

**OPENING PRAYER:**

The Lord be with you ...

Almighty God, you have given your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him. Grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by your love and grace, may daily be renewed by the Holy Spirit. Amen

Please be seated.

**INTRODUCTION****Joy of the windows**

What a joy today to see our new stained glass window symbolizing Baptism and to be standing between what are now two stained glass windows representing those two great pillars of *Anglican* theology: Eucharist -- in which we celebrate our communion, our participation, in God's world -- and Baptism, in which we confirm and celebrate our covenant with God.

**Anglican**

Today you'll be hearing me use the word "*Anglican*" a lot; I mean Episcopalian also. I use the term Anglican because I'll be talking about our theology that is over 400 years in the making and worldwide in its scope and creation.

**Advent season**

Today is the last day of "Ordinary Time" or Pentecost, our 7 month season of no important holy celebrations. Next Sunday we begin our 5 month season of sacred days with Advent. *I am so happy to I want to talk with you today about Advent and Christmas.*

Some of you probably know may know that Advent is my favorite church season, and Christmas my favorite day of the year. Maybe I love Advent so much because both of my children were born on Dec 16th and each year I have fond memories of awaiting a child's birth. That sense of *wondrous anticipation*, appreciating the miracle of a child, is present for me. Even if you have never had the wonder of a child growing in you, Advent is a time you can, through imagination, feel that mystery. That is what our meditations in Advent are all about... feeling wonder through imagination.

Standing between these windows, these pillars of Anglican theology, on the last Sunday before Advent, I want to talk with you about the tower which centers these pillars: THE INCARNATION, our theology of Christmas .

For many, dare I say most, Anglican Theologians, INCARNATION IS THE CENTRAL TOWER OF OUR THEOLOGY; we are the "Church of Christmas Day." Let's talk about this.

**Ah ha!**

Much of what I'll be talking about today I learned from Frederica Harris Thompsett, one of my fine theology and history professors at the Episcopal Divinity School. Reading her book, called *Courageous Incarnation*, was a pivotal moment in my spirituality.

Do you ever have those moments of insight when you say, "ah ha, that is what it is all about?" I had one of those moments of insight about what it is to be an Anglican Christian in reading *Courageous Incarnation*. I became more open to mystery as a way of knowing, and at the same time more dedicated to reason as a way of knowing God. I want to share some of those incarnation insights with you; they concern: mystery, reason, and love.

**INCARNATION THEOLOGY**

When I wrote the article in this month's Philippian inviting you to Wednesday Advent Meditations, I could not resist quoting Thompsett's book. Here is that quote:

Anglicans are recognized for the emphasis and attention they give to the Christian theology of the Incarnation. This indispensable Anglican tenet is built upon the New Testament witness of a God in Christ who came to live among us as God and as human. ... As early as 1623, when Anglicans moved to the [Puritan] Massachusetts Bay Colony, authorities responded to this unwelcome group by forbidding the celebration of Christmas (Thompsett 1993, p. 8).

By incarnation I mean, as Thompsett says: "God in Christ who came to live among us as God and as human." Incarnation literally means *taking on flesh*. It also means, as she says throughout the book, that God out of love for us, became incarnate in us.

**Church of Christmas Day**

What do we mean the "Church of Christmas Day," and why do we say that?

We can contrast our theology with that of the Roman Catholic church that we might call the Church of Good Friday, with its emphasis on redemptive suffering. We can describe Protestant churches as those of Easter Day, with their emphasis on personal and intense experience of salvation through sacrifice and resurrection. For us Anglicans, our relationship with God proceeds from loving incarnation, God becoming human.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>2</sup> As Anglicans, we have very little *doctrine, meaning beliefs that our church institution mandates we must believe*.

The foundation of Anglican theology<sup>3</sup> was created by Richard Hooker, a principal theologian in the time of Elizabeth I, a person you'll be hearing about again in this sermon. For Hooker, writing in the time of Luther and Calvin, the foundation of religion is not suffering, nor any form of intense personal experience (as it was for Luther and Calvin) [In my last sermon, I teased us about being the "frozen chosen"; we avoid emotional expression in our worship. We have a long Anglican tradition of NOT being

expressive. In this sermon I have to admit that having a solemn expression and avoiding any joyful emotion is QUITE Anglican historically, and for reasons I'm now going to talk about.]

