

# Becoming Flesh, Becoming God

*A sermon on John 1:1-18 & Ephesians 1: 3-14 by Nathan Nettleton, 5th January 2020*

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## Message

God has become flesh so that we might know God and realise our own destiny in God in the world.

## Sermon

The word “flesh” is a word which for Christian thinkers, more often than not, evokes negative connotations. Phrases like “the sins of the flesh” or verses like “what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit” come readily to mind. Certainly it is true that Christian thinking has often been so worried about the sinful possibilities of the human body that it has promoted a very suspicious or even hostile attitude towards the human body, towards human fleshliness.

While it cannot be denied that this has been a feature of Christian thinking, there is another strand of Christian thought on human fleshliness which takes quite a different tack. “The Word became flesh and made himself at home among us.” The Word, who was with God in the beginning; the Word who is God; the Word became flesh. The Word took human form, with a real body of real flesh, and made himself at home as one of us, flesh and blood the same as us.

In a way, I think we are less shocked by this at Christmas than we might be at other times of the year, because it is so easy to idealise and romanticise babyhood. We can speak of God becoming a baby and wax lyrical about the innocence of babies, and the purity of babies, and beautiful trusting bond between a baby and its mother. We can safely think of baby flesh as all chubby and unblemished and cute, and fall into being quite sentimental about the idea of God becoming flesh.

When we are talking about the flesh of a baby we can avoid being troubled by “the desires of the flesh” and the sexuality of the flesh and, in our low infant mortality society, we may even manage to avoid facing the problem of flesh being so fragile and prone to death.

Now, of course, as the parents of babies or toddlers will readily point out, such idealised views of babyhood are just that: idealised views which conceal as much of the truth as they reveal. Sure, babies are innocent and trusting and cute, but they also spend much of their time pooing, dribbling, vomiting and screaming blue murder. Try telling a sleep-deprived new mum with bloodshot eyes, cracked nipples and a lap full of baby vomit that babies are pure and lovely and a source of constant joy and happiness, and see what sort of response you get.

And yet that frazzled mum may be lot closer than most of us to understanding the shocking news of Christmas: the Word, who was with God in the beginning; the Word who is God; the Word became flesh, infant human flesh, screaming, pooing, dribbling, piddling, projectile vomiting human flesh. God became one of us, crappy nappy and all.

A psychologist who’s done a lot of work understanding childhood experiences once said to me that the experience of being a small child is always a bit humiliating. As an infant you are always at the bottom of the pecking order. You are constantly surrounded by people who are bigger than you, know more than you, and have a lot more power than you. And you can’t

just avoid them because you depend on them for your access to food, clothing, shelter and love.

When my daughter was quite young, I used to get frustrated by the habit she had of trying to find some error to correct in everything I said, and I had to remind myself that not only was that embarrassingly like me, but that it was understandable for her to be desperately wanting to be more knowledgeable or more powerful than those around her at least some of the time.

Perhaps trying to remember what that was like can, like seeing the real life struggle of new parents, help us get a little more in touch with the shocking news of Christmas: the Word, who was with God in the beginning; the Word who is God; the Word became flesh, an infant human being, frustratingly powerless, humiliatingly ignorant, begrudgingly dependent on all those annoyingly big, powerful, know-it-all grown ups. God became one of us, and chaffed against the limitations of it just as we do.

I could go on and talk about God becoming a little boy, one of those annoying snotty-nosed brats who think that the funniest things in the world are poo-bum jokes, and that the ultimate achievement is to break the school record for urinating the highest up the wall. Or I could go on to talk about God becoming a teenage boy, all gangly macho bravado and hormones raging out of control. I could, but you get the picture. The Word became flesh, real human flesh. God became one of us, warts and all, pimples and all.

And if we begin to take that seriously, one of the first things it should warn us against is falling for versions of Christian spirituality which hold the human body in contempt and make out that the goal of our spiritual journey is to be released from the flesh in order to find some sort of out-of-body spiritual fulfilment.

