The Word Became Flesh and Dwelt Among Us

Rev. Fr. Anthony Cook

Since we began, we have spoken repeatedly of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ as the core Truth of the Christian Rule of Faith. This has held true even though we have not yet actually seen this word used in the Creed. Today, we finally arrive at the point we have been anticipating, as we confess that Jesus Christ was Incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became a human being.

I thought originally that we would cover this phrase in one or two episodes, but as I have worked to prepare those episodes, I have realized how much there is to say about the Lord’s Incarnation, even approached in the most basic of terms. I would dearly love to say that this point of Faith has become needlessly and artificially complicated over the centuries…but I cannot. The Incarnation is THE central matter of the Rule of Faith, and it touches every part of our life and our very existence, and because it touches on Christ, the God-Man, as well, its depths are, in fact, infinite. We have already spoken at length about this, especially in episodes 18 through 22, and have discussed from the beginning how the Christian Faith often seems complicated and difficult, because Christian people must confess with words and reason the encounter of the Infinite God with the Finite Creation, and because words are insufficient to describe, much less define, the Infinite God. Words can point in the direction of the Truth. Words can rule out falsehood. Words can meditate on truths that appear to be contradictory but which are, in fact, perfectly harmonized in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ. But words cannot reduce these matters to something perfectly simple and easy.

What we can do, however, is break down the many facets of our life and Faith that touch on the Incarnation, cut them into bite-sized pieces, as it were, into discrete and fundamental points. We will summarize these points here and now, and examine each of them in more detail moving forward.

Point #1: The Incarnation of the Lord - that it happened, and why it happened, as well as how it happened - is prophesied, proclaimed, and affirmed in Scripture. The language with which the Creed affirms these truths (that our Lord Jesus Christ, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man) … this language is taken directly from the Bible, and functions self-consciously, I think, as a summary of the Scriptural witness. These passages are important - we need to know well what it is that they say about the Lord and His coming to us.

Point #2: Since, in the Incarnation, God assumes our human nature, we must
reflect deeply on what exactly it is that we are. The human nature that
Christ assumes in the Incarnation is summed up in the term “Flesh.” But
flesh in the human context is a complex and composite reality,
comprised, at the very least, of a physical, fleshly element and of a
spiritual element as well. We can and do and must affirm that whatever
our human nature is, the Lord assumed everything that we are in His
Incarnation - He truly became a human being. But we are still left with
that complex and composite reality of human nature, and the question of
what that composite reality is, in fact, composed of.

Point #3: We don’t actually have a clear and consistent answer for that
question. We tend to speak of a human being as being composed of a
body and a soul, but some of the Fathers speak also of a spirit that is
potentially distinct from the soul, or of the nous, the intellect, as a third
element of the human being. Dogmatically the Church also speaks of will
and energy as being in some sense aspects or elements of human nature,
assumed by the Lord. What we can say is that we are physical beings,
that we are made in the image and likeness of God, that we are created
for relationship with God, and that the integrity of some part of what we
are persists after death, and awaits the Resurrection of the Body in a
place of either rest and peace, or of darkness and torment, variously
called Paradise, and Sheol, or Hades.

Point #4: If we try to understand the Incarnation in terms of the Lord
assuming our fallen nature, we are doomed to confusion and to error,
because we do not understand what we are, and as a result we cannot
affirm with confidence what He has assumed. We begin to think of the
Lord as not just assuming our nature, but as being made in our image,
and this becomes more and more troubling the more we understand how
very imperfect and fallen we are individually, and still more so the more
we see how many different ideas there are of what exactly human nature
is.

Point #5: The Orthodox Christian solution to this problem is to remember
that there is, in fact, no human nature apart from Christ. Despite the
slight inconvenience that time and temporality present to our
understanding of this truth, we know that Jesus Christ, God Most High,
born of a Virgin in Bethlehem, is the original human being. Adam and
Eve, and you and I, and all other human beings who live and have ever
lived are created in His image. WE have been made like Him, not Him
like us. Not that we can’t and don’t affirm that, within time, He has
assumed our nature, HAS become like us…but we need to understand
that that is only from our perspective, and thus is an imperfect and
ultimately misleading way of speaking about these matters. If left
uncorrected by what we know to be true, this way of speaking leads us to
assume that God’s action in relationship with us is bound by the
constraints of Time, and we manifestly know that He is not. We are so
bound - but not Him.

