

CONVENTION ESSAY

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GOD BECAME OUR BROTHER

(ET INCARNATUS EST — HE BECAME INCARNATE)

The pitch lowers, the music softens, the soloist almost whispers. The words are barely audible. "He became incarnate". In the musical setting of the mass, at these words of the Nicene Creed, the music invites the hearer to stand quietly before the great miracle and ponder the mystery. Each time the music bids us to feel anew the awe of the shepherds who first went to marvel at the great thing God had done. For "beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: he appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up into glory."(1 Timothy 3:16)

No Christian dare ever let the miracle of the incarnation become common place. Nor must we let the awe of it be lost in the Christmas season, the season in which our focus fixes most narrowly on "God become fully human". Indeed the danger is great for "...the mystery of Christ runs the risk of being disbelieved precisely because it is so incredibly wonderful. For God was in humanity. He who was above all creation was in our human condition; the invisible one was made visible in the flesh; he who is from the heavens and from on high was in the likeness of earthly things; the immaterial one who could be touched; he who was free in his own nature came in the form of a slave..."(On the unity of Christ, p. 61)

The best way to approach this subject is with a sense of awe, for we can never understand nor comprehend the miracle. Nor should we attempt to. The truth is simple and clear. "The miracles recorded permit us not to entertain a doubt that God was born in the nature of man. But how—this, as being a subject unapproachable by the processes of reasoning, we decline to investigate." (The great catechism, p.487) "The manner of this union is entirely beyond conception."(On the Unity of Christ, p.77) The incarnation is the very heart of our message and the center of the Gospel. "We can not treat of and teach diligently enough that great compassion and the honor the Heavenly Father paid us by deigning to send His son into the flesh."(Genesis 28, p. 224) With the angels we bow and worship. In the end we can exclaim with Gregory, "I cannot restrain my pleasure; I am rapt into God."(Oration on the Holy Lights, p. 357)

"Fully human"

The testimony of Scripture to the full and real humanity of our Savior is overwhelming. But as we fix our attention on his humanity, we want always to remember that he is true God. In all that we say we can not lose sight of this truth. Scripture teaches with equal force that our Savior is one person who is both God and man.

From the beginning God had revealed that the coming Savior would be a real human being. In the first promise he said, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel."(Genesis 3:15) When he called Abram, he promised him, "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."(Genesis 12:3)

He repeated that promise in Genesis 15 and again after Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, God swore by the most solemn oath, "and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed." (Genesis 22:18) He sealed that same promise both to Isaac and Jacob.(Genesis 26:4, 28:14) Finally out of their descendants, the people of Israel, he chose one family through which he would fulfill that promise. He chose David, "When your days are over and your rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom."(2 Samuel 7:12) No one convinces us of the Savior's humanity more than Isaiah as he pictures the suffering servant for us in chapter fifty-three.

The New Testament confirms the promises of the Old. Matthew traces the genealogy of the Savior from Abraham to Joseph and Mary(Matthew 1:1-16). Luke goes even farther, he traces the Lord's genealogy from Joseph to Adam(Luke 3:23-37) Throughout the Gospels, Christ calls himself, "The son of man". Paul writes to the Romans(1:3), "who as to his human nature was a descendant of David..." Paul and the other apostles also use this description in other books of the New Testament. Paul attests to the real humanity of Christ in Galatians(4:4), "but when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law."

One word vividly describes the humanity of Christ. As he faced those who denied that Jesus was fully human, John wrote(1John 1:1), "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and *our hands have touched*—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life." Even after many decades John remembered the night of the resurrection. Jesus appeared among them, but "they were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost(not for the first time—Mark 6:49)".(Luke 24:37) Jesus reassured them and commanded them, "*Touch me* and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."(Luke 24:39) It is as if John were saying to his readers, "Have no doubt in your minds, we touched him before and after his resurrection. Know without any doubt. Jesus was just as human as you and I are."

Jesus was a real human being. He was born(Luke 2:7). He was circumcised(Luke 2:21). He grew up(Luke 2:52). He was tempted(Luke 4:2). He hungered(John 4:8). He thirsted(John 4:7 and 19:28). He was tired(John 4:6) He slept(Mark 4:38). He wept(John 11:35). He anguished(Matthew 26:38). He suffered(John 19:5). He died(Luke 23:46). In every sense of the word Jesus was fully human, except in one—he was without sin(Hebrews 4:16).

