

The Incarnation

Romans 13:12b

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

There is a verse in a poem that one of the modern poets wrote and it goes like this, "O world invisible, we view thee; O world unknowable, we know thee; O world untouchable, we touch thee, incomprehensible, we clutch thee", and for centuries, all the gurus and the sages and the philosophers of the human family would have said, it's impossible, it's impossible. You cannot talk about reality in those concrete terms and all their opinions of reality down through the years were filled with vague generalizations and vague aspirations. So the Hindus would talk about "Oh well there is Brahmin and there is Vishnu and there is Shiva, gods of creation and preservation and destruction, but they're not personal, we can't know them. You should try to somehow merge in with them but you can't ever know them."

Or Confucius would say, "Well, you can come to a certain peace if you bring about an inner harmony to your mental and emotional life." While about the same time in 500 B.C., Buddha would say, "Well, you can come to a kind of peace if you negate the self." But it did not matter who it was, whether it was Zoroaster or Buddha or Mohammed, all of them were saying the same thing, "Well, I think reality is less. I think reality is like this. I believe the meaning of the universe is this", but all we human beings could do was suspect that behind the waving leaf of a tree, there were some kind of life that brought it about and we ought to try in some way to try to merge with that life. That was all, loved ones, that we knew about reality by our own efforts. That was the kind of vagueness that filled our notions of reality.

What then happened to enable this poet of our era to write, "O world invisible, we view thee; O world unknowable, we know thee; O world untouchable, we touch thee, incomprehensible, we clutch thee" ? God came to earth and lived here for 30 years, that's it, that's it.

God came to earth and lived here for 30 years. It's as if he looked down at us and watched us with all our mystical ideas and all our feeling after truth and he said, "Stop that, stop that. All those things you are trying to do to make out who I am, here, here is what I am. Here, I want you to see me in your own terms so that you'll be in no doubt; this is the person who has made you."

That's why about 300 years ago, a man called Milton wrote, "That glorious form, that light insufferable; and that far-beaming blaze of majesty, wherewith he went at heaven's high council-table to sit the midst of Trinal Unity, He laid aside, and, here with us to be. Forsook the courts of everlasting day, and chose with us a darksome house of mortal clay", and what did he mean?

Well, all the high-flown statements of the poets and the philosophers never get it over the way that simple fact did. He meant that Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem, and it's amazing, isn't it that the dumbest little three or four-year-old can understand that and they mightn't understand Milton or Mohammed or Zoroaster or all the great philosophers but they can understand that Jesus was God's own Son born here on earth, and it's incredible that it's as simple as that.

Yet that's what the incarnation is. It's God saying, "I am going to end all your philosophizing, all that you're guessing, all your surmising and I am going to come here to earth incarnate", in Latin "In the flesh", incarnate. "I am going to come incarnate to your earth so that you will have no

doubt any longer what I am really like", and that's what the incarnation is, loved ones. It's at least that.

It's a clear demonstration to each one of us of what reality is and what God is like. That, at least, the incarnation does for us. It brushes away all the guessing, all the philosophizing, all the generalizing, all the mysticism -- and it shows us exactly what God is like, but it is something more than that. It shows us what God is like if he ever became incarnate in you. It shows us what God is like if he ever was able to come and live in your life. It shows the kind of life that he would live, and you remember, it was the kind of life lived by an elder son.

If Jesus lived the life he did, in his own body, then if God were to come into your own life, he would live the same kind of life. That is, he would do a job of some kind, that's what Jesus did for 30 years. He made tables and chairs and yokes for oxen. He worked as an ordinary carpenter helping to bring more order into God's world and helping to preserve some of the beauty that was in it.

Now, if God was to come incarnate into your life, he would presumably live the same kind of life. He would do an ordinary job. He would do some job that helped to bring order and harmony and beauty into his Father's world. We reckon that Joseph died when the family was young. That's at least the best information we have that Joseph died when the rest of the family was young and Jesus of course, was the oldest son and therefore he helped Mary bring up the rest of the family by carrying on his father's business and that's exactly what he did for over 30 years.

So of course if God were to come incarnate into your life, he would presumably do the same kind of thing. Now it is true that that wasn't what occupied him night and day. I mean, he did that because he lived in the kind of world that we do where there's a need for a supply of goods and services in order to maintain life here in time and space but that wasn't what made him tick. That wasn't what Jesus thought about night and day.