Our Anglican tradition, beginning with Hooker says the foundation of faith is not experience, but IS God. Let's explore this theme.

I warn you, it is heady stuff, so stick with me. My goal is that by the end of theological journey today you'll see that it can also be simple as well as dense. It is important that, in the end, it is simple because theology is not something done by those experts over there. It is practical. Theology **is our striving and yes, our groping to comprehend.** Theology at its best is our best thinking and our practical way of living and appreciating our life with God.

### **Sacraments**

For Anglicans, all of our practical activity as Christians proceed from the gift of God's loving "**in-breaking**" into our world, which we know as "the Incarnation." Sacraments are the pillars of this theology because they are the means [the ways, the methods] by which the purpose of the Incarnation, "the union of our soul with God." is fulfilled. Sacraments ARE channels of God's grace into our lives.

By contrast, the writings of Calvin and other Protestant theologians say nothing like this about the function of the Incarnation or the sacraments.

### **Reason**

Hooker says that the loving gifts of God are bestowed upon humanity only when we as **reasoning humans are able to comprehend "what is divine and what is human."** **How do we do this? By contemplating/ meditating on Christ as our *example of the union of these two natures [divine and human].*** Jesus was an actual, in the flesh, human who, and no less, is also God.

### **Creed**

For Hooker, and his buddy, author of our Book of Common Prayer, Thomas Cramer, saying the creed as a body, a congregation, was an important avenue for God to be with us and in us as the Body of Christ. Today when we say the Nicene Creed, we can get distracted by the term "virgin birth." But at the time that creed was written, the virginity of Mary was of no consequence. The controversy the Council of Nicaea sought to settle was that Jesus is God, and was born of a woman and *made man*.

### **Our role in God's ongoing creation**

For us as Anglicans all our faith follows from this loving, divine union.<sup>4</sup>

For me the most memorable aspect of all that Hooker writes is the conclusion of his reasoning about the centrality of the Incarnation:

*Finally, since God has deified [made Divine] **our** nature by making it his own inseparable habitation [where God lives, that is in our nature], **we cannot now conceive how God should without man exercise divine power.** For man is now an associate of the Deity (Hooker 1994, Chapter 54, 5)*

Hooker uses an analogy, the creation of light to illustrate his point:

*The light of God in the beginning illuminated the world; but after the Sun and Moon were created, the world has received light from them. In this way the Deity of Christ, which before our Lord's incarnation wrought all things without man, now works everything through human nature, (Hooker 1994, Chapter 55, 8).*

### **Salvation**

What this means for us is that we gain immortality and incorruption, not so much through Christ's sacrifice but rather through the loving "union of his deity with our nature" (Chapter 56,8) This is not a theology that says, "Christ died for you." Rather, it says, "Christ lived for you."

The teaching of the Church of Christmas Day is that, by the loving **in-breaking** of the totally divine into the totally human, God lifted us. We became associates. We are participants. We participate with God in all we do that is God-like, and through the sacraments of Eucharist and Baptism. Our Book of Common Prayer has all of us active participants in the service: sitting, standing, responding, singing. The prayers in our services are written, not spontaneous, in part to save us from being carried away by emotion, but mostly so that we can all participate in those prayers.

