

Author as character: God becoming flesh

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God — children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”¹

Can God have a body? Can the maker of everything take on the form of a cooing, poohing baby, like the author of a play becoming one of his own characters? Can the infinite become finite? Most people in the first century answered with a resounding ‘no!’.

There were — and are — two likely objections. The first is of the “Who-the-heck-do-you-think-you-are?” variety. If God has become a human being, then there is somebody around, somewhere, claiming to be that God. Well, show him to us. We’ll soon tell him how contemptible we think he and his megalomaniac ideas are. The Jews accused Jesus and his followers as blasphemers and Sabbath-breakers — which is

¹ 1 Jn.1:1-14.

why they picked up stones to throw at Jesus, and why some of them eventually succeeded in having him crucified.

The second approach looks at the matter, not so much from the side of the human being making divine claims, as from the side of a rational view of God. In that light, the idea of God becoming a man was met, not so much with indignation as with amusement and baffled incomprehension. It just didn't make sense! The Greeks typified this approach; for them, the notion that a body could be anything other than a nasty, smelly prison for the soul, with which the creator would have nothing to do, seemed ridiculous.

Perhaps the divergent attitudes of the Jews and the Greeks were similar (in this, though in respect of precious little else) to those of modern British and French people. Faced with such claims, a typical British response would very likely be an irritated "Ere! Who the bloomin' 'eck [or maybe some other words] d'you think you are, then? You think you can tell me what to do?" The rationalist French person, with his or her obligatory secondary-school training in philosophy, would more likely respond with a Gallic shrug, an amused smile and "Pah! But it does not make sense, *ne c'est pas?*"

Yet it is this, the crucial stumbling block, with which John decided to open his gospel. For many years, I disliked this book, though not because I had any problem with its doctrines except, perhaps, that of understanding them. I preferred the 'Synoptics': Matthew, Mark and Luke. They, at least, were readily comprehensible. John's gospel, by contrast, says everything in such a compact and mysterious style that, if you read more than a few sentences at a time, you start to get mental indigestion. (Probably those hyper-earnest readers who were struggling to 'stay with it' got spiritual indigestion, too, but, frankly, I wasn't even trying.) When I became a theology student

and started to make smart-alec jokes, I once raised a cheap laugh by saying that, of all John's writings, I found Revelation the easiest to understand.

In more recent years, my tastes have changed a lot. I've gained more patience with John's extraordinary way of writing. He doesn't claim to give a chronological account of the life of Jesus (only Luke does that), but goes instead for a thematic arrangement. Most scholars think that John's gospel was the last to be written, when John himself would have been old by the time he was writing, and possibly living in Ephesus. If they are right, the chances that he was familiar with at least some of the other gospels are good. So I strongly suspect that he was deliberately recording the very things that the others had left out of their accounts, knowing that, if he didn't record them for posterity, no one else would.

And what a style he adopts! If much of Scripture invites us to chew carefully upon each phrase, John practically forces his readers to do so — or they come away with nothing at all! Almost everything in John needs to be wrestled with. For quick-fix, push-button westerners, that is a difficult thing to do. But what he has to tell us is so crucial, that we need to do that wrestling. For in this opening passage, the central point that he is requiring us to meditate upon is that the eternal, infinite God has come to us as a living, breathing, eating, laughing, weeping, sleeping, fearing, dying man. The consequences of that reality are enormous, with a significance that is simultaneously cosmic (Jesus is "the light of the world") and yet deeply personal — he enables the individual to be "born of God". And he does this by taking on human flesh.

John gets right down to business. The opening phrase, "In the beginning", is deliberately provocative. By starting off with these words, he is clearly intending to put his readers in mind of the opening words of Genesis: "In the beginning God created the

heavens and the earth”. The point is to show us that the person whose story he is about to tell runs all through Scripture (and, of course, for John’s first readers ‘Scripture’ was simply the Old Testament) and all through world history.

He was also making a debating point against the heretics within the Christians’ own camp. A lot of Greek-influenced Christians were still uneasy with the idea of a distant, passionless God getting mixed up with the filthy material world, and as a result many of them were easily seduced into heresies that suggested there were two gods: an inferior one who made the evil (or at any rate, despicable) physical universe and human bodies; and a superior, purely spiritual and distant god who is revealed by a very ethereal, not-really-human Jesus. By starting off with “In the beginning”, John is making it plain from the outset of his account that the spiritual revelation of God in Jesus is inseparable from, and part-and-parcel of, the God who did the work of creation in Genesis!

