

# GOD FOR US: Why the Incarnation is Rational

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We are in the midst of Lent, a time ripe for sermons since it offers so many themes. Today is the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent, and I will comment on theme of this, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent shortly. The main focus of my sermon is one of the most important holidays of our church which we celebrated this week. Can we recall what holiday I'm speaking of? It is the Annunciation, the *Euaggelismos*, the Announcing of the Good News to Mary that she will bear the Christ child whom she will name Jesus, the day of the Incarnation, the day God became human in the form of a man. We celebrated this story on March 25<sup>th</sup>, this past Monday. Let us remind ourselves of the story in the Gospel of Luke.



Our Orthodox tradition very much affirms that on this day God became human, that Jesus who was conceived on this day is paradoxically God and man. This belief in the incarnation of God in the man Jesus, as it says in the creed, “incarnate by the Holy Spirit,” that is by the power of the Holy Spirit, this belief is not an easy one to affirm. In fact, I would say that over the past few centuries, it has fallen into disfavor. One reason is that a scientific standard of truth has become prevalent since 17<sup>th</sup> century and the idea that a God can become human is something that has never been observed before, nor is it something that is scientifically verifiable. In an age where trust is given to that which can be verified, that for which we can provide proof or evidence, the belief in God becoming human in a particular individual is something which simply cannot meet that standard of truth. Even before the Scientific Revolution, it wasn't something easy to believe. A study of early Christian writings reveals that the Greek philosophers did not find such a belief very reasonable.

One of the beautiful things about the Church hymns is that they tend to imaginatively amplify the stories in the Bible. The sense of disbelief in the idea of God becoming human is extended to the main characters in the story. So, for example, one of the hymns for the Vespers of the Annunciation (vespers is the service performed the night before a feastday, so the vespers of the Annunciation would have been performed on Sunday evening, the evening of the 24<sup>th</sup>), this hymn of the vespers beautifully describes the angel Gabriel's perplexity as the angel descends to tell Mary the Good News. He tries to comprehend “how he who dwells in the heights, whom non can comprehend, will be born of a Virgin? How he whose throne is heaven and whose footstool is the earth will be held in the womb of a woman.” A beautiful hymn at Christmas, the *Christos Genatai*, speaks of the incarnation as the closing in, or containing of the one who is infinite, without space (*en w aneklithe o achoristos*).

Joseph did not have an easy time understanding what was happening to Mary. The Bible tells us that he was dismayed when he heard the news of Mary's pregnancy. In another hymn chanted during Christmas, this dismay is dramatized a bit. Joseph asks Mary, “What is this doing, O Mary, that I see in thee? I fail to understand and am amazed, and my mind is struck with dismay. Go from my sight, therefore will all speed.” Then with anger, which the music so beautifully brings out, Joseph asks again, MARY, WHAT IS THIS DOING THAT I SEE IN

THEE. Instead of Honor, You have brought me Shame; instead of Gladness, Sorrow; instead of Praise, Reproof.”

Even Mary herself is not excluded from initially hesitating to believe in the possibility of such a thing as the Lord coming to dwell in her. She responds to Gabriel with a question: “How shall this be, since I have no husband?” In another hymn of the vespers of the Annunciation, she comes close to accusing Gabriel of trying to deceive her. She asks him, “how can you speak to me of things that surpass any human power?” The incarnation, the idea of God becoming human was, and is not an easy thing to grasp.

Yet much is at stake in its affirmation or its denial. What I wish to suggest is that what is at stake is the very essence of Christianity itself. In the Incarnation we don't simply see a God who became man, we see a God who emptied Godself for us, as St. Paul says in his letter to the Philippians; we see the love of a God who came to be with us, to be with paralytics, the blind, the tax collectors and the prostitutes, who were considered then the lowest segment of society, and showed them love; we see a God who, as St. Paul say in his letter to the Hebrews, that sympathizes with our weaknesses and knows our human suffering, because God himself suffered; we see a God resurrected and in this resurrection opened the way toward an unbreakable relationship of communion with God. Through the incarnation we a see a God full of love and compassion for his creation, one who taught us how to love and be compassionate to others; one who unites Godself with us so that humans can go beyond what we are capable of; in the Incarnation we have a God who came to lead us to God, to an intimate union with God. Without the incarnation we don't have any of this, we have a Christianity stripped of its essence, of love and compassion, of the capability of being united with God. This is why St. Athanasius, who lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, affirmed the reality of the incarnation, because if it were not true, then there is no Christianity, and humankind is not saved from the great annihilator which is death, because without union with God, with the eternal source of life, we are beings unto death.

