

## **The Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery**

God's plan to rescue us from the tragedy of our first parents' Original Sin was announced almost immediately, but took many, many years to be fulfilled. It is described rather cryptically in God's chastisement of the serpent for his role in the Fall: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers..." (Genesis 3:15) The Church has long seen in this passage the promise of a descendent who would set right again our lost relationship with God, and free us from the bondage of sin. The expectation of a Messiah, or "anointed one", who would deliver the people from their trials, is a theme throughout the Old Testament of the Bible. Certainly the history of the Chosen People is filled with messianic figures whom God raised up to save them from their enemies. From Moses to Sampson to David, we see a series of heroes who could rival any Avenger or Super Hero of our current day. The prophets also did their part to heighten the people's anticipation, with their sometimes subtle, but often clear descriptions of the one who was to come.

The Church in her liturgical life wants us to share that anticipation in a particular way during the Season of Advent as we prepare for the celebration of Christmas. During the Advent Masses she presents to us the great prophecies of the Old Testament in the first reading, and shows us how they were fulfilled by Jesus Christ in the reading of the Gospel. The Infancy Narratives are familiar to us, no room in the Inn, the choir of Angels, the manger and the little drummer boy. We know how the story ends, and so the sense of anticipation may be a little lost on us... but not on the child who longs for the gifts that might be hidden under the tree on that cold winter morning. And for the disciple who has perhaps encountered more personally a rescue from a trial, or dark period in life, the anticipation is not altogether lost as he or she prepares for the Lord's coming in a new way.

No matter how we anticipate the coming of the Lord at Christmas, it would be difficult to match the anticipation that the children of Israel experienced, as generation after generation, they awaited the fulfillment of the promises made so long ago. And in the fullness of time, under the often cruel and relentless rule of Rome, on that most beautiful night, they received the message of the Angel: "Behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the City of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord." (Luke 2:10-11) The long-awaited Messiah had come. In a way, they had been expecting Him. What they most likely did not expect, and what we perhaps often take for granted, was that the Messiah was not only sent by God, but the Messiah was God, Emmanuel, literally, "God with us." We speak about the arrival of the Messiah as the "Incarnation," a word whose meaning describes this rather shocking development. If you know your

dinosaurs, you know that they are often classified as “herbivores” or “carnivores,” plant eaters or “flesh” eaters. “Carne” in “carnivores” is the same “carne” in the “Incarnation,” namely, this child was not only the Messiah, He was God “in the flesh.” The word actually comes from the Bible. At the beginning of his Gospel, St. John announces the good news that, “the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us...” (John 1:14)

Other religions have their prophets, saviors, heroes and holy figures, but the Incarnation describes the striking uniqueness of Christianity, God did not only save man, God became Man. After Easter’s celebration of the Resurrection, Christmas is perhaps the Church’s greatest feast, the celebration of God becoming one of us. We celebrate it with gift giving and acts of charity, motivated by God’s great gift of love to us in His only begotten Son.

And as we grow in love of God, we learn that “it is better to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35), and following His example, we learn to give ourselves to others as He did. The Incarnation answers the fundamental question, “Who is Jesus?” He is God... “in the flesh.” But as we considered the distinction between nature and person in our discussion of the Trinity, we see that the more appropriate question might be, “What is Jesus?” The Church has an answer for that question as well, He is the “Hypostatic Union.” “Hypostasis” is a Greek philosophical term that literally means “stands under.” The Trinity tells us that God is three persons in one divine nature, while the Hypostatic Union tells us that the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, is one person who “stands under” the union of a divine and human nature, one person and two natures. What is Jesus? God... AND Man.

The Catechism asks the question: “Why did the Word become flesh?” and provides us four reasons for the Incarnation: “In order to save us by reconciling us with God... So that we might know God’s love... To be our model of holiness... (and) to make us ‘partakers of the divine nature’.” (CCC 456-460) St. Athanasius does us the favor of translating that last one, “the Son of God became man so that we might become God.” And that is the second piece of astounding good news about the Incarnation. Not only is the messiah God “in the flesh,” but He took on our wounded human nature to heal it and elevate it. And through Him we become children of God and share in the very life of God, a life that never ends, and one that gives us a new set of super powers we call theological virtues. How that happens takes us perhaps to the next important topic regarding Jesus, the one that answers the question, “What did Jesus do?”

