

God has Spoken: The Incarnation

Hebrews 1:1ff – God has spoken through His Son - Revelation culminates in Christ Jesus

John 1:1ff - “Taking up St. John’s expression, “The Word became flesh,” the Church calls “Incarnation” the fact that the Son of God assumed a human nature in order to accomplish our salvation in it” (CCC 461). “Belief in the true Incarnation of the Son of God is the distinctive sign of Christian faith” (CCC 463).

Explain “Word”

Faith is “Incarnational” → historic; in time and space

Knowing Christ through the scriptures

Lord, Liar Lunatic – the Claims of Christ

“Why did the Word become flesh?” When we speak of the Word, we mean the Second Person of the Trinity, God the Son. So why did God become flesh? The Nicene Creed answers this question. “For us men and for our salvation He came down from Heaven.” The Incarnation is a mission of pure love and generosity. *The Word became flesh in order to save us from our sins. The Word became flesh so that we might know God’s love. The Word became flesh to be our model of holiness. The Word became flesh to make us partakers of the divine nature – to bring us into the inner life of God.*

2000 years ago, Jesus Christ, the Son of God made flesh, asked his disciples: “Who do people say that I am?” They said in reply, “John the Baptist, other Elijah, still others one of the prophets.” And he asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter said to him in reply, “You are the Messiah.” For 20 centuries the Church has reflected on that question: “Who do you say that I am?” It took four centuries for the apostolic faith – the faith of the Apostles - to be articulated in the form we now find it in the Creed. It took more than four hundred years for the Church to develop a language that could, to some adequate degree, express the mystery of God becoming human. How do we answer Jesus’ question: “Who do you say that I am?”

The names and titles used for Jesus in the Gospels have often been a starting point for exploring His identity. The proper name, **Jesus**, in Hebrew means “God saves.” Names in the ancient near east were often intended to express the identity of the person. Hence, Simon’s name was changed to Peter, rock, to signify that he was the rock upon which the Church would be built. The name Jesus signifies

both identity and mission – “God saves.” The title **Christ** comes from the Greek translation of the Hebrew “Messiah,” or anointed. This title signifies one consecrated for a divine mission. This anointing was given in the Old Testament to priests, kings, and prophets. The awaited Messiah who would definitively establish the kingdom of God, was to fulfill the hope of Israel as priest, prophet, and king. Jesus’ contemporaries were awaiting a Messiah in the political sense, that would save them from foreign domination. Christ, however, linked His identity as Messiah to His suffering and cross, that is, our salvation from sin. Jesus is also called **“Son of God.”** In and of itself, this does not signify that Jesus is divine. In the Old Testament angels, the children of Israel, and kings are all called sons of God. But in the New Testament, this title takes on a unique significance. At both the baptism of Jesus and the transfiguration, the voice of God the Father calls Jesus his “beloved Son,” and Christ is also called the only son of God (Jn 3:16). Only in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus does the full meaning of this title become clearer. Finally, Jesus is called **“Lord.”** In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the divine name YHWH was often rendered by the Greek Kyrios – Lord. Lord becomes the more common divine name. The confession of the Church that Jesus is Lord is an affirmation that the adoration and glory belonging to the Father are also due to Jesus His Son.

The New Testament bears witness to the fact that belief in the divinity of Christ goes back to the roots of Apostolic preaching. For example, St. Paul makes use of what appears to be an early Christian hymn in his letter to the Philippians:

*“[Jesus], though **he was in the form of God**, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:6-11)*

The letter to the Hebrews says this:

*“In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe, who is the refulgence of his glory, **the very imprint of his being**, and who sustains all things by his mighty word” (Heb 1:1-3).*

The pre-existence of the Son is clearly affirmed. By that we mean that the divine Word, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity became man at a particular point in time. Nevertheless, the Word did not come into existence at the Incarnation, but existed from all eternity as God. It should come as no great surprise that it took the Church some time to articulate her faith in such a radically unheard of event.

The history of the early Church is like a swinging pendulum. In attempting to understand how this Jesus, born an infant in Bethlehem, who suffered and died – in attempting to understand how Jesus was also God – some individuals sacrificed one truth for the other. The truth is holding in tension that Jesus is both true man and true God. The human mind doesn't care for this both/and; we want clearly understandable categories, and these categories don't seem to go together too well. The history of the early Church is a working-out of this both/and in light of those who emphasized an either/or approach.

True God and True Man: PowerPoint
ROLE OF THE CHURCH

The importance/difference that the Incarnation makes – Discussion
Summary in Handout page 2, right hand column

These definitions and distinctions can all too easily appear to us to be dry, intellectual abstraction; academic debates best left to the classroom. Why should we confuse our simple faith in the Lord Jesus with such technical jargon? What do persons and natures have to do with my lived experience of my faith?

The early Christians knew how important these matters were. They did not get together in council as erudite scholars or professional academics. They debated these matters as pastors of souls. They had a keen sense that doctrine is intimately connected to salvation. In fact, one of the driving forces behind these definitions was the “salvation principle.” In order for Christ to truly save us from our sins, he had to be truly God and truly man. If he were not God, then He did not have the power to save us; he would be just another creature stuck in the deep yogurt of sin and death. If Jesus were not human – well they had a saying: “What was not assumed was not redeemed.” What was not taken on by Christ was not healed. Why must we confess that Christ has a true human soul and intellect? So that we can know that our soul and intellect is redeemed. Why do we believe that Christ had a human will? – so that we may believe that our wills have been redeemed. If Christ did not have a full human nature, then our human nature was not lifted out of the deep yogurt. Denying any one of these aspects leaves us approaching a Jesus of our own creation who has no power to save us.

An understanding of these struggles of the early Church to come to an articulated Faith in the person of Jesus also can lead us to an appreciation of the Faith we profess in the Liturgy. The Creed we pray together is the work of hundreds of years, written by a Church emerging out of persecutions and strife. It is a victory of Truth over error. When we renew our baptismal promises during the liturgy, we can do so knowing the weight that each word of the Creed carries. We ought never take for granted the Faith we have received, since it is the heritage of centuries of prayer and study.

Each definition is a brush stroke in our image of Christ, our image of God. How do we view Christ? Do we hold in tension all the rich aspects of who Jesus is, and do we let it affect our conversations with Him in prayer?

Sacred Heart – Handout
Handout on the Hail Mary
Pray the Angelus