Jesus the man has a birth in Bethlehem around the year 4 B.C.. But Jesus as he is with the Father (i.e. as “the Word”) doesn’t *have* a beginning; he was there with the Father “*in* the beginning”. The fact that “The Word was God” tells us that Jesus (the Word-become-flesh²) is, in fact, God — a point which later Christians explained by speaking of a Trinity of three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, sharing one substance, or essence.

A figment of God’s imagination?

“Through him” (that is, through “the Word”) “all things were made.” But of course

² v.14.

everything was made through the Word of God! That was the only way that God could make anything at all! I remember how this realization hit me like a thunderclap one time when I was in the bath. (Fortunately for the neighbors, I refrained from doing the ‘full Archimedes’ and running around naked crying ‘Eureka’!)

Indulge, if you will, a possibly blasphemous imagination: imagine that you are God before the creation of anything. You decide to create something: the heavens and the earth; angels; constellations and planets; seraphim and cherubim; the Okefenokee Swamp and the Watford Gap. Anything. How will you do it? What will you make it from? How will you create a thing that is distinct from your own essence?

Back on earth in the here-and-now, if anybody decides to make anything, they immediately take other *things* (to say nothing of tools) to make it from. Sandwiches require bread, butter and a filling. Walls need bricks and mortar. A letter needs pen, paper and ink — or a word-processor, paper and printer. What will God use before the creation of any other thing? How will he create *ex nihilo* — out of nothing?

He speaks. Quite literally, he speaks the universe into existence. God says “Let there be...”, and there was, and, “behold, it was very good”. So John is pointing out the only possible explanation for the process of creation when he says that “Through him” (that is, the Word who later “became flesh” as Jesus) “all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”

Not only is this true of creation itself, but God continues to sustain all things by the word of his authority. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews tells us that “In these last days he has spoken to us through his Son, ... through whom he made the universe.

The Son is ... sustaining all things by his powerful word.”³ Imagine that: God closes his hand — and the universe dissolves! That is *not* to say that God is making everything that happens happen; rather, it is that he is limitlessly resourceful and powerful, and so is able to bring his ultimate purposes to pass. He speaks everything into being, and his continued speaking is what keeps it there.

God speaking the universe into existence: apart from anything else, this is a great joke on the atheists, who like to insist that God is a figment of our imagination — whereas in fact almost the converse is the case! It would be closer to the truth to say that we are a figment of God’s imagination. (I did say “almost” and “closer”. Don’t follow that idea too far, or it becomes heretical. Clearly, God has made his creation autonomous in the sense that it — or we — can do things that God doesn’t want — like sin, for example.)

Life in Christ, and light all round

John then starts talking about the way in which Christ coming as a human being brings life and light. Now that only means anything if we inhabit a world of death and darkness. But precisely that is the case, unfortunately. It wasn’t created to be that way, but we have made it that way. By living as we do, by making the choices that we have made, we have sinned our way into a world of death and moral darkness. These things are not a product only of our own day and age; if we have pornography, ethnic cleansing, global pollution and wall-to-wall promiscuity, the people of classical times were not far behind us. Crucifixion, slavery, gladiator contests, ritual prostitution and spectator-sport executions were not the product of human righteousness. Corinth could

³ Heb.1:2-3.

have shown Las Vegas a thing or two.

The world is a dark place. We look at sin and suffering on every hand. Our newspapers are full of it; our own lives are constantly overwhelmed by it. Half the time even we Christians barely feel spiritual enough to come to church because of it — or our thoughts are distracted during worship or the sermon by our own troubles or sins, or those of loved ones.

And into that darkness comes God, not as a heavenly voice, nor as a cherub flying around with a banner that says “Stop it, you rascals!” ... but as a Galilæan peasant. How earthy! God, how *could* you?

“In him was life, and that life was the light of men.” Life consists in being “in Christ”. To be sure, there is a general, limited sense, in which even unbelievers ‘live in him’ — even though they don’t recognize the fact. He is, after all, the ‘word’ through which they were created. That is why Paul, in Athens, was able to tell the assembled intellectuals that “in him we live and move and have our being”.⁴

According to John, the “light” that is “the life of men” also shines into this world’s darkness, “but the darkness has not understood it”. Now normally I use only modern translations, but on one point the old King James (or Authorized) Version has an advantage. It reads: “the darkness comprehended it not”. That’s better because it more closely approximates the ambiguity of the Greek. Most Bibles have footnotes explaining that this verse can mean *either* that the darkness couldn’t understand the light, *or* that it couldn’t overpower it. And the word ‘comprehend’ very cleverly faces both ways. For, clearly, both are right. God coming to us as a man offends our sense of logic or

⁴ Acts 17:28.

propriety; darkness finds it hard to 'understand'. It's also true that the darkness has spent all of the past two thousand years trying to extinguish the light, starting with the crucifixion and carrying on with persecutions of various kinds and intensities, until in the early twenty-first century the worldwide church is bigger than ever. The darkness can't overpower it.