The Paschal Mystery not only answers this question, but presents us with the opportunity to explore another one of those interesting “mysteries” about God and His

plan. It is the “Paschal” mystery because it has something to do with the “Passover,” that central redemptive event of the Old Testament. The children of Israel thrived and grew great in number in Egypt, until a new Pharaoh felt threatened by them and forced them into slavery. Moses was sent to free them from their bondage in Egypt, and when a series of horrific plagues failed to convince Pharaoh that he could not win this battle, God sent the Angel of Death to strike down every first born in the land. But the Angel “passed over” the houses of the children of Israel marked by lamb’s blood, and when finally free, God told His people to remember this “Passover” with a sacrificial meal every year.

And so it was, that during this annual celebration, Jesus, in His 33rd year, commemorated these events at a meal known forever as His “Last Supper.” John the Baptist had anticipated this event when he gave testimony regarding Jesus: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29) Jesus became the Paschal Victim for us, the “Lamb of God,” establishing the Eucharist so that His Apostles, and every disciple after them, could “take and eat” His own Body, and so too be freed from the bondage of sin and receive a new life in the “promised land” of Heaven, a life that never ends. And the next day He shed His blood on the Cross, fulfilling the Passover Sacrifice which won our freedom. “Dying, He destroyed our death; Rising, He restored our life.”

Christ’s victory over death is our victory too, we will not die, but will live forever. We need not fear death, and like St. Paul, and with all the martyrs who heroically embraced torture and death for love of their Master, we can taunt our final enemy: “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1Corinthians 15:55) The empty tomb of our Easter celebration means that everything is different now. The problems, challenges, tensions and tragedies of our former life have been nailed to the cross of Good Friday and swept away in the new life of the Resurrection. If Jesus can rise from the dead, can He not be trusted to bring healing, joy and new life to you? Such is the invitation of Easter faith: “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28)

But maybe you do not feel all that “alive” today. How is it that this new life becomes ours? Though you often don’t remember your Baptism, most of you probably know that it was during that “life” changing event that the new life of sanctifying grace was poured into your soul making you a new creature and, very literally, a child of God. Here is where St. Augustine’s explanation is realized, “God was made man, that man might be made God”.

But Baptism, like all the Sacraments, receives its “power” from the Sacrament of Sacraments, the Eucharist, what the Catechism calls “the source and summit of the Christian life.” (CCC 1324) The Eucharist is unique because it is Christ Himself, given to us that we might be “flesh of (His) flesh” and have divine blood flowing through our veins. God could have saved us in any number of ways, but He found it to be most fitting that we should be saved, forgiven of sin and granted his new life, by participating in the very events in which He accomplished our salvation. And so, like our older brothers and sisters in faith, we gather regularly to celebrate the Passover, now the Paschal Mystery, at every Mass. But unlike them, we not only remember those events and have lamb for supper, we are transported in time, or even outside of time, into the heavenly realm, to be actually present at the Lord’s Last Supper, to eat the flesh and drink the blood of our “Lamb of God” who takes away our sins and gives us a share of His own divine life. It kind of makes you wonder when the next Mass is. How long will you wait before you respond to His invitation to come to the table of life? Who is Jesus? God... “in the flesh,” the Incarnation. What is Jesus? God... AND Man, the Hypostatic Union. What did Jesus do? Died and rose that you might have new life, the Paschal Mystery. How do we get this new life? By participating in the Paschal Mystery, receiving the Eucharist during the celebration of the Mass. Is that the end of the Story? No, He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. Are you ready for that? Let’s get ready, I’ll see you at Mass. And don’t forget to read the readings before you go, and listen for the word that He has for you.