Throughout the history of the discussion of the humanity of Christ, the fathers looked especially to three portions of Scripture. The first is John 1:14,"the Word became flesh..." These words are a bare, stark statement of the reality of the incarnation, simply saying that it is so. In these four words we have the sum of the whole Scripture and the Gospel itself. The Word, the second person of the Holy Trinity, the Son himself became flesh. We notice immediately who initiates the action. The initiative lies with God. He takes the action. Our salvation begins and ends with the action of God. Salvation is wholly in God's hands. We are saved purely by grace. Irenaeus writes, "On this account, therefore, the Lord Himself, who is Emmanuel from the Virgin, is the sign of our salvation, since it was the Lord Himself who saved them, because they could not be saved by their own instrumentality; and therefore, when Paul sets forth human infirmity, he says, 'For I know that there dwelleth in my flesh no good thing,' showing that the 'good thing' of our salvation is not from us but from God."(Against the heresies, p.451) Again he writes, "...according to the tender mercy of God the Father, who had compassion on his own handiwork, and gave to it salvation, restoring it by means of the Word—that is, by Christ—in order that men might learn by actual proof that he receives incorruptibility not of himself, but by the free gift of God(Against the heresies, p.550)."

Defending Christianity against the charge that it had no trustworthy foundation, Origen writes, "...our agreement is based on such an important foundation, or rather not on a foundation but on a *divine action*, its origin was God..."(Against Celsus, p. 136,137). Our salvation, our hope and our future are secure because they rest wholly on God.

"The Word became flesh..." He became as we are, human in every sense of the word. The apostle uses the term "flesh" in a figure of speech as a part for the whole to describe the whole human being. The word flesh is often used this way in Scripture(Luke 3:6; Acts 2:17,26; John 3:6). The word flesh also teaches us that Christ came in all weakness.

The second passage and certainly a favorite is Philippians 2:5-8: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing(emptied), taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" These words say far more than the bare truth that the Word became flesh. These words show us to what degree he became flesh and to what lengths he was willing to go for us. In short he held nothing back.

Paul emphasizes that Christ was God in very nature. Unlike Adam and Eve and all sinners since, he did not need to strive to be as god or fall prey to the devil's temptation, "You will be like God(Genesis 3:5)". For him it was no big deal, he was already by nature God. Yet in love he emptied or made himself nothing. So he conformed himself to the limits of the creature He Himself had made. He hid his divinity. But he went even further. He took the form, the very nature of a slave. He was truly one of us in everyway but one. For the apostle carefully adds "in human likeness" for he was without sin. He was found in appearance as a man—he looked just like any other human being of his time. To the eye he looked no different, to the ear he sounded no different. He experienced and endured everything human, even death and not just any death, but the most disgraceful death of that time, death on a cross. "All that is human has become his own. And so to say that he assumed the form of a slave expresses the whole mystery of the economy in the flesh"(On the unity of Christ, p.76)

All for us. "For there was no other way to honor the slave except by making the characteristics of the slave his very own so that they could be illumined from his own glory"(On the unity of Christ, p. 75). "He therefore yielded his neck to the law in company with us, because the plan of salvation so required it; for it became him to fulfill all righteousness. For having assumed the form of a slave, as being now enrolled by reason of his human nature among those subject to the yoke, He once even paid the half shekel to the collectors of the tribute, although by nature free, and as the Son not liable to pay the tax. When therefore, thou seest him keeping the law, be not offended, ...but rather reflect on the profoundness of the plan of salvation"(Commentary on Luke, homily 3, p. 4). Because he took the form of a slave, we ought to expect that in his humanness he would be as we are. He endured everything we endure. He became as weak and poor as we are. He entered into the full measure of human littleness.

The third portion of Scripture to which the fathers often referred is Hebrews 2:12, 14-17, "Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers...Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is the devil—and freed those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it

is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers..." This passage emphasizes God's great compassion for us. He is not ashamed to call us his own family. We sense the warmth and love in this word, family. To save us, he had to become one of us in every way. So he shared our flesh and blood. Thus he could die and by his dying end death. Our brother stood in our place, taking the death Adam brought into the world upon himself and thereby freeing us from it forever.

Even though the fathers often had good reason to shrink away from Christ's humanity, nevertheless, they taught and confessed it with all its reality. Tertullian wrote against those who denied the reality of Christ's suffering in the flesh, "The Son of God was crucified; I am not ashamed because men must needs be ashamed of it. And the Son of God died; it is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd. And he was buried, and rose again; the fact is certain, because it is impossible. But how will all this be true in him, if he was not himself true—if he really had not in himself that which might be crucified, might die, might be buried, and might rise again? I mean this flesh suffused with blood, built up with bones, intertwined with nerves, entwined with veins, a flesh which knew how to be born, and how to die, human without doubt, as born of a human being"(On the flesh of Christ, p. 525).

