

Fourth Sunday of Advent A Understanding the Incarnation

Fr. Frank Schuster

Every so often this time of year there is a story...a parable really...that helps get my mind and heart into the meaning of Christmas. I have shared it before but it is worth repeating. It is from a book entitled "Christmas, do you hear what I hear" by author Paul Dunn. He begins...

(Christmas - Do You Hear What I Hear?, Paul H. Dunn, 1987, pp 90- 91)

Once upon a time, there was a man who looked upon Christmas as a lot of humbug. He wasn't a Scrooge. He was a very kind and decent person, generous to his family, upright in all his dealings with other men. But he didn't believe all that stuff about an incarnation which churches proclaim at Christmas. And he was too honest to pretend that he did.

"I am truly sorry to distress you," he told his wife, who was a faithful churchgoer, "but I simply cannot understand this claim that God became man. It doesn't make any sense to me."

On Christmas Eve, his wife and children went to church for the midnight service. He declined to accompany them. "I'd feel like a hypocrite," he explained. "I'd much rather stay at home. But I'll wait up for you."

Shortly after his family drove away in the car, snow began to fall. He went to the window and watched the flurries getting heavier and heavier.

"If we must have a Christmas," he reflected, "it's nice to have a white one." He went back to his chair by the fireside and began to read his newspaper. A few minutes later, he was startled by a thudding sound. It was quickly followed by another, then another. He thought that someone must be throwing snow balls at his living room window.

When he went to the front door to investigate, he found a flock of birds huddled miserably in the snow. They had been caught in the storm, and in a desperate search for

shelter had tried to fly through his window. I can't let those poor creatures lie there and freeze, he thought. But how can I help them?

Then he remembered the barn where the children's pony was stabled. It would provide a warm shelter. He quickly put on his coat and galoshes and tramped through the deepening snow to the barn. He opened the doors wide and turned on the light. But the birds didn't come in.

Food will bring them in, he thought. So he hurried back to the house for bread crumbs, which he sprinkled on the snow to make a trail into the barn. To his dismay, the birds ignored the bread crumbs and continued to flop around helplessly in the snow. He tried shooing them into the barn by walking around and waving his arms. They scattered in every direction - except into the warm, lighted barn.

"They find me a strange and terrifying creature," he said to himself, "and I can't seem to think of any way to let them know they can trust me. If only I could be a bird myself for a few minutes, perhaps I could lead them to safety."

Just at that moment, the church bells began to ring. He stood silently for a while, listening to the bells pealing the glad tidings of Christmas. Then he sank to his knees in the snow.

"Now I understand," he whispered. "Now I see why you had to do it."

My friends, hundreds of years before Christ was born Isaiah prophesied that a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel. The Gospel of Matthew tells us that an Angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph with the words, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from the sins." The Gospel continues, "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means "God is with us".

The question that should be on our hearts and minds is why? Why would God become human? Could it be that human beings at times are like those birds flopping in the snow? As I have shared on a number of occasions, GK Chesterton wrote in his book *Orthodoxy* that original sin was the only doctrine Christianity possessed that can be proven with empirical evidence. All one needs to do is open the newspaper and see sin in all its glory.

No matter how many prophets God would inspire to teach us. No matter how many covenants God would establish with us. Through the gift of freedom, human beings will always be capable of rejecting God, thus becoming like birds flopping in the snow. And so, for the sake of our salvation, God becomes human.

It has been explained to me in this way. When I was in kindergarten, I couldn't write my name. No matter how many children books with diagrams on how to write letters, I couldn't get the pencil to do what I wanted it to do. My teacher had to place her hand over my hand so that I could learn to write.

The incarnation of our Lord is exactly like this. By becoming human, God places his hand over our hands and teaches us to be human again. By becoming more like Christ, we become more like God. And what a marvelous exchange! God becomes human so that humans can become like God one day! Like a marriage between divinity and humanity, the possessions of one spouse become the possessions of the other spouse. In the marriage between God and humanity, God possesses our brokenness and finitude while our humanity receives Christ's divinity and eternity.

The celebration of Christmas is special because it is by Christ's incarnation that salvation becomes a possibility for humanity. And what could possibly motivate God other than love? And what could possibly motivate God other than love?

In the words of St. Bernard of Clairvaux in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, "Let your goodness, Lord, appear to us, that we, made in your image, may conform ourselves to it. In our own strength we cannot image your majesty, power and wonder; nor is it fitting for us to try. But your mercy reaches from the heavens, through the clouds, to the earth below. You have brought us the greatest of all gifts, the gift of your eternal love. Caress us with your tiny hands, embrace us with your tiny arms, and pierce our hearts with your soft, sweet cries." My friends, we have lit the fourth candle. The birthday of our savior is at hand.