The God we worship became flesh. God honoured the human body by making himself known to us in a human body. As our gospel reading said, no one has seen God in any other way than in the body of Jesus the Son. When God set out to make himself known to us as fully as possible, God came to us in a human body.

Christian spirituality then, is about spirit becoming flesh, not about spirit being liberated from the flesh. Everything of consequence in our faith must become incarnate, must take flesh, and be lived out in the here and now in real life bodily ways.

But this shocking news of God becoming flesh challenges more than just our attitudes to human flesh. It also challenges our images of God.

Descriptions of God are fond of describing God in contrast to us. We are finite, God is infinite. We are weak, God is all-powerful. We are fickle, God is unchanging. We know only a little, God is all-knowing. And while I have no doubt that there is some truth in such statements, they cannot be the starting point of a Christian understanding of God. Instead we start with what we can know of God made flesh in Jesus.

*The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son... It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.*

Our image of God begins with a human life, lived with the same human limitations that the rest of us face. When we want to talk about the power of God, we don't see a power that is able to end all violence and hostility at the click of a finger, but a power that is able to keep on loving even when suffering the worst of that violence and hostility. We don't see a power that is able to magically eliminate hatred and torture, but which is able to absorb its evil and transform even the most horrendous suffering into the source of hope and salvation for all who suffer under the weight of the sin of the world.

I could go on, one by one, through all the images of God's bigness and totally-unlike-us-ness, but I hope you get the picture. It is God the only Son, Jesus with all his human limitations, who has made God known to us, and our understanding of God must begin with what we see and know in Jesus. Our ultimate and definitive revelation of God came in human form with no more than human capabilities.

Finally, the biggest shock to emerge from this Christmas news may be the message that begins to take shape when we hold together these two truths: that God honours human bodies by becoming human flesh, and that what we can know about God is revealed to us in human flesh. Because when we hold together these truths about what we are and what God is, they beg the question of what we can become.

Of course, this question only arises and can only begin to be answered, when we read the Christmas stories in the context of the whole story of God made flesh in Jesus. Like the earliest Christians who first recorded and reflected on the stories of Jesus's birth and infancy, we are looking at them with the benefit of hindsight. In a world where millions of children are born in deprived circumstances in countries under occupation by oppressive military powers, there is nothing remarkable about the story of the baby born in the shed when taken on its own.

No doubt you will have received plenty of Christmas cards with lovely nativity scenes that take the story as just a baby story and thus make it captive to the "wishing your family a good year" message of the festive season. But did anyone get one that said something like, "as we remember God becoming what you are, may you become more of what God is"? I didn't think so!

But perhaps this is the shocking news which we most need to carry into the new year from our celebration of Christmas. God became one with us, so that we might become one with God. In Jesus, we have not only seen what God is, but what we can become. We have seen human life lived to the full. We have seen the destiny for which we were created: human life lived to the glory of God, full of grace and truth.

This is the great reconciliation of which the gospel speaks. This is the reconciliation of earth and heaven, of spirit and flesh. This is the reconciliation of God and all that is not God.

John speaks of us becoming children of God, not by processes of conception, gestation and labour, but by being born again of God. Through the only child of God, Jesus Christ, we are enabled to become children of God also. Our reading from Ephesians spoke of it in terms of adoption, being destined for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ, and being marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit as a pledge towards our inheritance as God's own people.

And so here is the gospel, the ultimate good news, lying in a manger. Here is the promise and here is the challenge. Here is the destiny for which we were created and the truth that sets us free. God has become a child of humanity so that human beings may become children of God.

This is certainly no promise of a picture perfect, lovely nativity scene, blissfully happy life. The one who is our promised destiny and the leader we follow, was hunted at birth and humiliated at death. But that's the point! It is into the realities of our life, with all their pain and struggle and anxiety, that God has stepped and become like us.

And it is from within the realities of our life, with all their pain and struggle and anxiety, that we can catch sight of our promised destiny and can begin following in the footsteps of the one who will lead us all the way from crappy nappies to the promised land where our deepest hungers are fulfilled and life is lived, full of grace and truth, to the glory of God forever.