### **Wonder**

Hooker is known as quite the rationalist, one who established the importance of reason in our faith. Yet, this does not mean that he felt any need to explain the mechanism of incarnation. In words that are good for us to remember in all our ponderings on the Divine, he says of the Incarnation:

*It is not in man's ability to conceive the manner in which this [Incarnation] was brought to pass. But the strength of our faith is tried by those things wherein our wits are not strong (Chapter 52, 1).*

Wrapping up all this consideration of theology, the theology of the Church of Christmas day, we come to this: Because of God, out of love for us, became one of us, we are now God's eyes and hands in the world. The Body of Christ is now us; we receive the gift of incarnation through our PARTICIPATION in God's ongoing creation AND in the sacraments of baptism and eucharist. Hooker puts it this way:

*Participation is that mutual inward hold which Christ hath of us and we of him, such that each possesses the other. (Chapter 56, Section 1). The Sacraments of baptism and eucharist are the sensible [meaning "of the senses"] means by which almighty God communicates those blessings, which are incomprehensible (Chapter 57, 3).*

This theology of Christmas is pretty heady stuff, and I thank you for staying with me through it.

If theology is our practical way of being with God then it can be communicated to even our young Christians.

### **ZACHARY ADVENT LETTER**

The challenge of communicating the theology of Christmas to a five year old came to me in the Advent season of 2006. I had recently had a stem cell transplant that rid me of leukemia. I was weak, and it was not at all clear that I would survive the transplant.

I had decided that Zachary (at five) was old enough for an Advent calendar.

But how could I explain to Zac the meaning of such a calendar? I wrote him a letter which we sent with the calendar that would, I hoped, communicate the importance of Christmas as a time we celebrate God coming to live in us. I imagined that it might become more meaningful to him in a time I would not be there to discuss.

I'd like to close by reading that letter to you, hoping that you can take with you as you anticipate our annual celebration of the incarnation of God into ourselves, whether you are 5 or 95.

November, 2006

Dear Zachary,

Here are ADVENT CALENDARS for you and Lucas (his brother who was one year then). You will need to explain this to Luc as he gets old enough to understand the story.

As you know a calendar helps you to know what day of the year it is. An Advent Calendar helps you to know the days that lead up to Christmas. This calendar helps you celebrate each of these days with a delicious piece chocolate that you can eat yourself, or share with Mommy, Daddy, or one of your friends. You may be curious about why we would have a whole chocolate calendar to mark the days before Christmas.

You know that Christmas is an important day all over the world. People decorate their houses even bringing in big trees just for this day.

You know that Christmas is a birthday... the birthday of Jesus. And that Jesus was born over 2000 years ago, that's lots of years of celebrating a birthday. But you may wonder, why is the birthday of Jesus so important?

Jesus is God. Out of love for us, God chose to become human like us, for a while. Jesus' birth as a human baby brought the best possible gift to us, the assurance of God's love. When Jesus became an adult, he assured all of us that we each have God inside of us. When we celebrate Jesus birthday, we are celebrating that we, like him, are made from God and that God lives in us.

God is a love that is so big, we can't really understand it, but feel that love; we know that we have it. Because we have God lives in us, we have wonderful gifts to celebrate at Christmas. Let me tell you about four gifts from God that we celebrate at Christmas.

First, is the gift of loving God. You love Mommy and Daddy because they are in you. With God's help, they made you, and so you love them. God made you too. And because of that you can love God. And because you love God, you ask yourself what God wants you to do.

When you really want to tease your brother in a way that might hurt him, the God in you is there helping you decide what to do. You know that God does not want you to hurt your bother, (though God might think it is OK to do some harmless teasing once in a while). God helps you to know one from the other. As long as you put God first, doing what you know God wants you to do, you will be a fine person, a person everyone loves and admires. That is the first gift of Christmas.

The second gift is that, because God lives in you, you can love other people like God loves us. You love your friends and they love you because you all have God living in you. Sometimes you have to choose between doing what a friend needs and doing something that would just help yourself. God helps you decide when you ask yourself, am I loving this person as I love myself. At Christmas, we celebrate our love for others by giving presents to each other as God has given us so much.

A third gift from God at Christmas is the responsibility to be God's hands in our world. We take care of grasses, trees, flowers, birds, big animals like whales, and animal pets like Sam in God's name. In building your bird perch, you were assuring the birds that you are helping to take care of them. When Sam got hurt, you, Mommy and Daddy all took care of him. We have a special responsibility to take care of our planet earth and all that is in it because it is such a special present from God.