There isn't any other light. You can hide from this one — for a while, at least. Indeed, that is the basis on which we shall all be judged.

“This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”⁵

And even if we do hide for a while, we still won't find another light except for this Galilæan peasant. Because there isn't one.

John has worked another carefully contrived ambiguity into the opening passage of his gospel. (He really does intend us to stop and think!) The NIV reads: “The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.” That is, when Jesus comes into the world as a man, by being born as a baby in Bethlehem, then growing up as a carpenter, and then preaching, teaching and healing, and finally by dying on a cross, he brings light to everyone through what he says and what he does.

But this sentence can also read like this: “This was the true light that gives light to every man who comes into the world.” On this reading, the one who “comes into the world” is not Jesus, but “every man”. If so, Jesus is being considered here, not as a Jewish carpenter in Roman Palestine, but as he was in eternity with the Father. As “the

⁵ Jn.3:19-21.

Word” he gives light to every person who is ever born. Everybody can see something of God, simply through the creation that they can see around them and also by virtue of their own createdness in the image of God. And the Word of God (understood, not as the Bible, but as “the light”) is what reveals this to us, even if we’ve never heard of Jesus or seen a Bible in our lives. The apostle Paul spells this out in his letter to the Romans, and concludes that this is why we are all “without any excuse” for our sins.⁶ It is also what Abraham Kuyper, the nineteenth-century Dutch theologian, called ‘common grace’.

Again, John’s sentence reads both ways, and both are profound insights into what is going on when we say that the Creator of the universe has become a man.

The offence of the boy next door

We have been speaking philosophically again. For the past few pages, we have been considering an angle on the problem that would have bothered Greeks (or French people) far more than Jews (or Brits).

But John soon gets down to the other side of the issue as well. Not only did the “world ... not recognize him” (that is, Jesus), but he came to that special part of the world “which was his own, but his own did not receive him”. This is not altogether surprising (quite apart from Jewish religious sensibilities), in view of the world as we know it. Jesus himself wryly commented that “Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor”. Onlookers had just been scoffing at him: “Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James,

⁶ Rom. 1:20.

Joses, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?"⁷ Forget the messianic claims. Never mind the thought that Jesus is actually God come amongst us. Not even a divinely inspired prophet comes from *here*! Prophets, religious authorities, things and people of veneration come either from hundreds of miles away or at least from centuries ago. They must retain an aura of distance. God is not manifested in the carpenter's kid from next door! Prophets don't have actual brothers and sisters!⁸

Such sentiments are obviously irrational. The ancient — or distant — person venerated must have been somebody's kid-next-door. In the immortal words of Eccles (of the 1950s comic series, *The Goonshow*), "Everybody got to be somewhere!" But when the somewhere is your-where, it's just so hard to accept.

Partly, of course, there is an element of pride, that makes it hard for people to respond to the Christian witness of a close family member, whose foibles they know all too well. It is easier to respect a distant preacher, whose faults may be less obvious because of that distance.

This attitude extends even to quite trivial things. I remember as a youth leader introducing some worship songs that a few of us in the group had written. These were received tolerably well, but one kid mentioned them later in comparison with what he called 'real worship songs'. The funny thing was, he was implying no criticism at all of our own efforts. (Much criticism may indeed have been due from wiser heads, but certainly he was in no position to give it.) On interrogation, it emerged that a 'real' song was something that had been printed in a book and written by someone we didn't know,

⁷ Mk.6:3-4.

⁸ Significantly, later generations of Christians were sometimes anxious to rescue Jesus from the same 'contamination'. They were explained away as 'cousins' — or as Joseph's children by a previous marriage, from which he had been widowed.

and who lived a long way away from our little church!

Poor kid. He was only fifteen; I should leave him alone. But the point is clear. The familiar, the too-like-us, the earthy, does not easily win our respect. We need illusions. But Jesus has become precisely that: one of us. The key statement in John's whole prologue, the very heart of what he has to say, is that "The Word became flesh". There is the central offence. The infinite God squeezes himself into a human body ("foolishness to the Greeks") and becomes an ordinary Jewish boy whom you could walk right up to and speak with ("a stumbling block to the Jews").⁹

And not entirely without its problems for us. How can this man be God? Or, to put it another way, how can this God be man? Christian theology got working on the problem at an early stage, moved into excessive overdrive in the fourth and fifth centuries, and has kept creeping back to tinker with it ever since. I am not about to second-guess all of that effort, though I would be glad enough to dispense with some of it. I do not understand exactly what would be going on inside of this personality, this god-and-man, Jesus, when he weeps with emotion one moment and raises Lazarus from the dead the next. But I cannot doubt the basic formulation, because the biblical evidence (not just of the proof-texting kind that we need to resort to in order to silence the Jehovah's Witnesses!) more or less rules out any other conclusion.