He didn't think about the yokes and the tables and the chairs night and day when he lay in bed at night. That wasn't what concerned him. What concerned him was some other business that he was preoccupied with, and it was a business that he was preoccupied with even before he engaged in his public ministry.

During those 30 hidden years, this was what consumed him and he expressed it, you remember, even before he was out of childhood. It was in Luke 2:46. Mary and Joseph you remember had gone to Jerusalem for a special time and they had left to go back home and found, of course, that Jesus wasn't with them and they had to go back to Jerusalem to look for him. And so in Luke 2:46, this is what happened.

Luke 2:46, "After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions; and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. And when they saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously." And he said to them, "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" And actually the Greek reads, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's things? Did you not know that I must be involved with my Father's affairs, that I must be concerned about the same things as my Father?"

Well, of course that just bewildered Mary and Joseph because he wasn't planning any building of

tables or chairs and that was his father's business. But what Jesus meant was, "This is what makes me tick. I do this with my hands" -- as some of you are plumbers, as some of you are teachers, as some of you are secretaries, as some of you are finance people - "I do this with my hands to bring order into this time, space, world and to help preserve it. But what makes me tick and what I am concerned about are the things that concern my Father. He has a dream for every individual in this world and he has a miraculous ability to get every life into that dream and to get every life back onto the track that he had in mind for it, that's what I am concerned about. That's what I am going to spend my life doing. I am going to spend my life getting over to others the plan that my Father has for them -- and I am going to help them to exercise the faith that is needed to get back on to that plan." That was what he was concerned about.

So, when Jesus said, "Did you not know that I must be about my Father's affairs", that's what he meant. And so he lived his life to do that. He lived his life to get as many people as possible in this world to understand what God had in mind by putting them here in the first place, and then encouraging them to have faith to do that.

So probably if God would be incarnate in you, he would do the same thing, and maybe he'd work for early retirement and spend the last three or four years or the last 10 years of his life doing that full time. He probably wouldn't retire to Florida to fish and die, probably wouldn't, and we should keep that in mind.

It's so good, isn't it, to be able to look at Jesus and see that's what God did when he came to earth. What would he do in me if he came to earth in me? And that's what he'd do. He'd spend his last breath trying to get the rest of us to understand what God's plan was for our lives and encouraging us to exercise the faith that is needed to fulfill that plan.

Jesus didn't concern himself with the latest model camel or the latest model cart. He was a dear person. And it wasn't because he was an ascetic or a monastic, it wasn't. They accused him of being a winebibber, a drinker, because he went to parties. So it wasn't because he was monastic or ascetic, but he knew, "The latest camel, ah, that's not what we are here for. The latest cart, that's not what we are here for. Anyway, it'll only be the latest for a little while. We're not here to gather those things. Those aren't essential things."

He didn't either try to get himself into an elite group -- an elite professional group or an elite group financially -- because he was concerned to be close to ordinary people, to help ordinary people to understand what God had planned for their lives. So if God were to become incarnate in you or in me, he probably would do that same thing. He wouldn't get himself into an elite select group that would cut him off from other people; he would be with ordinary people.

Very interesting -- Jesus didn't even wrap himself all up with family life. He didn't. He didn't get all worked up with the Christian family. In fact, you might say he was kind of hard about it if you would like to look at a certain piece. It's in Mark 3:31.

Mark 3:31, "And his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting about him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, asking for you." And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother.'" And it's pretty straight, isn't it?

If God were to become incarnate in you, he probably wouldn't get all wrapped up over his blood relatives and he probably wouldn't think that his own blood-son was any dearer to him than the little child that is dying in Bombay this morning, because he obviously thought of everybody as his brothers and sisters and everybody as his sons and daughters. So if God were to become incarnate in you, he probably would live that great expanse of life that is much bigger than the ordinary, narrow little idea of family.

They said he did not have a pillow to put his head on. He certainly didn't have a nice house to live in. So if God were to become incarnate in you, he probably wouldn't live for a nice house and he obviously didn't live for getting married. If God wanted him to be married he'd marry but if God didn't, he didn't make that a big goal of his life.

Obviously, if God were to become incarnate in you and me, these are the things that he would be concerned about, aren't they? You know it. You know it speaks so forcefully, doesn't it, that you know so well it's not me trying to put over a line to you because his whole life was standing behind this and it's very obvious.