They took on the toughest issues and accepted the consequences of Christ's humanity. Did he grow as a normal, natural human being? Scripture says so. Do we accept the limits implied by such growth? Of course. Cyril of Alexandria writes, "When the wise evangelist introduces the Word as having been made flesh, he show him economically, allowing his flesh to obey the laws of its own nature. It belongs to manhood to advance in stature and wisdom, and one might say in grace also, for understanding unfolds in a certain fashion in each person according to the limits of the body. It would not have been impossible, or impractical, for God the Word who issued from the Father to have made that body which he united to himself rise up even from its swaddling bands, and bring it straight to the stature of perfect maturity. One might even say that it would have been plain sailing, quite easy for him to have displayed a prodigal wisdom in his infancy; but such a thing would have smacked of wonder-working, and would have been out of key with the plan of the economy. No, the mystery was accomplished quietly and for this reason he allowed the limitations of the manhood to have dominion over him"(On the unity of Christ, pp.109-110).

Describing the profound human feeling and the great anguish Christ clearly displayed during the last days of his life, Ambrose writes, "As being man, he doubts; as man he is amazed. Neither his power nor His Godhead is amazed, but his soul; he is amazed by consequence of having taken human infirmity upon him. Finally he cried : 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' As being man; he speaks, bearing with him my terrors, for when we are in the midst of danger we think ourself abandoned by God. As man, therefore, he is distressed, as man he weeps, as man he is crucified"(Of the Christian faith, p. 230).

We ought not be surprised at anything in which Jesus shows us that he is truly and fully human, but rather rejoice that in all things he was like me. For "it is profitable to me to know that for my sake Christ bore my infirmities, submitted to the affections of my body, that for me, that is to say for every man, he was made sin, and a curse, that for me and in me was he humbled and made subject, that for me he is the Lamb, the Vine, the Rock, the Servant, the Son of an handmaid, knowing not the day of judgment, for my sake ignorant of the day and hour"(Of the Christian faith, p.236). We can not fathom this miracle. We can not understand it, but God does not ask us to. He bids only believe that for all humanity His son became fully human so that in every way in all stages and life

experiences he might walk in our steps and by this walking redeem and restore all of human life to God. Christ's psychology is beyond our analysis. That he should pray in anguish, struggling and wrestling to do his Father's will, is beyond us. We, in whose life sin and all that is natural to us without sin are totally intermingled so that we can not separate what is normal from what is sinful, can not but marvel at one who lived like us, but never sinned. But that was God's rescue, "for what the law was powerless to do in that was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man..."(Romans 8:3).

"Attacked on every side"

In view of all the testimony of Scripture, one would think that no one could possibly deny that Christ was fully human. But many did, some crassly and crudely, others more subtly. Even today we still face the temptation not so much to deny, but at least to diminish Christ's humanity.

In general three reasons lay behind the denial of Christ's humanity. Many felt that it was not worthy of God to become human, that somehow by becoming human God would lessen himself or pollute himself. This idea springs from a low view of creation and the material world. It also comes from a flawed view of God. It ignores the very reason for becoming human, that is his great love for man. Others felt that it was "impossible" for God to become human. The very act would endanger or threaten the deity of God because it would subject God to change and even possibly sin. All Greek philosophy taught that God was impassible, not subject to change. In the Bible itself God says, "I am the Lord, I change not."(Malachi 3:6) Finally the incarnation clearly challenges the freedom of man. It attacks his unlimited potential and his power to deliver and save himself. The desire to be godlike in thought and action lies coiled in the center of the human heart. It was after all the basis for the first temptation("you shall be like God"). To accept the incarnation is to admit one's sinfulness and the need for help and a savior. This man can and will not do of himself. Jesus said it well, "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil"(John 3:19).

Very early in the history of Christianity, Christ's humanity became an issue. The apostle John in his writings opposed teachers who denied the full humanity of Christ. These teachers were probably influenced by a religious movement known as gnosticism. Gnosticism's origins are obscure. It began outside of Christianity as a religious movement. It drew from a wide range of thought in the ancient world. Because it was very adaptable, It spawned many mystery religions or pagan sects the most prominent of which was Manichaeism. Gnosticism did not exist as organized, independent religion, but rather attached itself to a host religion much like a parasite. Very quickly it found sympathizers among some early Christians.

