

Anglican Theology is Incarnational

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We have spent several weeks exploring how the Book of Common Prayer evolved, and how our common prayer shapes our faith. While the history gives us much to ponder, theology is vital to living a spiritual life. Theology (theo-logia) means God-talk. It is not talk about God but God's talk, God's conversation and loving communion with God. Theology allows the divine to overtake our lives, embrace all our stories and show us how and where God is working in our lives. The loving power of Spirit inhabits us and transforms our hearts and minds so we begin to hear and understand what God is saying, so the Word takes root in us and unfolds to become the very pattern of our lives. Theology that is transforming is engaging, constant, habitual, and constant. We do theology not to be clever but to be drawn into God's own life.

Anglican theology is defined in the Thirty Nine Articles, as a three-legged stool by Richard Hooker who understood that there is a close connection between theology, doctrine and worship. Distrusting infallibility but respecting authority, Hooker did not think it was productive to confine all authority to one person or group, nor did Scripture hold explicit answers to all questions without a strong effort to reason, reflect, pray, and entertain a sense of mystery in matters pertaining to God. Sensing a divine presence in the natural order God is revealed in mind and conscience of human beings. Richard Hooker in keeping with the Elizabethan Settlement liberated theology from dependence on one source of revelation by honoring the authority in scripture, tradition, and reason equally.

God created all that is and placed in creation a certain order. The divine Logos is a principle of unity, of purpose and of rationality. Through the indwelling of the divine Logos in the world, human beings develop a sense of good and evil, of right and wrong. Conscience and reason inform as well as scripture and tradition. In recognition of the sin that corrupts our reason and conscience, it is also the

teaching of the church, of scripture, and a reasonable assertion that the Spirit of God must redeem us from wrong thinking and purify our minds so that we can see rightly, recognize Truth, and pursue justice.

Incarnational theology takes John's phrase, "word made flesh," as a way of telling us that the birth of Jesus as a human being was preceded by the Word which spoke all creation into being. The Word that was the "voice" of the Trinity became one of us. Being one of the "three in one," the second person of the Trinity, reveals God in human form therefore Jesus is the full revelation of God. Through the person, life, work, death, and resurrection of Jesus we understand God in a new way. Indeed Paul would posit a new creation with the advent of Jesus as the new Adam. Incarnation requires an embodied, integrated spirituality of thought and action. Jesus brings God into the realm of time and space. cc

When we describe Jesus as fully divine and fully human we point to a central tenant of Christianity, which we call Christology. It is very difficult to keep the balance between the human Jesus and the Divine Word, but that is what we seek to do, even in sacramental worship. The simple elements of bread and wine become more once sanctified by the Spirit of God. At the Eucharistic table we see a foretaste of the heavenly banquet prepared for us all by God. We catch a glimpse of a Form, which we now see dimly but will eventually see face-to-face. We approach the holy sacrament in faith, aware of our unworthiness yet trusting God's grace to draw us forth. We allow a mark to be signed on our foreheads in baptism that carries the symbol of Calvary. We remember a hand laid on our heads affirming that we are members of the body of the one whose hands bore the mark of nails and whose touch healed.

We are justified by faith through grace. Martin Luther declared, "Faith is a divine work in us, through which we are changed and regenerated by God" In a letter to his brother, he used the famous phrase "Be a sinner and sin bravely but more bravely have faith in Christ...the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." The Roman Catholic Church from the Council of Trent maintained that

justification was the work of the Holy Spirit. The grace is God's but faith comes from the recipient. Thus sanctification and justification are fused as one. The Anglican center articulated by Henry Newman is that faith like air or water is colorless, but the medium through which the soul encounters Christ. As God's grace brings forth faith in us, His holiness stirs our fear as His grace kindles our love. Newman is seeking to move us from belief in the thing called salvation to believing in Christ as that in which we live and move and have our being.

Charles Darwin also a member of the Anglican Church wrote "origin of the Species". The work caused great controversy then as now. The United States bishop, Charles Grafton in 1889 wrote, "To deny what is called the Darwinian theory, or the evolutionary process, is as unwise as to deny the truths of the world's ...orbit about the sun...The discovery of the law of progress in the natural world...is in favor of the doctrine of the progressive development of man, in and through the incarnate Lord into a final union with God which secures sinlessness and eternal life...The larger truth is that God, in spite of man's sinfulness, came to forgive and lift him up into a higher degree of union. In the Incarnate One, creation advances to its completion." (Charles Grafton, *A Journey Godward*, NY: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1914, 183-4)

An English contemporary priest, F.D. Maurice was interested in affirming that the visible church was a sign that God had redeemed all humanity. Maurice taught that Christ is the Lord of all people and believed that the indwelling presence of the divine logos was in every person. Baptism is that moment when we acknowledge the grace of God and proclaim that Christ's act of redemption. He said, "the great disease of our time, is that we talk about God and about religion and do not confess Him as a Living God...the Redeemer of men [sic] in the Son." Seeing in every human being the likeness of the creator, Maurice veered to Christian Socialism, calling himself a Christian Socialist. To Maurice, socialism per se was not Marxism, rather Maurice was thinking in practical terms about the cry of the oppressed in a growing industrial country. By Christian Socialism,

Maurice meant that in Christ we ought to identify with those in need of liberation, and work for justice for all.

