



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, February 27, 2010
The Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany

Choral Evensong
at 4pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin, Ph.D.

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WHO WAS CONCEIVED BY THE HOLY GHOST, BORN OF THE VIRGIN MARY
(Apostles' Creed Series, Sermon 5)

With this line of the creed, suddenly the entire Trinity is before us. The creed began with belief in God the Father almighty, and with that word “Father” the implicit claim was made that there is a Son of God. For God is always Father, and that means there is always God the Son. So even before naming the Son, the creed assumed his presence and reality. And now, as the creed moves on to name Jesus Christ God’s only Son, it right away brings in the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Ghost. For of Jesus the creed says he “was conceived by the Holy Ghost.” What should we think of the Holy Ghost’s sudden and unheralded appearance? This: that the entire Trinity was already there as what the creed presumed upon. Even before he is defined, even before he is pointed to as an object of belief, the Holy Ghost must be named with abruptness as the agent of Jesus’ conception.

This point is in fact all the stranger when we recall the architecture of the creed as a construction of three paragraphs, one for each person of the Trinity. So we start with the Father, and then we have a longer paragraph on the Son, and then finally after we’ve spoken of his death and resurrection and future coming we turn and speak of the Holy Spirit. One paragraph for each divine Person. Likewise, in some accounts of baptism in the early church each paragraph of the creed was put as a question—for instance, “Do you believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth?”—and once the candidate answered yes, she was immersed in the waters of baptism. Three questions, three immersions. To this day the customary practice in baptism is to pour water upon the head of the baptized three times, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

But the triune God is not built up out of three persons, and we can see that in the way the creed is forced to assume all three divine persons from the beginning. Why do I emphasize this? It reminds us that Christian faith is never self-initiated. When we come to God we are actually responding to God’s already-given invitation to us. Not a person here, not one person among the billions who are and have been Christians, came to Christian faith on her own. Every one of us who says “I believe in God” says it only because God—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—first came to us.

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By saying “conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary,” the creed puts before us the claim that Jesus Christ is both God and man. The eternal Son of God at a particular point in our human

history became a human being in our history. Jesus Christ has God for his Father and Mary for his mother. This is the incarnation, that God the Son took on, entered into, “carnis,” flesh, human flesh, being just like us in everything that pertains to our humanity. But it is not an abstract doctrine or teaching. To learn that Jesus is both God and man is not like learning that water is both hydrogen and oxygen. It is to learn of an event in history, something unique, unprecedented, and of cosmic consequences. That God became man is the most important event ever in human history and indeed the history of the universe. It is the key that unlocks the meaning of history, of our own history, the key that unlocks the meaning of every particular human life.

Let me put this in three ways.

First, with respect to God: the incarnation means that although God is a vast and unspeakable mystery—the uncountable cause of the being of all things, and not a being among beings—nonetheless God can unite himself with human flesh. The result, the incarnation, is not a hybrid being, because a hybrid is what you get when you put together two sorts of critters that are already here, for instance, a man and a duck. The hybrid man-duck is of course neither a man nor a duck. But the God-man Jesus Christ is no hybrid because God is no critter. We cannot imagine how God could take on human flesh. But we can see that to do so is not the contradiction of a hybrid. That is to say, a man-duck cannot be at once fully man and fully duck. But Jesus, the God-man, is at one and the same time fully God and fully man.

The incarnation is the key that allows us to touch God without God thereby losing his mystery and becoming merely a creature.

Second, with respect to Mary: the incarnation means that she gave birth as a virgin. Here I want briefly to say that if there are any people who still argue that Christianity needs to grow up and stop talking about miracles, because as modern scientific people we (quote) “know” that miracles can’t occur, they really need to face the consequences of their beliefs. Sure, we can deny that Jesus walked on water or that Mary gave birth as a virgin, but it will not work to deny those things and still try to hold to the greatest miracle of all: that God the Son became a human being. If God can take on flesh and live a fully human life, then it is small potatoes to accept the virgin birth and the miracles of the gospel.

The incarnation is the key that opens up for us the miracles of the gospel, beginning with the virgin birth of Jesus.

Third and most importantly, with respect to us: the incarnation means that we have a supernatural destiny. By becoming human, God showed that it is his desire that human beings become divine. We are not meant by God to remain forever mere creatures for whom our Creator remains an eternally unknown mystery. Rather, the goal of our existence is to become friends of God. What do friends do? They talk. They communicate. They love and are loved. So are we to be with God. We are to share his communion, to dwell in his being, to love and be loved by him for ever.

The incarnation is the key that teaches us and makes it possible for us to be friends with God.

All this, too, is assumed by the creed from the beginning. Not only does the creed assume the Triune God as a reality that’s already there before we begin to speak, so also the creed assumes God’s intention to lift us above mere creaturehood into divinity, so that we become equal with God, not as some other countable and false gods who are just creatures in the pretended guise of God, but as truly divine, sharing in the loving and the belovedness for ever of him who for our sake was conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the virgin Mary.