

## THE INCARNATION

Presents at Christmas time come in all kinds and in all shapes and sizes. There are utility presents such as oven gloves and aprons for the kitchen, or boxes of perfumed soap or bubble-bath in plastic containers. There may be an assortment of fancy goods that tend to find their way onto the gift stall at the Summer Fair. There are those personal gifts that have something special about them, because they have been chosen with much thought and care with a beloved person in mind.

The best Christmas gift that was ever thought of and given was that which our Heavenly Father gave to the world, of His only Son, Jesus Christ; to teach us about His Heavenly Kingdom and to die on the Cross for us so that we might be saved and go to Heaven. As St John tells us in his Gospel: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth”.

This is what is meant by the Incarnation. In Jesus Christ God has come very close to us. He is the perfect image of our Father in Heaven. Through Him, God’s wayward and erring children can be restored in a right relationship. We belong to Him and can come close to Him.

When Jesus Christ came upon earth all those years ago, his coming was quite unlike anything the Jews had anticipated. They were expecting some kind of divine visitation which they referred to as “the Day of the Lord” when God would manifest his power in the world, vindicate his people, the Jews and destroy their enemies or those whom they regarded as their enemies. But as the Book of Wisdom puts it, “While all things were in quiet silence, and the night was in the midst of her course, thy Almighty Word leapt down from Heaven from Thy Royal Throne”. In the still of the night, God comes to the world, in the form of a helpless baby, born in a stable and laid in a manger, and the Angels all around sing of peace and joy and good-will to all people.

Throughout his earthly life Jesus made himself known to his people, the Jews. He showed forth God’s love, mercy and forgiveness not only to his friends but to his enemies also. He showed them that God was like a Father and he showed them the way home to His eternal kingdom. He was the ‘promised’ one. After our Lord had left this earth, his power was revealed to us in an even greater way when the Christian Church was born on the day of Pentecost, at the coming of the Holy Spirit to his Disciples and followers.

And still Christ comes to us, individually and corporately with great power, and individuals are re-born and new Churches emerge. When Nicodemus, the Jewish teacher, came to Jesus by night, Jesus told him that a person must be born again of the Spirit in order to see the kingdom of God. It means there can be an Incarnation for each one of us. It means that Jesus Christ can be born in each one of us. Like Mary, our bodies too can enshrine the Word of God. Our bodies can become temples of the Holy Spirit. And as St Paul reminds us: God needs our response. Jesus Christ is the ‘Bringer of New Life’, often termed re-birth, and is constantly bringing it.

To have the experience of being born again is a very exciting thing. You may feel you have discovered God for the first time, but it doesn’t end there. It is just the beginning. Human beings are growing and evolving creatures. Each stage of life will bring us fresh discoveries about God, if we let it.

There may be, in our lives, many stages of re-birth or the receiving of new life in the Spirit. There is a sense in which life is an on-going experience of death and resurrection. Dying to sin in ourselves that we may rise to new life in Christ. Every morning can be an experience of new Life as the well-known hymn by John Keble tells us. "New every morning is the love, our waking and uprising prove, through sleep and darkness safely brought, restored to life and power and thought".

At this time of the year, at the end of the old and looking forward to the new, it is a good time to think about re-birth and new life in the Spirit and what it can mean for each one of us. Perhaps to make some New Year resolutions. It is helpful to look back over the receding year and to think about our failures and successes, our strengths and our weaknesses with a determination to make some attempt to put right those areas in our lives that need putting right whether it be in circumstances or relationships. A very helpful prayer I have found in connection with this is one by an American Church historian. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Success is encouraging, and those things we know that we do well can be our contribution to the well-being of other people, whether in befriending lonely people or in teaching or in the care of the young. Gifts in the arts, in music, painting or needlework all add to the beauty and pleasure of life. And in the world of entertainment we can bring interest, laughter and joy into other people's lives. These are gifts given to us by God and meant to be used for his good purposes.

Re-birth or the receiving of new life can be a very creative thing. It is this kind of positive approach that helps to lift us out of the old order which may be crumbling away into a new order of well-being for ourselves and for the Church. For Christ came to give us life and to give us life abundantly.

Let us end with a prayer which is also a hymn:

O Holy child of Bethlehem  
Descend to us we pray,  
Cast out our sin and enter in,  
Be born in us to-day.  
We hear the Christmas Angels  
The great glad tidings tell,  
O come to us, abide with us  
Our Lord Emmanuel.