He did not have a nice house, he was not married, he did not get all wrapped up in his children and his wife. He did not get all wrapped up with getting an elite professional situation. He did not get all concerned about the latest camel and the latest cart. It's very obvious, and of course our God is saying to us this morning, "My loved ones, you know, you know what I am like because you can look at my son Jesus and you can see the kind of life I lived in him. Now don't tell me that you didn't know. You know the kind of life I lived in him and you know he wasn't a wild fanatic and he wasn't a strange person and you know how much you admired him and you know how much you encouraged other people to follow him. Now if I become incarnate in you, isn't it likely that I would live that kind of life too?"

Maybe that's the biggest thing the incarnation does for us, isn't it? It's God saying, "Stop all the talk. Stop lording it over one another with your knowledge that you have got from Zen Buddhism or your knowledge that you have got from Christian mysticism or your knowledge that you have got from the charismatic movement. Stop all that lording it over each other with your knowledge and what you understand about God. Be. Be. That's why I came to earth."

"I was able to get the knowledge to you in books like this but the only way I could get over to you the heart of what I am, is by being -- because that's what I am. I am who I am. It's not a matter of talking about the love that you have for people. It's raising Lazarus from the dead because you love Mary and Martha and you love Lazarus. It's doing things. It's being friendly to lonely people. It's healing sick people. It's helping people who are down and out -- that's what being in me is. That's what me being in you is, it's doing things. That's what I did. I did things. I didn't just talk; I healed people. I lifted people. I helped people. I befriended people. That's what I want to do in you." If God becomes incarnate in you and me, he'll probably be the same as he was in Jesus and that's, you remember, the kind of life that Jesus lived.

In other words, Jesus said, "I drove nails straight. I didn't sell furniture with joints that were weak. I drove nails straight and I sold furniture that had strong joints in it." That's what God did when he came to earth here. He did things right. He was what he said he was and that's, loved ones, what God will do in you.

That's why Jesus put it into Paul to say, "Love is not irritable or resentful. It is not jealous or

boastful. It is not arrogant or rude. Love believes all things. Love bears all things. Love endures to the end." And then Jesus was able to say, "I am patient and kind. I am not arrogant or rude. I am not jealous or boastful. I do not insist on my own way. I am not glad when others go wrong. I am glad when others are right. I believe all the things. I bear all the things."

What God is able to say in you is just that, if he becomes incarnate in you. And could you say that? Could you say, "I am gentle and kind? I am not jealous or boastful? I am not arrogant or rude? I do not insist on my own way? I am not glad when others go wrong? I am glad when others are right"?

If God becomes incarnate in you, he will be what he was in Jesus, and loved ones finally, that's the only proof that God is in you, not all your knowledge. It's not a matter of knowledge of good and evil, it's a matter of life. It is a tree of life, and of course, up to that point, our humanist society agrees, and for two whole weeks, our whole humanist society says, "That's right, that's right. We should be what Jesus is. We should be kind to the underprivileged. We should be kind to those who are deprived. We should be like that", and for two whole weeks, our humanist society rises to that and tries to be that and they, in some sense, engage in at least gestures to that end.

So our whole humanist society believes all that but they can't keep it up because they haven't a Christmas nature. They just put it on for a while but they can't keep it up because they haven't a Christmas nature. Moreover, increasingly don't you agree, the kindness or generosity that we all express at Christmas becomes increasingly superficial as the years go by because however much kindness and generosity you have, you somehow can't deal with those problems that are the chronic problems. The broken family relationships, you cannot deal with those. The personalities that will not change, you can't deal with those, and all our kindness, and all our attempts to imitate Jesus can't deal with those things. That's maybe the greatest part about the incarnation.

Not that in Jesus God was good and was kind and was loving, but that in Jesus, there was released in this world a power that deals with the broken family relationships, a power that deals with broken bodies and broken hearts, and that's what Jesus said, you remember.

He said, "There is something that has happened since I came to earth. The kingdom of heaven is at hand because you can see people being healed. In fact, maybe you'd like to look at it. You remember when John sent his disciples to see who Jesus was. Jesus answered them in Luke 7:20.

Luke 7:20, "And when the men had come to him, they said, 'John, the Baptist was sent us to you, saying, 'Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?' In that hour he cured many of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many that were blind he bestowed sight. And he answered them, 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me.'"

