation that God became Israeli flesh. The extreme right are offended by the proclamation that God became Jewish flesh. The upper and middle classes are offended by the proclamation that God became peasant flesh. The children of the enlightenment are offended by the proclamation that God became flesh among people who thought the earth was flat. Feminists are offended by the proclamation that God became male flesh. LGBTI+ people are offended by the proclamation that God became cis-gendered flesh in a heterosexual family, while the traditional family values lobby are offended by the fact that Jesus may have been conceived by some form of artificial insemination that marginalised the role of the father as head of the family.

And even the straight, religiously conservative, Jewish, Israeli men are offended by the proclamation that God became flesh in Galilee. Can anything good come out of Galilee?! And some of us are just grumpy that God allowed that person who most gets up my nose to think that the incarnation was for them just as much as it was for me.

The world's usual response to all this scandalous particularity is to try to gloss it over by turning the Christmas message into something more generic and inoffensive and marketable. So baby Jesus surrounded by his adoring parents and an odd assortment of onlookers gets the Hallmark treatment to become a universal affirmation of the importance of family, and Christmas Day almost becomes Mothers' Day all over again. And the angels' song lends itself well to becoming a blandly universal and inoffensive message of peace on earth and goodwill to all.

Of course, the message of Christmas absolutely is about peace on earth and goodwill to all, but when stripped of all potentially offensive particularity, that can easily become no more than the sort of blandly obvious statements that beauty pageant contestants seem to always say. Because if we get more specific than that and say that peace on earth means an open-armed welcome of asylum seekers and goodwill to all means goodwill to members of the Taliban and the National Rifle Association, to Scott Morrison, Vladimir Putin, and George Pell, and perhaps even to renegade preachers who dare to lump all of those into the same sentence; if we say that, then it becomes particular and scandalous and we all get our noses out of joint and walk off in a huff saying "How dare they try to politicise Christmas."

Some of us would indeed be more comfortable with the idea of God becoming flesh as an orangutang than the idea of God becoming flesh as a first-century, straight, Jewish, Israeli male.

But there you have it. Emmanuel. God with us. And God not allowing us to easily wriggle out of the fact that God with us doesn't mean God mirroring and endorsing the status quo of our current preferences and prejudices. It doesn't mean God with us *especially*, but God with them just as much.

And when we have faced up to the confronting irritation of that, and been won over by the extravagant grace of that, then we will truly begin to grasp the wonder of this night and be able to partner with God in making the angel's song of peace on earth and goodwill to all a reality for all the peoples of the whole world, in all their diverse particularity. In fact, lest I forget the Orangutang and the Leadbeater's Possum, let me rephrase that as all the creatures of the whole world, and no doubt the earth itself.

May that peace be born tonight, among us, and among all whose hearts stir at the sound of the angels' song.