Point #6: This brings us back to the word Incarnation. In a very real
sense, the Lord’s Incarnation is His union, as Creator, with His Creation.
The Flesh that He assumes is the matter of His Creation, which He takes
upon Himself, to which He gives being, which He upholds and sustains
and vivifies. That matter, once He has assumed it, remains matter, but is
elevated and sanctified and perfected, in hypostatic union with the Very God and Creator Himself. And when God makes man, the Flesh that God fashions from the dust of the ground in His image and likeness, into which He breathes the breath of life, is truly alive, not merely animated by the will of God our Creator, but possessing a life and will of its own, yearning toward communion with its Creator.

Point #7: This truth then gives us a potential answer for what the soul is - we are created in the image and likeness of Christ, no longer merely flesh and blood, like the animals, but body and spirit, creatures made to be like the Prototype of humanity, created for communion with the God-Man. The Soul, then, that ancient word for the “life/breath” that animates the physical matter of living flesh, comes to be more properly applied to the life of us human beings, that life which “is hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3).

Point #8: Thus the Soul, which should by rights be coterminous with the body, coming into existence when the body begins to exist, and ceasing to exist when the body dies, is therefore instead Immortal, created to live forever in communion with its Prototype, our Lord Jesus Christ, and thus the Body, too, has an immortal destiny, although it is frail and temporary. And therefore when we die, the soul persists, and passes to a place of rest to await the Resurrection. It remains the life of the body, even as the body decays and falls apart, and even the body is called as well to everlasting communion with the Incarnate Lord Jesus Christ. After death, both the soul and the body await the Resurrection, the consummation and perfection of the image and likeness of God, of our Lord Jesus Christ, set in them as a seed at their creation, so that in the fullness of time, with the revelation of the entirety of the Lord’s Incarnation (His birth, and life, and death, and resurrection, and ascension, and ultimate return in Glory), they might together, whole and complete and perfected in Christ, abide in communion with the Godhead for eternity.

With these eight points, we work our way through the deep complexities of the Incarnation - that Jesus Christ comes into the world and unites Himself with our fallen nature, but that His coming is itself the laying of the cornerstone of our nature, and that communion with Him is what we were created for, what we have fallen from. We will consider each of these points more carefully in the next several episodes, but it is important that we understand and remember our destination as we go. Our Incarnate Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, is both God and Man, both Infinite Creator and Immanent within His Creation, and in this juxtaposition of what are by nature opposites we see the beauty of Christ’s Person. In Him, we see ourselves as He intended us to be as though for the first time, as a reflection of His Divine Person, and thus we begin to understand the complexity and the high calling of our own nature. So next time, we will begin to examine these points by considering what is the Scriptural witness that is summed up in the Creed’s confession of our Lord’s Incarnation - foretold by the Prophets, attested by the Evangelists, and affirmed by the Apostles and Martyrs.

The above is the twenty-seventh installment of Fr. Anthony’s catechetical podcast, updated semi-weekly at http://theruleoffaith.typepad.com. We also have a weekly Bible Study each Tuesday at 6 pm - all are welcome. Please note, as well, that we live stream each Sunday’s Orthros & Divine Liturgy on our parish Youtube channel: https://www.youtube.com/c/franthonyc-stgeorgesouthgate. A recording of the Sunday Sermons is also posted on the YouTube channel.
As we are speaking of our internet offerings, please remember to check the parish website: http://www.stgeorgesouthgate.org, for announcements, and for an updated calendar of feastdays, readings, services, and events.
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St. George Calendar of Events • JUNE - JULY 2019
FAMILY BONFIRE NIGHT

MONDAY, JULY 1 5:30—7:30 PM
Pizza and S’mores in the Park
Come and enjoy the fellowship of the
Saint George Family!

FAMILY & PARENTING DISCUSSION

* MONDAY, JULY 22 * 5:30-7:30 PM *

in the Multi-Purpose (Activity) Room
COME JOIN US in a conversation about parenting and family life,
and how we can best face today’s challenges!

Pizza & Childcare Provided

EVENTS HOSTED BY ST. GEORGE ORTHODOX PARENTS ASSOCIATION (OPA)