

Monastic Scribe LXIV: December 15, 2023

FLESH, BLOOD, PAIN AND LOVE

Christmas is a festival largely centered on children. We adults are delighted by the enthusiasm of children, perhaps reminding us of when we were children ourselves. It can, likewise, be a tough time for elders who only have memories of Christmas and now feel emptiness and loss. The religious dimension of Christmas centers on the birth of a child, always a special moment of beauty and joy. There are many wondrous aspects of celebrating this feast as Christians. Stars, shepherds, animals, a young couple in love and a baby all help us touch God's presence in the world.

The Christian feast of Christmas centers on the Incarnation - God becoming flesh, the wedding of heaven and earth. We are delighted to see the wonder and awe in our children. This should be, but often is not, a call for us to refine wonder and awe in our lives as adults.

Super saturation with material gifts can dull our awareness of the wonder of creation, of those we love, of our own bodies and imaginations. Christmas really calls adults to a deeper understanding of the cosmos and its creator. To grow from the first half of life, centered on childhood understandings to the deeper realities of the second half of life remains an invitation for many people, but often an unrealized one. Churches may stay on the first level of life and keep us in a passive, dependent child-like level of faith. The second half of life call us to a transformation of our consciousness, a change from the either-or judgmental way of living to a both-and, non-dual awareness of all that is.

How about a little history to help us understand what has happened? It took the church about four centuries to really clarify and name and explain what it meant to be a Christian. Heated arguments on the streets divided people, many who insisted that Jesus Christ was God, the second person of a Holy Three-in-One God. Others argued, following principally the theologian named Arius, that Christ was the first step in creation, below the Godhead. Councils, including both bishops and lay people, argued out and declared the dogmas of the Trinity and the Incarnation at Nicaea, Chalcedon, Constantinople and Ephesus. These doctrines would mark church practice for centuries. We still recite the Creed every Sunday put together at Nicaea and Constantinople. The church upheld belief in Jesus

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Christ who was both God and human. In reality the emphasis came to be put on his divinity.

Little by little the humanity of Jesus was underscored. It was understood in the babe of Bethlehem but lost in succeeding portrayals of Jesus' life. People became hesitant to receive the Eucharist feeling unworthy. The obligation to attend Sunday Mass and receive communion at least once a year was finally stated at the Fourth Council of the Lateran in 1215. The host had to be elevated at the consecration so people could see the host and bells were rung so people would know what was happening. While this was going on, people no longer knew the scriptures in Latin and became ignorant of the life and teachings of Jesus. He was God. Amen!

This remoteness of the Eucharist, and understanding of Jesus solely as God, continued into the twentieth century when people would often not receive communion without going to confession. Pope Pius X lowered the age of receiving first communion so children would receive the Eucharist. It was not until 1957 that Pope Pius XII changed the rules of fasting from midnight before communion to encourage more reception of the eucharist. But the neglect of embracing Christ's humanity and knowing his life and teachings in the scriptures has continued among many even to this day. People come to Mass to adore Christ not, as he intended, to be one with Christ and his body, the church, that is to BE Christ. His words were "take and eat, take and drink," not "take and adore."

As the Protestant Reformation, the age of enlightenment, and the scientific revolution occurred, the church began to study the scriptures to know Jesus Christ better and understand his teachings, especially as had been known in the earliest centuries of the church.

Studies in scripture, liturgy, social justice took place in the nineteenth century which Pope John XXIII knew well. He called the Second Vatican Council to both go back to basics and read the signs of the times. The first document of the Council, on the liturgy, called for "active participation in the liturgy," and the place of the laity in the celebration of the sacraments. We are still struggling to assimilate the teachings of this Council. Some prefer to stay passive and let the priest do everything.

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Some people leave the church when they no longer find adult sustenance. Many stay on the first level of life. But how do we move on to an adult understanding of the Incarnation? Knowing the scriptures well, having a radical awareness of our own inner lives and identity including our faults (this is the best way to come to know God), practicing a vulnerable openness about ourselves, regular prayer especially centering prayer, staying still with nature, moving on to a unified consciousness of what life is all about, that we are all one!

All these do help. You can add deep human experiences of love and suffering that move us from centering on our ego to trust in God.

Yes, Christ is truly God. But we do not know what "God" really means. We have to take Christ's humanity seriously, as the early church learned, and then finally confess that he is God. I pray that all of you will come to an adult understanding of Christmas and really want Christ to come to you. A Merry Christmas to you from joycet@glastonburyabbey.org

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.