The theology of Maurice was both Christocentric and Trinitarian. Finding Christ as the revelation of God and Christ as the center of the human race, all people are of equal merit and interest to God and the church. Rather than seeing the evolutionary theory of Darwin as a threat to faith, Maurice held that it invited theology to see God as both creator and continuously at work in creation. The divine immanence is in the processes of nature, so that God is at work in the world about us as our Eucharistic Prayer C states.

The Incarnation offers a theological lens for encountering and appropriating new scientific knowledge. When Charles Darwin wrote *The Origin of Man* a firestorm erupted because the idea that human beings evolved from apes was counter to the Biblical creation account – or so some claimed. Charles Gore in 1889 contributed to a series of essays (*Lux Mundi*). Gore recognized the value of the Incarnation as a lens to see contemporary secular thought as an ally. The Logos that was involved in the creation is the same Word that became flesh and therefore God is not distant from creation but continues to work in nature, in human persons, in science to provide new illuminations of the truth, which is fully revealed in Christ.

The challenge of evolution and biblical criticism were posited by Gore as complementary rather than contradictory to Scripture. Gore canvassed human history for themes consistent with the Anglican tradition of Scripture, tradition and reason to hold to the concept of what is a good life for a human being. Resisting any reductionist over-simplifications of Christian theology, Gore was able to seek a comprehensiveness that does justice to the full orbit of Christian truth, which invites ecumenical dialogue. Gore said, “the Incarnation is a self-emptying of God to reveal Himself under conditions of human nature and from the human point of view.” There is a difference in what is revealed and how it is revealed. The transcendent God of incomprehensible mystery is revealed in the very limits of

human nature. Thus the incarnation speaks of our complex nature as material and spiritual beings.

“The evils which we deplore in our present society are not the inevitable results of any unalterable laws of nature or any kind of inexorable necessity, but are the fruits of human blindness, willfulness, avarice, and selfishness on the widest scale and in the long course of history...The challenge must be ‘Repent ye—change your minds’ – if the kingdom of Heaven is to come in any other form than as a judgment of God, whether that judgment would be sudden and scathing or gradually disintegrating.” (Charles Gore, *Christ and Society*, 1928, pp 177-8)

Charles Gore declared that the Incarnation of Christ was something natural and supernatural. He meant that the Incarnation represents a new order that cannot be understood in purely organic terms. Jesus, as the Word, preceded all creation and, as the Christ, He inaugurated a new creation. Sin separated humanity from God but the Word made flesh through death and resurrection restored humanity to God. It was not the miracles that proved the deity of Jesus but the supernatural intervention in the Incarnation. The miracles were examples of the divine freedom in the process of God putting the world right. Miracles are the way God uses freedom – being transcendent God is not subject to physical laws.

There is an alluring danger in trusting too much in one’s own ideas of God rather than seeking to fully know God as we are fully known by God. We must be sure not to mistake our ideas about God for God. God is more than we can describe in language, or capture in our imagination and yet there is within us some deeper longing for something beyond ourselves, pure love, honest acceptance, friendship that draws us from self-occupation out into the world of other, be it neighbors near and far, or the divine Other. God is a living God who invites us to seek and find. What we often discover is that God had already found us.

The Incarnation is paradoxical: in finite life one can discover infinite life (eternal life appropriated through faith in Christ). In Christ we can also be radically

transformed. The key to faith is residing in Christ, releasing the self-involved efforts and emotions of fear and control and cultivating a life of reliance on Christ. Incarnation means to be given over to God but the effect is a freedom to act and to live.

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth...From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (Jn 1;14,16). While John takes the beginning of creation as the beginning as the Word which spoke creation into being (Genesis 1), Matthew and Luke describe the incarnation as Immanuel – God with us. The incarnation transforms our experience of God, Christ and the world. In becoming a human person, Jesus, entered human history, was restricted by human conditions, was crucified by a political system that could not tolerate so much revealed Truth. Jesus, the one who died is also the one who rose from death demonstrating the liberating effect of the incarnation. What became flesh also rose from the mortality of flesh –death – providing God’s resolution of the consequences of sin and judgment that is redemption.