That's what happened when God became incarnate in Jesus. Jesus knew that God had already healed all those things. He had already solved them all in his death before the beginning of the world but he knew that those things would only be manifested here if he expressed his faith that these things had been done.

Now would you think for a minute what expressing faith was? Was it Jesus going into his room where nobody could see him and saying, "Lord, that man that's paralyzed, will you heal him? Heal him Lord

so that he'll be walking when I get out of this room and I'll be able to tell everybody, you know how that happened? God did that." That would have been a safe way to operate because what if it didn't work? Nobody knew Jesus had prayed. But that's not the way faith works. Indeed that isn't faith.

Faith was Jesus in that house surrounded by all kinds of people with all eyes upon him and then these guys, they don't only bring the guy in, you know, by the side door, they break open the roof and let the guy right down, this paralyzed man, right in front of everybody so that stops the sermon dead, and then Jesus has to show that faith is action.

He knows that this man has already been healed in the Lamb that was slain from before the foundation of the world in himself. Already he has been healed but he knows that that will never be manifested in time and space unless he actually puts himself on the line and says, "Rise, take up your bed and walk", and he shows that faith is action.

Maybe that's the greatest thing about the incarnation. It shows you why so many of us live in poverty, in poverty of spirit, in poverty of health, in poverty of our abilities. We live there because we won't go out on faith action and it's only faith action that enables the miracles that God has wrought in Jesus to be manifested in us.

In other words, when the man came with blind eyes to Jesus, it would have been a nicer, less threatening, more fail-safe situation if Jesus could have stayed in his own room and simply prayed that God, his Father would heal this man and would enable him to see, but he didn't do that. He asked the man, "What do you want me to do?" and the man said, "That I might see", and then Jesus took mud, you remember and put it on the man's eyes. Can you imagine the anticlimax if that man had not been able to see? I mean they would have been pretty mad. All he had got was a dirty face. That's what it is, you see.

See, if you believe it, you'll do it; if you don't believe it, then you won't touch the mud, but you see, our lives lack the power of God because we won't let God be incarnate in us. That is, we won't engage on actions and words that only make sense if God has in fact done this in Jesus death. that's it.

See, we'll say, "Lord, will you help the situation in my office? Will you make it better? Will you improve my boss's attitude?" Deep down in our hearts we think this praying is dead easy. It's a nice way to go because if it works, it's good and if it doesn't then my body isn't on the line, except that that's not faith. That's the old prayer wheel stuff. It's not faith.

Faith is believing that God has already healed the situation in the office and approaching the boss in absolute confidence and with a whole new spirit and heart to yourself that is based on that fact that you know it's been changed, that's it. Why do so many of us see no changes in our marriages? We approach them the same way.

"Lord, will you try to influence my wife or my husband? Will you try to bring them around?" And we hope that somehow God will change the thing but we don't put our own lives on the line by acting towards them on the basis of the fact that they have already been changed and that's what Jesus brought home to us in the incarnation.

Faith is action. It isn't just praying. It isn't just words. It isn't just thinking. It isn't

working yourself up into a persuasion that the thing is so. Faith is acting in absolute certainty that this thing has already been done. That's what the incarnation is about. It's God incarnate in a man, so confidently believing that God has removed all the evil in his life and all the evil in the world already that he does what only makes sense if that in fact is true.

So loved ones, many of us are playing mental games and what God is saying to us at this Christmas time is, "If I become incarnate in you, I will be exactly what I was in my son Jesus", and then here's the amazing fact. There's a verse in the Bible that runs like this, "He was the light that enlightens every man that comes into the world." Jesus is in you. Jesus' life is in you. It is incarnate in you. You can let it be what it is or you can destroy it, and he said because of this, greater works than these will you all do.

So loved ones, you can be this very moment what God has already made you and greater works than these will you do. That's part of what the incarnation means for us. Let us pray.

Dear Father, we are overwhelmed. Thank you. Dear God, we see that there's only one thing to do and that is to be this moment and to act and to speak and no more merely to think and meditate and aspire and hope but to be and think and speak and do, so that we may be part of this great incarnation, and so that men and women in our places of work and in our world will be able to see you alive in another person's flesh, will be able to see you incarnate in us. Lord God, we commit ourselves to being this for your glory. Amen.