Gnosticism taught a radical form of dualism. In *Star Wars* all reality was divided into the dark side and the force; in gnosticism all was divided into matter and spirit. The gnostics held that the Supreme god was good and a lesser god, often called the Demiurge was evil. The Demiurge created the world out of matter; hence all in the world, everything containing matter, was evil. Between pure good and pure evil lay a host of intermediate beings, called aeons. By mistake one of them caused the Demiurge to create the world. In the process human beings were made of matter, but imbedded in this lump of matter was a spark or piece of pure good(the soul). The goal of the gnostics was to provide the knowledge with which a gnostic could free his true self(spark of good) and return to be with the Supreme god.

Gnostic teaching was incompatible with Christianity. When it entered the Church, it had an enormous impact. Many gnostic Christians wrote new gospels whose purpose was to give the secret knowledge possessed by Jesus so that their followers could follow his example and escape evil. Those who followed gnostic teaching denied two basic Biblical teachings. They denied that God had created the world. Because they denied God (the Good God) any role in creation, they usually rejected most of the Old Testament. They also denied the reality of Christ's humanity. Instead they taught that Christ appeared only as a phantom (hologram) or at the very most, temporarily as a human being. The term docetist (the word means *to seem*) was generally applied to them.

Obviously gnosticism threatened the very existence of Christianity. It remained a threat for over two hundred years. So quickly the earliest leaders of the church responded to the heresy by asserting the Biblical teaching that Christ was fully human. Ignatius (died as a martyr in 117 A.D.) wrote to the members of the church at Smyrna, "...Being fully persuaded as touching our Lord, that he is in truth of the family of David according to the flesh, God's son by the will and power of God, truly born of a Virgin, baptized by John that 'all righteousness might be fulfilled by him.' truly nailed to a tree in the flesh... (To the Smyrnaeans, I, p.253)" Again he makes a good confession about the person of Jesus, when he writes to the Ephesians, "There is one Physician, who is both flesh and spirit, born and yet not born, who is God in man, true life in death, both of Mary and of God, first possible and then impassible, Jesus Christ our Lord." (To the Ephesians, VII, p.181) Somewhat later Melito of Sardis (d.177), bishop of one of the seven churches to which John addressed the book of Revelation, wrote just as fine a confession, "For there is no need, to persons of intelligence, to attempt to prove, from the deeds of Christ subsequent to his baptism, that his soul and His body, His human nature like ours, were real, and no phantom of the imagination. For the deeds done by Christ after his baptism, and especially his miracles, gave indication and assurance to the world of the Deity hidden in the flesh. For, being at once God and perfect man likewise, he gave sure indications of his two natures: of his deity, by his miracles during the three years that elapsed after baptism; of his humanity, during the thirty similar periods which preceded his baptism in which, by reason of his low estate as regards the flesh, he concealed the signs of his deity, although he was the true God existing before all ages" (Remains of the second and third centuries, p. 760). In one sense both these confessions are remarkable because they contained so early in Christian history a very good summary of truth about the person of our Savior. In another sense they are quite unremarkable because they simply teach what Scripture says.

Later Origen (185-251) in a formal discussion with gnostic leaning Christians, also confesses the full and real humanity of Christ, "So then, our Savior and Lord, in his desire to save the human race as he willed to save it, for this reason thus willed to save the body, just as he willed to save also the soul, and willed to save the rest of the human being: the spirit. For the whole human being would not have been saved *if he had not assumed the whole human being*" (Dialogue with Heraclides, p.63). Origen established a fundamental principle with regard to the humanity of Christ. Its classic expression was later given by Gregory of Nazianzus, "For that which he (Christ) has not assumed he has not healed; but that which is united to his Godhead is saved" (Letters on the Apollinarian controversy, p.218). To it put is simply, our salvation depends completely on the full and genuine humanity of Christ. Only by becoming one of us, in every way like us, could he save us. For as in Adam all humanity was ruined, so in Christ all humanity is healed or saved.

To deny the full humanity of Christ leads to complete disaster. Tertullian (160-220) in usual blunt manner demonstrates this truth, "Since, however, Christ's being flesh is now discovered to be a lie, it follows that all things which were done by the flesh of Christ were done untruly....For he suf-

fered nothing who did not truly suffer; and a phantom could not truly suffer. God's entire work, therefore, is subverted. Christ's death, wherein lies the whole weight and fruit of the Christian name, is denied....Now if his death be denied, because of the denial of his flesh, there will be no certainty of his resurrection. Similarly, if Christ's resurrection be nullified, ours also is destroyed" (Against Marcion, p.328). Basil (330-379), writing a century and a half later, against a different opponent, says the same thing, "If, then, the sojourn of the Lord in the flesh has never taken place, the Redeemer paid not the fine to death on our behalf, nor through himself destroyed death's reign. For if what was reigned over by death was not that which was assumed by the Lord, death would not have ceased working his own ends, nor would the sufferings of the God-bearing flesh have been made our gain...All these boons are undone by those that assert that it was with a heavenly body that the Lord came among us" (Letters, CCLXI, p.300).