The collision between heaven and earth

To be sure, there are very many things in this world that I do not understand. I cannot grasp how gravity operates, or how a car engine works, or why toast always

⁹ 1 Cor.1:23.

lands butter-side down. But I know that these incomprehensions are due to my own stupidity and laziness. Given time and forcing myself to pay attention, I could probably get the hang of these things. In this case of God becoming a man, however, not only do I not fully understand, but I am extremely suspicious of those who claim that they do. We can, should and must say the words (“fully God and fully man”) but, as soon as we start to think about how that must have been in practice, our imaginations cannot cope! All of our categories are broken down!

Still, we can understand this much: in becoming a man, God was doing something that he has always done. He was deliberately limiting his own omnipotence. He was allowing his own infinity to be reduced to finity. He was taking a risk. All of this was just as he had done when he made us human beings in the first place. He could have made robots, but instead he made people; that is, he gave freedom to the creatures he had imagined into existence so that they could act independently of — and even against — his will. Now he was actually becoming one of them himself!

The fact that Jesus came here as a man (what we call the ‘incarnation’, that is the ‘enfleshment’) is quite literally the bringing together of heaven and earth, of infinity and finity. Now, that completely beggars many of our neat, mental categories (which is another way of saying that we can’t understand it), but then God is not an abstract intellectual principle, or the ‘first cause’, or the ‘unmoved mover’; he is personal!

Moreover, it is in this collision of the spiritual and the material, of heaven and earth, that orthodox Christian faith consists. Is God transcendent (that is, utterly distinct from and outside of the world he has made) or is he immanent (that is, inhabiting it in every place and manifested through every object)? The answer is neither one nor the other — but both! That offends our neat intellectual systems, but it is the only way of

doing justice to what we read about God and his dealings with the world and to Christian experience. Moreover, if we force ourselves to choose between a transcendent god and an immanent one, we will end up in heresy, whichever road we choose.

If we emphasize only God's transcendence, the result may sound very 'spiritual' for a while, as we stress his 'sovereignty' and his superiority to the transient doings of mere mortals. In the process, however, his care for, and intimacy with, his world get lost. We end up with an unknowable God. But the whole point of Scripture and the coming of Jesus is that we might know God! For he is not distant and without passions, existing only in some rarefied spiritual realm; he is intimately involved with, and moved by, the affairs of the creatures he has made. Nor is the physicality of the world a cause for despising it, for God has made it and called it "good" — whatever evil may since have come to it through our own sinfulness.

If, on the other hand, we emphasize only God's immanence, that also may sound 'spiritual' for a while (just think of 'seeing God in everything!'), but we will end up as New Age mystics, worshipping nature.

Transcendence alone, then, veers off down a road which leads, at one end of the fork, in the direction of Islam, or else, in the other, to deism. Immanence alone is a road that leads either to Hinduism or to the New Age. Without following them so far as their logical destinations, however, we will still have a pretty shaky kind of Christianity by following either of these routes at all!

For God is both transcendent, distinct from his creation, *and* immanent, haunting it in every place and capable of being moved by it. That reality is the distinct Christian

insight. "The Word became flesh." It's offensive stuff.

We find the same situation in respect of that other manifestation of 'the Word of God', the Bible. Is it divinely inspired or is it a humanly produced document recording what its authors thought and felt? If God inspired it, do we have to discount the personalities and backgrounds of Jeremiah, John and the others, and assume that they were used by the Holy Spirit as some kind of human dictating machines? If, on the other hand, the Bible reflects the people by whom, and the places where, it was written, does this mean that the Bible is completely untrustworthy? Such arguments miss the point. For Scripture, like the body of Jesus, is the meeting place of heaven and earth, and to ask which fragment is human and which divine is well nigh impossible, and perhaps even meaningless. God works through people, their cultures, temperaments and characters, and in spite of their failings and limitations. That is the entire point! So of course the Bible reflects the assumptions of its culture and the personalities of its different human authors, whilst nevertheless remaining the Word of God.

So in coming as a man, Jesus was taking to the limit this ultimate paradox that is at the very heart of what Christian faith is all about. In the incarnation, heaven and earth collide, meet, fuse and embrace. Infinity slips into the world of the finite like an uninvited guest. When the Word through whom the world was created "became flesh", the Author was becoming an actor in his own play.