



Second Sunday after Christmas

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 2 January 2022

READINGS

Jeremiah 31: 7-14; Psalm 147: 12-20; Ephesians 1: 3-14; John 12: 44-50

Coming to terms with the Incarnation

Greetings in the name of Immanuel – God with us, this second Sunday after Christmas. In this season of Christmas, we are still metaphorically basking in the radiance of Christ's birth and still coming to terms, again, with the meaning of Christ's birth for our lives. I will attempt to say something toward this end today.

The word *incarnation*, as you may know, comes from the romance languages and means "flesh" or "meat". It is the same root from which we get the English word, *carnivore*. I mention this because it offers a certain visceral aspect which seems lost in our modern understanding of the incarnation which we have, as with church terms, over-spiritualised. Without wishing to sound biased, because I am Christian, the incarnation in fact represents probably the most significant event in human history, apart from God's creation of the cosmos at the dawn of time. The reason for this rests precisely on the aspect of the incarnation I have just tried to highlight – that which is ethereal, that which is spirit (or perceived as such), becomes irreversibly and incontrovertibly physical and material.

Paul uses the Greek word, *kenosis*, to describe God's emptying of God's self through the incarnation. What he means, I suspect, is that the almighty, infinite, unfathomable God, chooses to become vulnerable and dependent, finite and subject to human weakness and limitation. Once more, as religious people, we seem to have an automatic tendency to want to spiritualise everything. It's as if we are somehow ashamed of our earthliness. Through the incarnation, God becomes very earthly. What is supposed to strike us as a fundamental change in perception and paradigm has become a story about a baby in a manger. Still the incarnation is able to function as a corrective to our overly spiritual worldview.

To help us, I refer to the work of Richard Rohr who, in his book *Another Name for Everything*, lists four potential worldviews which people can subscribe to when it comes to religion. Some of these have been predominant to greater or lesser degrees throughout history within western contexts.

The first is what he calls the spiritual worldview which says that the ultimate source of being is Spirit, and that everything is a manifestation of Spirit. By subscribing to this worldview, matter, or the material world is regarded as illusionary and ultimately of little importance or consequence.

The second worldview he calls the material, or materialistic worldview which, as you might have guessed, is in some ways opposite to the spiritual worldview. Here matter is of prime importance and entirely devoid of spirit; the spiritual world is a fiction, a fantasy, or a lie, and what is of importance is only what we can physically see, hear, taste and touch.

Finally, there is what he calls the priestly worldview, which is the best of both worlds because it recognises that there is indeed spirit and there is indeed matter. The priestly worldview says it is our job (or the job of priests?) to somehow reconcile these two. This is done through the sacraments, it is done by going to church, it is done by reading our bible, it is done through praying etc. Rohr goes on to say that there is in fact a fourth worldview which is less common than the other three and less talked-about. Ironically, this is the worldview which predominates within traditional cultures and societies, i.e. non-western societies.

The fourth worldview he refers to as the incarnational worldview and the incarnational worldview says that we don't need to strive constantly to put spirit and matter together because they have never been separate. In other words, it is not a case of reconciling spirit and matter but recognising their fundamental unity. They are, indeed, not two distinct entities. I offer this synopsis from Rohr's work, and highlight the fact that this kind of approach to religion, to life in general, is referred to as the incarnational worldview, because it seems that much more relevant at Christmas time. If Rohr is right in what he is saying, and if such a truth applies throughout history, the incarnation of Christ – God becoming human; spirit marrying flesh, at the event of the nativity, reinforces this understanding.

May we all therefore awaken to the truth of who Christ is to us and, in light of this, of who we are to God, this Christmas season. And may God's blessing and favour rest upon you and your loved ones.