By the 300's gnosticism had faded as an internal threat. However, later by 360, another threat equally as deadly had emerged. It came from a most unexpected source, Apollinaris the Younger (310-390). Apollinaris had stood shoulder to shoulder with Athanasius and others who had resisted the Arian heresy (the Arians taught that Christ was only a semi-divine creature). But in his old age he fell into a false teaching of his own. Apollinaris reasoned that to be human means that one is necessarily subject to change and is inevitably going to sin. If therefore Christ was human just as we are, he too would be subject to change and would inevitably sin and he concluded that because Christ is also God, then God himself would be exposed to the danger of change. His solution was to make Christ human, but not in the full sense of that word. Apollinaris held that a human being was made up of three parts. Each human being had a body, a soul or life principle and a spirit or rational soul, the ability to will and think. He taught that Christ had a human body and soul/life principle, but that his spirit/rational soul was not human, but solely that of God's Son. Hence in this way he denies the fully humanity of Christ.

Though different in degree, yet this false teaching is the same in kind as that of the gnostics/docetists. It also leads to the same consequences. For that reason the fathers strongly opposed Apollinaris' teaching. Gregory of Nyssa (330-395) writes, "Mind, which is man's proper nature, distinguishes him from irrational beasts. No one can define man as composed of a body, bones and senses nor judge human nature as simply the capacity to eat or be subject to change; rather, man is endowed with thought and reason. Man is necessarily rational and is not a man should he lack this capacity" (Against Apollinaris, p. 14). Scripture teaches that sin begins in the human heart (mind and will) (Matthew 15:19). If Christ did not assume a human heart, then that where sin has its beginning and greatest power is not healed. Then we are hardly better off than if Christ had not come.

Cyril of Alexandria (d.444) addresses this very point, "Clearly grace came upon us from him, as from a new rootstock, a new beginning. We must admit, of course, that the body which he united to himself was endowed with a rational soul, for the Word, who is God, would hardly neglect our finer part, the soul, and have regard only for the earthly body. Quite clearly in all wisdom he provided for both the soul and the body" (On the unity of Christ, p. 64).

Attacks on the doctrine about the humanity of Christ did not end with Apollinaris. They simply became more subtle and refined; however, the danger remained the same. In the 400's Eutyches taught that although Christ was fully human, at the time of the incarnation, his humanity was almost completely swallowed up by his divinity. The following illustration served to make his point. Christ's humanity disappeared into his divinity, just as drop of wine would disappear into the ocean. Another favorite slogan of his followers, who later were known as the Monophysites (one

nature), was “Before the incarnation two natures, after the incarnation one(the divine).” For all practical purposes they denied that Jesus was fully human. This false teaching is by no means the last to attack the full humanity of Christ, but we need to look at no more, for in the end all these heresies are the same, differing only in the degree to which they deny Christ’s humanity.

To lessen Christ’s humanity in any way undermines our whole salvation. Nothing could be clearer. Cyril of Alexandria sets out the principle when he writes, “In short, he took what was ours to be his very own so that we might have all that was his”(On the unity of Christ, p.59). We could not have what was his unless he were fully human. If we do not have what was his, we are quite plainly lost. Irenaeus writes, “Therefore, as I have already said, He caused man(human nature) to cleave to and to become one with God. For unless man had overcome the enemy of man, the enemy would not have been legitimately vanquished. And again: unless it had been God who had freely given salvation, we could never have possessed it securely. And unless man had been joined to God, he could never have become a partaker of incorruptibility”(Against the heresies. p. 448). All thanks to God that he did become our brother.

“The stairway of God”

When Jacob fled for his life from his angry brother Esau, he paused for the night at Bethel. There he had a dream. “He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.”(Genesis 28:12) After Jacob had seen the vision and heard the words of the Lord, he exclaimed, “Surely the Lord is in this place and I was not aware of it.”(Genesis 28:16). Luther believed that this vision was picture of the incarnation. “Accordingly, the ladder is the wonderful union of the divinity with our flesh. On it the angels ascend and descend, and they can never wonder at this enough. This is the historical, simple, and literal sense.”(Luther’s works, v.5, p.223) What a good picture it is. The stairway reaches from heaven to earth, for Christ came down. The stairway rises from earth to heaven, for the incarnate Christ is the one mediator between God and man, and the only way to God. By stairway alone, we who believe, travel the path to eternal life.

