

26 December 2010

Christmas 1A

Sermon notes:

Hebrews 1.1-4

Rev Dr Craig Thompson

The “high Christology” of the epistle to the Hebrews doesn’t make a lot of sense to the uninitiated! Whenever the New Testament speaks about Jesus and his importance for us, it is speaking both about what God is, and what the human being is. In the reading we’ve heard this morning the emphasis is on Christ’s standing before God as a human being. It’s not that easy to hear it, but it’s there. Jesus is spoken of as “the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being”. This sounds quite “un-human” – as if to do only with his claimed divinity – but as the “imprint” or image of God, Jesus is here claimed to share in the part played by “Adam” (or humanity more generally) right back at the very beginning, where we hear of the human creatures being created in the “image of God” (Genesis 1.27f).

Christ’s humanity – *his* being the imprint, or the image, of God – is critical for our understanding of what it means to be human ourselves. If we were to give some sort of account of what it means to be human we would have to touch upon things social, sexual, moral, political, psychological, intellectual, emotional, physical, racial, religious, and not a few other things as well! But all of these characteristics – even traits to do with religion – are things which we have and are already, before we hear the church’s talk about Israel and Jesus, or the events of Christmas and Easter.

To all of the things we already know make up a human being the faith of the church “adds” only one more thing – and it is *not* ‘religion’, or even the concept or existence of ‘God’! These things also predate Jesus or our knowledge of him. What is added by faith to our humanity is *the story of what happened to Jesus*, and the humanity which is revealed therein. This is the season of newspaper opinion pieces about religion – and the themes of Christmas in particular. The same goes for radio program themes and television specials.

Much is pointed out about what can and can’t be true about Christmas, some of which is an honest (if unsuccessful) attempt at bridge-building into the Christmas story, others of which is filled with scepticism and manifests little more than the writer’s particular hang-ups. But if you’re going to get stropy and reject the things faith considers to be important in the Christmas story,

we might at least ask of the critics of Christmas – both in and out of the church – that they at least be sure to reject the *right* thing, which is the central importance of Jesus for understanding what the words ‘God’ and ‘human’ mean.

The church believes that to be human is to have a defining relationship to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Our science and experience tell us that we are social and moral and physical and political and whatever else. The church adds to this what we would not be able to work out for ourselves – that we are created to become like Jesus as he was in the world and before God.

This is the true problem with what the church believes – the *anthropology* of faith, its understanding of what *we* finally are as human beings. And it is a *real* problem both for us in the church, and certainly for those who don’t identify with the church’s beliefs. For Jesus is an “unnatural” part of us. He is, so to speak, ‘added’ to what is natural in us, and so we are completed.

But even this is not quite an adequate way to say it. It is perhaps better to say that we are added to Jesus, filling Jesus with us, as much as the other way around. This is better not least because it is *stranger* to say it this way, and so simply catches our attention. “Adding Jesus” sounds a little too much like adding religion, and casts the things which Jesus embodies as something of an option, when this is how we already conceive of religion. But to speak of being added to Jesus casts *him* as the essential thing, and ourselves as the components – components of Jesus, and so also even of God. For Christmas is not simply the sending of a gift, to be opened and enjoyed, or not. It is the drawing of the world into another space – a divine space.

The church’s expression of its faith has often been bolder in its assertions about what it means to be human or divine than piety would seem to allow. The early church theologian Athanasius, whose exploits were critical to the process which delivered us the Nicene Creed, once remarked that “the Son of God became human so that we might become God”.¹ If nothing else, this broadens somewhat our ideas of what it means to be human! But it remains the case that, with just a little qualification, this is the gospel. To be the image of God – whether for Jesus or for ourselves – is not a matter of being some pale, through-a-glass-darkly reflection of the divine; it is to be caught up into the divine life, and for this to shape how we act and relate to one another.

¹ St. Athanasius, *On the incarnation*. 54, 3

The Christmas message is that the Word has become flesh and lived among us. We have seen his glory, and through his presence and his work we have come to know God as he did, to be in him as he is in the Father, and so to be added to the divine life.

At Christmas, once 2000 years ago and again today, it is given to us that we might share in the divine life because the divine life has shared in ours. This is the meaning of the salvation at the heart of the church's preaching and its work in the world.

For this gift, may our mouths ever be filled be praise.

Amen.