Michael Ramsey states the history of salvation in the following way. “God creates the world by a process of creation that is compatible with the findings of Darwin. The human being is the climax of the process. Then comes the Fall – not to be identified with what happened in the Garden of Eden, but with a deep estrangement of the human race from the true path of godliness. While human progress – that is, moral, spiritual, and intellectual progress – is a great reality, there is also a tragic deviation. Human kind cannot be rescued into its right shape apart from an act of God coming to the rescue. God prepares the way with the action of the Logos in many cultures and religions, and particularly in Israel, through the Incarnation, he gives himself to humanity. The Incarnation, with both cross and resurrection as its climax, is the divine self-giving, enabling men and women through the now-indwelling Spirit to give themselves back to god in lives that are really a recreation of human nature in Christ. Finally, the Holy Spirit working through the church, in Word and sacrament, is the continuance in every

age of this work of reconciliation and new creation” (Michael Ramsey, *The Anglican Spirit*, p 74-75).

Who are you? This question is important in philosophy as well as in theology. When we ask who Jesus was and seek to understand the narratives of Matthew or Luke, we confront a sense of wonder in Mary as she yielded to the Holy Spirit and bore the child to be named Jesus. Look carefully at the Lukan story, the birth of Jesus foretold (Luke 1:26-38) and Mary’s faithful response, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” In visiting her cousin, Elizabeth, pregnant with John, the baby leaps in the womb when Elizabeth and Mary greet one another. Why asked Elizabeth has this happened. The answer given by Mary is known as the Magnificat (Luke 1:47-55). The New Testament scholar, Luke Timothy Johnson sees in these few verses the entire ministry of Jesus and an outline of the Gospel of Luke. The actual birth narrative is found in Luke 2:1-20.

Matthew also gives a birth narrative, (1:18-25). Opening with a genealogy back to David and Abraham, Matthew omits the birth of John the Baptist, and the visitation of the angel to Mary, the Magnificat, and the role of Mary as faithful to the Lord’s messenger. The genealogy in Matthew 1 differs from the genealogy of Luke (3:23-38), for different theological reasons. Matthew writing to the Jews wants to show that Jesus is the expected Messiah of Jewish tradition and sacred text. Jesus as the new Moses fulfills the law and prophets. More direct quotations of Old Testament texts are found in Matthew than any other Gospel. The message according to Matthew is that Jesus is the Messiah, Son of David, royal Son of God and apocalyptic Son of Man, who calls disciples to spread the good news of the kingdom of heaven to the whole world.

Luke’s Gospel views truth and history as theological. The plot is driven by the divine necessity of Jesus’ mission (see Luke 9:22, 31; 22:37; 24:7,26,44). God’s will is at work in human history. The story of Jesus is one of a historical person in the midst of conflicts in Israel. The followers of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel are

predominately Jewish. The Jewish participants in the narrative, whether or not they accept Jesus as the Messiah, are subject to the rule of the Roman forces in Judea and Galilee. The Gospel of Luke also emphasizes the ways that Jesus fulfills scripture. It is likely that the writer intended Luke-Acts to be one book. When the canon was shaped, the works were separated. The Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke both follow the outline of the Gospel of Mark (the Markan spine). Scholars date Luke to about 80-85 CE based on some allusions to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE (Luke 19:41-44; 21:20-24). Luke is written to the Gentiles but we do not know where it was written.

Christians believe that behind and underlying our desire is God's own desire, the desire of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father, the desire we call God the Holy Spirit. That is what awakens our own desire and into which we are beckoned. The One who has truly loved us from all eternity and who knows every hair on our heads. It is the Holy Spirit who ignites our desire and draws us into the life of Christ. Being filled with Christ's burning desire to do the Father's will is the great adventure which we call Christian discipleship.

The world as created by God was intended to be a living, breathing sacrament of the giving life of the Trinity. Eden is the environment where every being could come to flourish in the fullness of its own identity by being freely for each other and with God. God observed, "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen 2:18) and brings the other animals to Adam to make their acquaintance and to receive names. Above all, God gives the man and woman to each other as signs of God's own life, the luminous image of God's freely loving existence. No being was merely an object to be possessed. We become full persons by sharing in God's life, full of mutual desire and delight.

As Genesis tells the story, alas, the perfect paradise was spoiled by a rival competitiveness to be like God – to be gods ourselves. Every mother knows that the child grows from the carefree playing child into the graduate with desire for car keys and a credit card. The fierce drive to be grown up and free of their

control. This desire to be free makes us suspicious of anyone who might get in our way. God then turns into the all powerful one who is full of wrath, ready to punish us as viewed through the eyes of the serpent.