This is the way God chooses to save us. Jesus himself tells us, “No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.”(John 3:13) Again he says, “For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”(John 6:35) By no other way can we know God and believe in God. “For the Lord taught us that no man is capable of knowing God, unless he be taught of God; that is, that God cannot be known without God....”(Against the heresies, p. 468) Christ alone enables us to know God, for he says, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.”(John 14:9)

So we begin at the foot of the stairway, Christ in the flesh. Here God has hidden himself. Here God may be found. Luther writes in his commentary on Isaiah 61, “It is because of his humanity and his incarnation that Christ becomes sweet to us, and through him God becomes sweet to us. Let us therefore begin to ascend step by step from Christ’s crying in His swaddling clothes up to his passion. Then we shall easily know God. I am saying this so that you do not begin to contemplate God from the top, but start with the weak elements. We should busy ourselves completely with treating, knowing, and considering this man. Then you will know that he is the way, the truth, and the life(John 14:6). So he sets forth his weakness that we may approach him with confidence.”(Luther’s works, v.17, p.331)

Had God not come in weakness, hid in the flesh of Christ, we could not have endured his appearance. Irenaeus writes, “He might easily have come to us in his immortal glory, but in that case we could never have endured the greatness of the glory...”(Against the heresies, p. 528) God taught Moses and all of us that lesson in Exodus 33. After Moses had rescued his people in the matter of the golden calf, he prayed to the Lord, “Now show me your glory.”(Exodus 33:18) But God replied, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence.”(Exodus 33:19) Then the account continues, “But, God said, ‘you can not see my face, for no one may see my face and live’.”(Exodus 33:20) So Moses saw the back of God.

That back of God is Christ, God in the flesh. So God hides himself in Christ, who came in the form of a slave. Most can not believe it. We ourselves can scarcely believe it. Isaiah asks, “Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.”(Isaiah 53:1,2) This is God’s way to save us. He hides himself in weakness, in weak things, which are nonetheless, the very power of God. So God comes to us and saves us through weak things: the Word, the water of Baptism, the bread and wine of the Holy Supper, which are not weak at all, but the very power of God. The humanity of Christ, God’s coming in the flesh, is a picture and sign of the way God at all times deals with us.

What could be weaker than baptism? Many despise it. Yet through it God saves us. How contemptuously many regard baptism. Tertullian writes, “There is nothing which makes men’s minds more obdurate than the simplicity of the divine works which are visible in the act...for the simple acts it wonders at as if they were in vain...(On baptism, p.669)”. Yet what powerful thing is baptism, the promise of God with the water. What great gifts it brings to us. “Great indeed is the Baptism which is offered you. It is a ransom to captives; the remission of offenses; the death of sin; the regeneration of the soul; the garment of light; the holy seal indissoluble; the chariot to heaven; the luxury of paradise, a procuring of the kingdom; the gift of adoption.”(The procatechesis. P.50) It brings such great gifts because through it we are joined to Christ. “O strange and inconceivable thing! We did not really die, we were not really buried, we were not really crucified and raised again, but our imitation[the reference is to the practice of baptism of immersion practiced in the early church, we are reminded of Romans 6:3,4) was but in a figure, while our salvation is in reality. Christ was actually crucified and actually buried, and truly rose again; and all these things have been vouchsafed to us, that we, by imitation sharing in his sufferings, might gain salvation in reality. At the self-same moment(of your baptism), you died and were born; and that Water of salvation was at once your grave and your mother.”(The procatechesis, p. 61)

The fathers can barely contain themselves in praise of the simple mighty act of baptism. “It is the carriage to God, the dying with Christ, the perfecting of the mind, the bulwark of faith, the key of the kingdom heaven, the change of life...illumination(a another name for baptism)is the greatest and most magnificent of the Gifts of God.”(Oration on holy baptism, p. 360) Through all our life, though our doubts and fears and sorrows, we may look to our baptism. It shouts to us, “you are God’s own, do not be afraid, all things are yours.” With it we may defy Satan and defend ourselves against all his assaults. “Defend yourself with the water; defend yourself with the Spirit, by which all the fiery darts of the wicked shall be quenched. Say to Satan, ‘I am myself the image of God...I have put on Christ; I have been transformed into Christ by baptism; worship thou me.’ Well do I know that he will depart, defeated and put to shame....”(Oration on holy baptism, p. 363)