To the challenge that the idea of an incarnation is simply a myth, then I propose the counter challenge to offer a better alternative. If the response is that there is no God, then that leaves us with very little hope, since humanity itself has shown itself capable of both great achievement and great barbarism. As the great Jewish philosopher of this century, Walter Benjamin, reminds us, behind every great work of civilization is a great act of barbarism. And if the answer is that there is God but that God and humanity are two distinct realities that can never be brought together, then that also is not good enough. What good does it do us that God is simply out there with no way to be with God. We want, or at least I want, a God who is with us, a God whose power it is and whose freedom it is to be what is not God for the sake of uniting us with Godself. It is this God that we see in Jesus Christ, who is Jesus Christ. And we don't affirm this about Jesus simply because of what we desire, although this is part of it. We affirm it based on the witness of his earliest followers, that we find recorded in the Bible, that in this Jesus they witnessed a man who actions were truly human, but the power of these actions to brings us to an intimate union with God went beyond any human capacity. We affirm it based on the lives of the true saints in our tradition, who based on the belief of Jesus as God and man, structured their lives in such a way that the divine presence became progressively more manifest in and through their very bodies.

To affirm the incarnation, to affirm that God has become human, we are affirming a God who desires to be with us, a God who draws humans to Godself in the most intimate union. God is constantly calling us to this union, and this is reflected in Gabriel's announcement to Mary. We honor Mary, the *theotokos*, for two reasons. One has to do with who we believe Jesus to be. What we think of Mary has everything to do with who we think Jesus is. If we affirm that Jesus is God incarnate in a human being, then Mary truly does become for us the God-bearer, the one who herself is intimately united to God. The second reason has to do with her response to Gabriel. After hesitating, she freely accepts all that God wishes to be done through her. She says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord: let it be with me according to your word." Mary freely accepts the call of God to be intimately united with her, and through her, through Jesus whom she will bear, God calls all of us to an intimate union with God. God does not force Godself upon us; what God desires is our free acceptance to be with God. We simply have to imitate Mary, to get beyond our initial hesitation, and to freely accept God's call, God's desire to be with us.

One final word on today's theme, that of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent. On this Sunday, we honor a saint well known in Greece, but not so well known here in the US. His name is St. Gregory Palamas, an Archbishop of Thessalonica in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the 1300s. I won't go into the details of his life, except to say that the church honors him as a saint because he defended the view of the incarnation I just presented against those who were claiming that real union with God is not possible. His basic point is that if real union with God were not possible, and the incarnation were not about this, then what hope do we ultimately have. He is honored on this 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent to remind us that such a union with God is what Lent is all about. We travel through Lent, we do the Lenten practices not to torture ourselves, not to assure ourselves a place in heaven, but to train ourselves in such a way that would allow for a greater presence of God in our lives.

That is what Lent is all about, and that is what the incarnation is all about, which we celebrate on March 25<sup>th</sup>. After all this abstract consideration of the incarnation, the obvious question would be, how does one get there, how can one be united with God, how do Lenten practices unite us more with God? There are answers to those questions, though they are not easy, but before one even considers those questions, before one embarks on a lifelong struggle of learning about this way of life, one first has to believe that such a union is possible, that it is worth it, and that it is possible through Jesus Christ, the God-man. Why the effort? Because there is nothing better, more stable, more secure, more joyful, more peaceful, simply nothing better than being with God. It's simply what we were created to be, but the only way we can know this is if we heed the recommendation in the Book of Psalms to "taste and see that the Lord is good."

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