

Christmas. The Greatest Good News Ever!

Advent celebrates wonder and hope. Jesus' birth marks the beginning of the most amazing story ever recorded in history. All the events surrounding His coming are told in great detail in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. But in the gospel of John you won't find the story of Jesus' birth, no angels, no shepherds, no wise men from the East, no Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem. John points to the Christ who came from the depth of eternity. He is the great Light who will break through the darkness. The Bible uses many words to proclaim Christ's coming to the world, but not one is so filled with meaning as the word "became", found in the well known text: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14a). In His birth, in His Incarnation, the Lord Jesus Christ was flesh and bones. In becoming man He did not cease to be the Eternal Word. His divine nature was not laid aside.

The Son of God did not cloak Himself with our humanity so that He merely seemed human. He did not play at being a man. Other religions also tell about the appearances of their gods and they know all kinds of fantastic tales about them, but nowhere do you find the word "became". In ancient Greek mythology gods and goddesses played at being human beings. They would come down from the lofty heights of Mount Olympus and looked just like an ordinary man or woman. These so-called divine beings would have all sorts of adventures. But in due course, when the situation became a trifle sticky, they would get tired of it all, throw off the disguise, perhaps perform a miracle or two to get out of whatever difficulty had arisen, and then return to the abode of the gods. This is all mischievous fun. But it is not the incarnation. Those gods are not really human, but only appear that way. They did not undergo any real limitations, but simply disguised themselves. They did not put up with the trials and changes of normal human experiences, but were merely playing a game and doing so by their own rules. But with the child of Bethlehem, it was not a game. It was reality. Jesus, the Son of God, became flesh. He took on our human nature; He became one of us for our salvation. John is writing about a genuine incarnation. The Son of God accepted the limitations that are part of our human existence. John does not spell out what these limitations are, but his choice of words leaves his readers in no doubt about the real humanity of the Word. Jesus became one of us. He came right where we are. He took our nature upon Him. He underwent all that being human means. He linked His identity with the lowly (Matt. 25:45). "Though he was rich,... he became poor" (2 Cor. 8:9). The Lord of glory "made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Phil. 2:7). Jesus was so "one with us" that He shared our thirst, our hunger, our pain. In this wicked world, He was deserted by His friends, tortured by soldiers, falsely accused, mocked by religious leaders and ridiculed as a common criminal. Jesus became flesh. This truth is the heart of Gospel.

I never get tired of hearing the Christmas story. It always amazes me. God, moved by a love beyond our understanding, sent His Son to this broken and fallen world (John 3:16). Jesus left heaven's glory for our sake! Why did Christ come? Because of our sin. But sin is not the cause of His appearance. Sin itself brings nothing but misery and

death. Jesus came into the world in a body in order to make atoning sacrifice for the sins of all who believe in Him. Christmas is linked to Good Friday. From the manger in Bethlehem we travel to the cross of Calvary. The incarnation of the Son of God means that He was "in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering" (Rom. 8:3). God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself. The Son of God was made sin for us, Him who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. This is the heart and soul of the Christmas event. "He has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Hebrews 9:26). At the cross of Christ the perfect sacrifice is performed; Jesus died in our place. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. On the basis of His sacrifice, we who were once children of wrath have now become the children of God and can approach God the Father. It is precisely this descent that placed God's Son on that despicable cross, that reveals that there is not a man or a woman, adult or child, that the Lord cannot touch. His coming and descent, then, His life and death, distinct among all others, changed everything. Christ alone bridged the gap, the wretched alienation between God and sinners. But the greatest story ever told does not end at Calvary's cross, it goes on to point to the empty tomb. It is none other than this grief-stricken, rejected, and crucified Jesus who rose from the dead. His resurrection reveals that hatred and mock, shame and death are not the last words. The Son of God has the last word. He has conquered sin, death, and hell. John said the mysterious words, "Now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). Since the Word "became flesh" and was raised we have become different too. The Son of God became flesh. The flesh is for me as inescapable as it was for Him. But through Christ, my body will become a "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17) as my flesh shall be raised from the dead on the last day, when the last chapter of the greatest story ends.

Why did Jesus become man? The apostle John's description of Christmas is breathtaking. "The word became flesh and we have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). This was the astounding new thing in Bethlehem. God made Himself known. He is not the hidden God for whom we are searching without results. John says, "No one has ever seen God, but God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made him known" (v. 18). He became man so that human beings could behold God's glory in Him. What does John mean by "the glory of the one and only Son?" We tend to look at glitter and show. We usually think of glory in terms winning a trophy in a sports event or an award given to a movie star. Public recognition and praise are important to us. Leon Morris notes that we are a little like the opera singer Jan Klepura. It is said that on one occasion he complained to his publicity agent that another singer was getting much more publicity than he was. He did not want to be robbed of glory. His agent said mildly, "The trouble is that the gentlemen of the press think that you are conceited and therefore they do not care to write about you." The singer was incredulous. He exclaimed, "Conceited? Me? The great Kleptura?" We all tend to be that way. We like to be recognized and applauded. But John says that for Jesus it is not that way. For the incarnation we are taken to Bethlehem, and the stable and the manger. Jesus worked in a carpenter's shop with its daily toil. Where do we see the glory of the incarnate Lord? He went where

people needed help. Where there were sick, he healed them. Where there were hungry people, he fed them. He did not frequent the palaces of kings and governors. The glory of Jesus, therefore, is not found in His splendour, but in His humility. True glory is lowly service, and John sees that in every moment of Jesus's humble life. But the glory of Jesus is most clearly seen not in , . The cross was Jesus' glory. Jesus introduced His coming death with the words, "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified" (John 12:23). William Barclay comments, "Jesus did not mean by *glorified* what they (the disciples) meant. By *glorified* they meant that the subjected kingdoms of the earth would grovel before the conqueror's feet; by *glorified* He meant *crucified*". They defined glory as triumph; Jesus defined it as service. Jesus lived a life of humility, of lowliness, of rejection. And He accepted the most shameful of death. The cross was the glorious way in which God's Son brought light to people in spiritual darkness. The central point is that the death of Jesus on the cross is the supreme example of glory, not the shameful death His contemporaries thought it was.

Who can see Jesus' glory? All who believed in Him saw His glory; the unbelievers saw him, but they did not have the spiritual eyes to see, in His words and deeds, His glory. His coming in the world was a decisive moment in history. We too are forced to make a decision. John says, "To all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, he gave the right to become children of God" (1:12). The Son of God who became man is not one of many ways to God, one of many possibilities. John describes Him as the one and only door, the Shepherd, the Light of the world, the only Way, the Truth, and the Life. That's why it is so crucial to proclaim the Christmas story with all its implications!

Johan D. Tangelder
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