So great is the desire of God to save us that he provides the Gospel to us in superabundance. So

great his concern for our well being that he gives not only the Gospel in Word and in baptism, but also in the Lord's Supper. Through, with and under the weak and simple elements of bread and wine, our Lord gives us his very own body and blood. They are his body and blood. So he joins himself to us with the result that we are one body with him. His life is our life, our hope for life eternal. "For as the bread, which is produced from the earth, when it receive the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist of God, consisting in two realities, earthly and heavenly; so also our bodies, when they receive the eucharist are no longer corruptible, having the hope of the resurrection to eternity."(Against the heresies. p. 486). Though hid to the sense, a mighty transformation takes place, the greatest gift is given. "Therefore with fullest assurance let us partake as of the Body and Blood of Christ : for in the figure of Bread is given to thee His Body, and in the figure of Wine His Blood; that thou by partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, mightest be made of the same body and the same blood with him. For thus we come to bear Christ in us, because His body and Blood are diffused through our members; thus it is that, according to the blessed Peter, 'we become partakers of the divine nature'."(2 Peter 1:4)(On the eucharistic food, p.68)

How weak and insignificant the Word and the Gospel seem. Breath and air. But we know that they are the power of God unto salvation. "For God was pleased though the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe."(1 Corinthians 1:21) His word runs its full course. It always accomplishes that for which it was sent. Of course, the power of the Word is no surprise, because it is God breathed and Spirit filled. Just as Jesus shouted to the dead Lazarus, 'Lazarus, come forth', so God through his Word calls us and all who hear it from death to life. More than breath and air—the Scripture is the life giving voice of God himself.

God's love is so great that when and because it was impossible for us to rise to him, he came to us in the flesh. He became one with us. He remains one with us. Luther sums it up well, "In this way we ascend into him and are carried along through the Word and the Holy Spirit. And through faith we cling to Him, since we are one body with Him and He with us. He is the Head; we are the members. On the other hand he descends to us through the Word and sacraments by teaching and exercising us in the knowledge of him."(Genesis, v.5, p.223)

"Our supreme comfort"

We know all too well that by Adam's sin the whole human race was corrupted, fell into and is to this very day gripped by sin so that death has come and will come to every human being. Left to ourselves we have no means of escape. However, in his grace God provided one. He healed the whole human race from its corruption through the forgiveness of sins and from death through another who stood in the place of us all, our second Adam and our brother, Jesus Christ. "...as we died in Adam, so we might live in Christ, being born with Christ and crucified with him and buried with him and rising with him."(On the theophany or birthday of Christ, p. 346)

In dramatic dialogue Cyril of Alexandria describes the gift given to us through the work of Christ. "We had become accursed through Adam's transgression and had fallen into the trap of death, abandoned by God. Yet all things were made new in Christ...the nature of man was made rich in all blamelessness and innocence in him, so that it could now cry out with boldness: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'. Understand that in becoming man the Only Begotten spoke these words as one of us and on behalf of all our nature. It was as if he were saying this: 'The first man has transgressed. He slipped into disobedience, and neglected the commandment he received, and he was brought to this state of willfulness by the wiles of the devil; and then it was entirely right

that he became subject to corruption and fell under judgment. But you Lord have made me a second beginning for all on earth, and I am called the second Adam. In me you see the nature of man made clean, its faults corrected, made holy and pure. Now give me the good things of your kindness, undo the abandonment, rebuke corruption and set a limit on your anger. I have conquered Satan..."(On the unity of Christ, p. 105,106) Because Christ is our brother and the second Adam, in him and with him, 'by faith we can begin every day in all newness, for the old has passed away.

Life and salvation are ours. "And he who gives riches becomes poor; for he assumes the poverty of my flesh, that I may assume the riches of his Godhead. He that is full empties himself; for he empties himself of his glory for a short while, that I may have a share in his fullness."(Second oration of Easter, p. 436) What a comfort! Our wealth and abundance is as inexhaustible as God himself, for God gave us all things in Christ. We can live with all boldness and confidence. We can share our abundance, for we can not exhaust it. No matter what may come, we are always the brothers and sisters of God.

