

The Incarnate One

The question may not run, "How is the incarnated one thinkable?", but, "Who is he?" He is not the one adopted by God; he is not the one clothed in human characteristics. He is God who became man, as we became man. He lacks nothing belonging to man. The man whom I am, Jesus has also been. Of him only is it valid to say that nothing human was alien to him. Of this man, we say, "This is God for us."

The accounts of the birth and of the baptism of Jesus stand side by side. In the birth story, we are directed totally towards Jesus himself. In the story of the baptism, we are directed towards the Holy Spirit who comes from above. The reason why we find it difficult to take the two stories together is because of the doctrine of the two natures. The two stories are not teaching two natures. If we put this doctrine aside, we see that one story concerns the being of the Word of God in Jesus, while the other concerns the coming of the Word of God upon Jesus. The child in the manger is wholly God; note Luther's Christology in the Christmas hymns. The call at the baptism is confirmation of the first happening, there is no adoption in it. The manger directs our attention to the man, who is God; the baptism directs our attention, as we look at Jesus, to God who calls.

If we speak of Jesus Christ as God, we may not say of him that he is the representative of an idea of God, which possesses the characteristics omniscience and omnipotence (there is no such thing as abstract divine nature!); rather, we must speak of his weakness, his manger, his cross. This man is no abstract God.

Strictly speaking we should not talk of the incarnation, but of the incarnate one. The former interest arises out of the question, "How?" The question remains open, as and because it is already open in the Bible.

The incarnate one is the glorified God: "The Word was made flesh and we beheld his glory." God glories himself in man. That is the ultimate secret of the Trinity. The humanity is taken into the Trinity. Not from all eternity, but "from now on even into eternity"; the trinitarian God is seen as the incarnate one. The glorification of God in the flesh is now, at the same time, the glorification of man, who shall have life through eternity with the trinitarian God. This does not mean that we should see the incarnation of God as God's judgement on man. God remains the incarnate one even in the Last Judgement. The incarnation is the message of the glorification of God, who see the honor in becoming man. It must be noted that the incarnation is first and foremost true revelation, of the Creator in the creature, and not veiled revelation. Jesus Christ is the unveiled image of God. God binds himself freely to the creature and freely glorifies himself in the incarnate one.

The incarnation may not be thought of as derived from an idea of God, in which something of humanity already belongs to the idea of God. Here we speak of the biblical witness, "We saw his glory." A speculative basis for the doctrine of the incarnation would change the free relationship between Creator and creature into logical necessity. God binds himself freely to the creature and freely glorifies himself in the incarnate one.

Why does this sound strange and impossible? Because the incarnate one is also the crucified.

The question is not, “How can God be humiliated man?”, but, rather, “Who is the humiliated God-Man?” The God-Man in history is always and already the humiliated God-Man from the manger to the cross. In what way does this humiliation express itself? In this way, that Christ takes sinful flesh. The humiliation is necessitated by the world under curse. The incarnation is related to the fallen creation. Christ, of his own free will, enters the world of sin and death. He enters it in such a way as to hide himself in it in weakness and not to be recognized as God-Man. He goes incognito, as a beggar among beggars, as an outcast among outcasts, as despairing among the despairing, as dying among the dying. He also goes as sinner among sinners, yet how truly as “the worst sinner” (Luther), as sinless among sinners. And here lies the central problem of Christology.

The question is: Has Jesus as the humiliated God-Man entered fully into human sin? Christ has taken upon him all that flesh is heir to. But to what extent does he differ from us? First, not at all. He is man as we are, he is tempted in all points like as we are, yet much more dangerously than we are. Also in his flesh was the law which is contrary to God’s will. He was not the perfect good. At all times he stood in conflict. He did things which, at least from the outside, looked like sin. He stepped into man’s sinful way of existence.

Luther says, “He is himself thief, murderer, adulterer, as we are, because he bears our sin.” With that Luther describes the basic foundation of all Christological statements, and, as such, the one who bears our sins, and none other, he is the sinless one, the holy, the eternal, the Lord, the Son of the Father. He is wholly man and gives the law its due and is judged, and he robs sin of its power. He is wholly condemned as we are, and yet without sin, Christology cannot by-pass this paradox.

Simply stating the sinlessness of Jesus fails if it is based upon the observable acts of Jesus. His acts are not sinless, but ambiguous. When a person wishes to be incognito, one wrongs him by saying, “I have both seen you and seen through you” (Kierkegaard). We should not, therefore, deduce the sinlessness of Jesus in his deeds. The sinlessness of Jesus is not a moral judgement, but an assertion of faith. Faith confesses that he who tempted is victor, the one who struggles is perfect, the unrighteous one is righteous, the one who is rejected is the holy one. Even the sinlessness of Jesus is incognito: “Blessed is he who is not offended in me.” (Matt. 11:6).

When it came to the miracles and wonders, Jesus went back into his incognito and refused to give any visible evidence for faith. If he had answered the question put to him about his authority with an evident miracle, then it would not be true to say that he had become truly man like us. If Christ had proved himself by miracles, we would have believed in the visible deity, but that would not have been faith in Christ *for me*. It would not have been inner conversion, but simply acknowledgement. When I acknowledge a miracle, nothing happens to me. But faith is there when a man so surrenders himself to the humiliated God-Man that he bets his life on him, even when it seems against all senses.

Faith is when the search for certainty is given up. Then it is faith in God and not the world. The only assurance which faith accepts is the Word itself, which comes to me through Christ.

How then are we to understand that the fact that Jesus does in fact do miracles? The miracles do not break the incognito. The world of the ancient religions was filled with miracle workers and saviors. In that, Jesus does not stand alone. The realm of miracle is not identical with the realm of God. When Jesus does miracles, he thus preserves his incognito in the magical picture of the world. Only the community of believers see in Jesus' miracles the approach of the kingdom of God. A miracle has its explanation for both the believer and unbeliever. The believer sees in the miraculous signs of what is to be done by God at the end of time.

That incognito we have to deal with the Man-God is known to us only through the resurrection and exaltation. The incognito has already been lifted for those of us who are believers. We have seen the exalted one only as the crucified; the sinless one only as the guilt-laden; the risen one only as the humiliated. Even the resurrection does not break through the incognito. Only the disciples see the risen one. Only blind faith has sight here, "Blessed are those who have not seen yet believe" (John 20:29). He will lift his incognito only when he returns in glory. Then the incarnate one will no longer be the humiliated one.

All that we know today is only through our encounter with the humiliated one. The Church is good only when it humbly confesses its sins, allowing itself to be forgiven and confesses its Lord. Daily must it receive the will of God anew. It receives it because of the presence of the incarnate, humiliated and exalted one. And daily it holds anew to the promise, "Blessed is he who is not offended in me." (Matt. 11:6).

--Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, Harper & Row, 1978 translation, pp. 102-113.
