

Christmas I

The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us; this is a word of salvation.

We sense that we need to be saved, in body and spirit;

we yearn for a sense of wholeness.

Doctors, priest, therapists, yoga instructors, mindfulness websites;

all offer us a hope of personal integration and restored relationship with God or the universe or ultimate reality.

We sense that that we need to be saved at every level of our being.

How many levels are there?

Have you pondered lately what a human being is?

I sometimes hear us spoken of in an old way, an old way that isn't old enough,

that we are bodies with souls or souls with bodies,

that the two are separable, which happens when we die.

People say this at funerals.

To think of your body as a flabby, disposable soul container, however, isn't really sufficient, in Biblical or scientific terms.

Particularly in the Old Testament, in the Hebrew Scriptures,

our kind are understood as a unified reality, not separable into components.

Your soul is not a hard drive to be pulled out of the rest of your then-useless hardware.

You are more mysteriously together, more integrated than that.

We hope for Resurrection.

We struggle to find language to speak of ourselves.

To body and soul, we add terms like "mind" and "spirit."

Science has told us much more about who we are and yet also leaves us deeper in mystery.

We know there is code in each of our cells that determines much about us,

and yet we know freedom and creativity.

Neuroscience seems to be showing us that our consciousness is in the brain,

that our consciousness is organic and fleshly.

Is that what we had been calling the soul? I am not yet sure.

Yet we might be coming back round to what the Hebrews knew

before they fell under the influence of the Greeks.

We are one thing, an integrated creature, made in the image of God.

So the word would need to be made flesh and dwell with us to save us.

Three things there; the word, made flesh, and dwelled among us.

Before all else, it is divine salvation that we need; the saving presence of God.

This Word is the second person of the Holy Trinity,

the wisdom and reason of God, active in the creation of all things.

Flesh-taking and dwelling-with would not be saving if it were not God of which we speak.

Jesus, the Word of God, brought the mind of God to bear in the world

and has enlightened our minds for his service.

And this Word was made flesh.

“Flesh” is a bad word in parts of the Bible,
a shorthand for uncontrolled, abusive, bodily and material desire.
But here we hear that flesh has been claimed by God for salvation.
And we know how wonderful a love expressed in the flesh is.

We treasure hugs, meals lovingly prepared,
the joys of marriage, snuggling babies,
the beauty of the earth that delights our eyes.

It is an amazing sign of God’s generosity and God’s determination to save us that God would
choose flesh, to which we are so susceptible.

How can we resist?

Not just ideas, not just philosophy, but in the living, breathing, warm-to-the touch,
embracing flesh.

Jesus, the Word of God in flesh, came in such attractive, relational form to win us back to God.

And he came to dwell among us, to inhabit our space, to share in our experience.

In that dwelling with, Jesus, in flesh like ours,
has carried, into the life of God, the experiences we know,
the whole range, sorrow, joy, pain, and pleasure,
accomplishment and bitter failure.

He didn’t hang out, didn’t visit;

he dwelled, and our ways were his for a long season and are eternally.

And in that time with us, he taught us the ways of the Kingdom of God.

The word, taking flesh, and dwelling among us is the necessary foundation
for all else we would testify to in the Gospel.

If we have not seen God in the flesh, then the teaching of Jesus
is worth as much as any competing philosophy.

If his words are not those of the Word, there is much in them we will disregard as inconvenient.

If he wasn’t really in the flesh, if his humanity were not real,

if he did not dwell deeply with us, then his counsel comes from too high to work for us.

If the eternal Word of God, the second person of the Trinity,
didn’t become flesh and dwell with us,

then it matters little that a man died on a cross and we can see no real reason for a Resurrection.

If the Word did not take flesh and dwell with us,

to teach and die and be raised,

then the silliness of washing babies in his name

and eating bread and drinking wine alleged to be him ought to be stopped.

But the word did become flesh and dwelled among us,

to save us at every level of our being,

in our bodies that will be healed and raised,
in our minds that are being enlightened,
in our spirits that share in his Holy Spirit,
in all and whatever it is that makes us us, that God has claimed in Jesus Christ.
We may still be learning what a human being is,
but we know how a human being is saved,
through the gracious act of God in Christ,
who is drawing us still into the life and love of God by his incarnation.

If your faith has not all those dimensions; a new year is surely a good time to seek it.

Is the Bible the first book of your life; is that word before you?

Is the Gospel the foundation of the life your mind?

And then,

Do you know the joys of the flesh and share in the sorrows of it?

Or are you lost in the intellectual or virtual ether?

And third,

Do you dwell with others, with neighbors and sisters and brothers in the faith, or are you living above and beyond deep relationship?

The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us,

surely that we might know his word,

live in the flesh

and dwell with those he came to save.