Our comfort is especially keen because we know that even after his return to heaven, he is still one of us and one with us. In him we all stand before our God and Father. It is as if he were saying to us, "I am in myself presenting all humanity to its God."(Against Eunomius, bk11, p. 113) At the right hand of his Father and our Father, he ever intercedes for us, "for he still pleads even now as a man for my salvation: for he continues to wear the body which he assumed, until he make me God by the power of his incarnation..."(The fourth theological oration, p. 315). "It is a great comfort that the surest pledge of our salvation and glorification is the human nature of Christ seated at the right hand of the Father where he appears before the face of God on our behalf(Heb. 7:25), leading us and joining us to the Father(John 17:24), in order that then we may be made to conform to his glorious body(Phil. 3:21) In the very nature by which we are flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones we will come to judgment, in order that we may the more eagerly love his appearing(2 Tim. 4:8). By this tie and bond we shall be joined forever to God in eternal life."(The two natures in Christ, p.64) The hymn writer highlighted this truth, when he wrote, "He has raised our human nature On the clouds to God's right hand: There we sit in heav'nly places, There with him in glory stand. Jesus reigns, adored by angels; Man with God is on the throne. By our mighty Lord's ascension We by faith behold our own.(CW, no. 174, v.3)"

While we wait he has not left without help. No writer expresses the daily comfort we get from the incarnation of Christ more than the writer to the Hebrews. "Because he himself suffered, when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.(Hebrews 2:18) Because he knows what it is to be put to the test, he stands ready to help us with timely help so that we might stand under all testing. We know we can approach him for help, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way just as we are—yet without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence; so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."(Hebrews 4:14-16) Help is as close as a prayer, a scream, a sigh, a murmur. We do not have to beg him; he knows and understands whatever we are going through, because he is our brother. We have the sure promise, "Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens..(Hebrews 7:25,26) We do not have to wait until we are worthy. He has made us his own. He waits for us to ask. He often answers before we ask.

One passage gives special comfort to those who served in the public ministry. It also speaks to all

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those who serve Christ in all the various offices of our congregations and churches. As he begins to write about Christ's high priesthood, the write to the Hebrews reminds us that "Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God...no one take this honor upon himself; he must be called by God.(Hebrews 5:1,4)" God chooses human beings to be his representatives. He chooses them and us for the very reason we often find the work of that ministry so difficult. He choose us in all our weakness with all our spots, stains and shortcomings so that "he(that is the one called to be high priest) is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness.(Hebrews 5:2)" Because he has been patient with us and loved us despite all our sin, so he trusts that we will have that same gentleness and patience with our fellow sinners and so with understanding and in tenderness call them to repent and return. For this reason too his coming among us, his humanity is our great comfort.

Though our Father has blessed us to this very day with great riches in Christ, the best is yet to be. The effect of Christ's incarnation and work was and will be as Gregory boldly asserts, "I am made equal with God(The second oration on Easter, p.427)." We might think that Gregory is too bold. But in truth he is saying no more than the inspired John who wrote, "Dear friends, now we are the children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made know. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.(1 John 3:2) Once again we shall be in paradise and walk with God. All this because "the Word became flesh". We can not treasure the incarnation enough.

"The dear fathers, I say, were amazed that the divine majesty assumed every aspect of this bag of worms, our human nature, except sin and guiltiness of death. He ate, drank, slept, waked, etc.; but he was not born in sin as we were. But all this should make us meditate on the great glory that is ours. For the angels in heaven rejoice over the incarnation. It would not be out of place for us still to weep for joy. Even if I should never be saved—which God forbid!—this thought would still fill me with joy: that Christ who is of my flesh, blood, and soul, is sitting in heaven at the right hand of God, the Father, and that such an honor has been conferred on my frame, flesh, and blood."(Luther's works v.22, p.104,105)

Since Christ's incarnation all our comfort and joy against sin, death, and hell, we can never praise or remember it enough. "The following tale is told about a coarse and brutal lout. While the words 'and was made man' were being sung in church, he remained standing, neither genuflecting nor removing his hat. He showed no reverence, but just stood there like a clod. All the others dropped to their knees when the Nicene Creed was prayed and chanted devoutly. Then the devil stepped up to him and hit him so hard it made his head spin. He cursed him gruesomely and said, 'May hell consume you, you boorish ass! If God had become an angel like me and the congregation sang: 'God was made angel,' I would bend not only me knees but my whole body to the ground! Yes, I would crawl ten ells down into the ground. And you vile human creature, you stand there like a stick or a stone. You hear that God did not become an angel but a man like you, and you just stand there like a stick of wood!' Whether this story is true or not, it is nevertheless in accordance with the faith.(Romans 12:6)"(LW, v. 22, p.105)

May our joy, our hope, our strength, our song ever be : "God became our brother".

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