To heal the misunderstanding, a new creation began in the person of Jesus, born to liberate us from the kingdom of death. The mystery of salvation is that Jesus by dying and rising defeated our fear of death. Rather than condemning the apostles for their betrayal, he forgave them. The forgiving presence of the risen Lord in the post-resurrection accounts provides the disciples with a new understanding, a way forward as new selves, commissioned and sent out, filled with God's Spirit, made alive in a way no longer enslaved to death. Over and over again, the risen Lord tells them, "Do not be afraid." Breathing on them and saying, "receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22), Jesus restored the relationship of God with us.

Jesus did more than live a faithful life. Jesus by his own identity brought them a new particular relationship with the Father, as St. Paul describes it in Galatians 4:6-7 "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba, Father" So you are no longer a slave but a child and if a child then also an heir, through God." The power of Christ's resurrection is the power that reveals the lie at the heart of our world, the lie that says our desire can only be fulfilled at the expense of another.

To say that Jesus is the Word or Son of God 'incarnate' means that God can be human and human life can be lived divinely. Jesus can save us because of the relationship between the Son and the Father. Most people tend to lean to one extreme or the other – that Jesus was really just a man, divinely inspired, a good teacher, but still human – not God. Others take the view that Jesus was God in the flesh, all divinity, pretending to be human. Both extremes are minimalist and "heretical" (heterodox, not orthodox). The orthodox view is that Jesus is both fully human and the eternal Word of God. Anglican theologians from Richard Hooker in the sixteenth century to FD Maurice and Charles Gore in the 19th C, and William Temple and Michael Ramsey in the 20th C have worked to avoid the two

extremes and to bring us into communion with the saving mystery of God's intimate presence in Christ.

Since the enlightenment, there has been growing discontent with the language of incarnation. One objection is that the idea that God came to earth as a human being is an embarrassment to rational people. It is more intellectually plausible that the idea of God's kingdom is coming into being through the community Jesus created. It is the relationships of forgiveness and love which were understood to be the revelation of Jesus that drove Christians to social awareness. Early Christians thought they could tell how well they were entering into the mystery of Christ by how well they loved one another (John 14:23, 15:9-12). The coming kingdom of God flows through the communion of the Trinity, is foreshadowed in our world by the sacrament of the Christian community's life on earth. The mediator is Jesus because of his relationship with the Father. So the incarnation does not ignore but empowers the social ministry of the Gospel.

To say that the human being called Jesus is also divine is like saying when I hug my children, it is also Love who hugs them. This does not mean that love is hugging the children instead of me, or that I am less myself in hugging them because I love them. Rather, my freedom and desire to hug them comes arises from this Love. This Love and I are not mutually exclusive. Love empowers my act and helps me be a better parent. Love embodied in me loves my children. God's relationship to us is more like source than another thing alongside us.

Confusion comes when we try to see how the two natures coexist in one being. If we try to fuse the two they end up mingled but somehow distinct. For example we might be tempted to say Jesus had a human body but a divine soul. If we separate the divine and human natures then we end up with Jesus one and Jesus two like a game of me and my shadow. To achieve unity the Council of Chalcedon came up with the words we find in BCP 864: "One and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures

being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ.”

Who Jesus is as person is defined in the relationship with the Father. Jesus is only Son to the Father and the Father is only Father to the Son. The face each gives the other is the person of the Trinity but all are one in being, one God. Being born as a human being, Jesus was like us in every way, he taught, wept, prayed, hungered, slept, ate, had friends, and suffered a painful death. Just as Jesus and Peter were very distinctive persons, so also is the Father – Son – and Spirit distinct. The fact that Jesus is a divine Person does not mean that Jesus is not human. Being marked with the sign of the cross does not take away our humanity. It does open a new way of being who we are in Christ. What is unique about Jesus is the full dedication of his life and actions to the will of the Father. His mission of loving obedience reveals a particular relationship that identifies who Jesus is. In the incarnate life, the response is obedience willingness to suffer, resistance to temptation, willingness to die, proving on earth the very thing Jesus was in heaven, continuous perfect act of filial love.

“Your will be done on earth as in heaven,” Jesus taught us to pray. The vision of doing the will of the Father on earth as in heaven was so much a part of Jesus’ heart and mind that it reveals the core of his identity. He was and is the one who is who he is by living to do the Father’s will. The Word of God becomes flesh to find us just where we are – just as we are – and offers unconditional love.

The power of God’s story is the inspiration it offers us to tell our story, to reshape our lives according to the will of God. The God who comes to dwell within us, gives us ears to hear the Word and tongues to share the meaning faith has for life. God’s Spirit confronts us with God’s story, makes it alive in us, renews our hearts and minds to be reborn in Christ. Mary conceives Jesus because, according to the angel Gabriel, “the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the

power of the Most High will overshadow you” (Luke 1:35). The Holy Spirit empowers us to conceive God’s Word in our own life to be Word-bearers to one another.

Come Emmanuel, God with us.