Finally, because we have God in us, we will live forever. We don't live forever in our earthly bodies, but the God in us lives on. Our bodies will die, but life here goes on with more and more babies. The God inside us goes back to live with God forever. Now that is a very special present that we celebrate on Christmas.

All of this is our Christmas mystery, our Christmas miracle. None of us knows how this happens. But at Christmas, we know it does happen. That baby born at Christmas 2000 years ago became a man -- both God and man through mystery we can't understand. When he grew up, Jesus told us: we have God living in us, we are his children by faith and by our participation with God. We will live with God forever.

And so it is, Zac, that at Christmas we celebrate that each one of us lives in love, with God in us.

Much love to you and all your family, GrandBe

## **CLOSING**

Christmas is a holy mystery, the foundation of our faith. Advent is the time of wondrous anticipation of that mystery; we know and LIVE the mystery of God's love through our God-given reason and imagination.

An English Cardinal, Basil Hume, once quoted an ancient Greek theologian:

*It is not the task of Christianity to provide easy answers to every mystery, but to make us progressively aware of the mystery. God is not so much the object of our knowledge as the cause of our wonder.*

## **Closing Prayer**

Let us pray: Divine Mystery, keep us in your wonder this Advent and Christmas season. Let us be the children you would have come to you ... open to wonder . . . in you, in each other, in our world, and in ourselves as your creations. Amen

## **References**

- Hooker, R. (1994). Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity. Ellicott City, MD, Via Media, Inc. [Hookers Seven Volumes of Theology]
- Thompsett, F. H. (1993). Courageous Incarnation In Intimacy, Work, Childhood, and Aging. Cambridge, Cowley.
- Thompsett, F. H. (2004). We Are Theologians Strengthening the People of God. New York, Church Publishing Inc.
- Thornton, L. S. (1924). Richard Hooker A Study of His Theology. London, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

## Footnotes (deleted from main text for focus and brevity)

<sup>1</sup> For us as Anglicans, Christmas is the most sacred day. Incarnation is the keystone of distinctly Anglican theology. Yes, we say, as in our Catechism that “By his resurrection, Jesus overcame death and opened for us the way of eternal life.” Yet before this, the incarnated God in the form of Jesus was born of our human nature. And why, asks our Catechism, “Why did he take our human nature?” It answers: “The divine Son became human, so that in him human beings might be adopted as children of God, and be made heirs of God’s kingdom.”

The incarnation of God into humanity that makes us children of God and heirs of God’s kingdom. God living within us is the gift of Christmas. We observe a holy, a wondrous advent season as a time of anticipating the remembrance or yearly celebration of God living in us. All the gifts of Christmas come from this. That boy born more than 2000 years is certainly a gift from God, and an important gift to remember this Christmas. But so much more than that boy is what he told us when he grew up: that God lives in us. That heaven is HERE for us. All we have to do is to commit to it. We have to choose to live it. As Latin was translated, that commitment of the heart is called “belief.” But remember that how we understand “belief” after the Enlightenment is very different from what “belief” meant at the time of translation. Belief then was not about fact. And so many ways we understand the word “belief” still echo those older usages. When we say to our child “I believe in you” we aren’t saying “I assess that you are a fact.” No, it is a commitment of the heart.

<sup>2</sup>Theology is NOT DOCTRINE. You won’t find this distinction between theology and doctrine written about often. You may even find sources that define doctrine as theology. But if you look carefully at the meanings of each of these words, I think that you will draw the same contrast that I do. It is an important distinction.

You may hear often, and you may believe yourself, that Anglicanism is whatever YOU believe about God. Beliefs are relative for us Anglicans/Episcopal. In this denomination, you are free to create your own religion. Ralph Waldo Emerson is supposed to have said that: The merit claimed for the Anglican church is if you leave it alone, it will leave you alone.

Anglicans historically and theologically have MINIMAL doctrine.

I’m defining DOCTRINE as an **institutional codification of belief that guides, or is intended to guide behavior.** Doctrine has related words like: doctrinaire and indoctrinate. We often think of doctrine as dogma.

One Roman Catholic doctrine, for example, is the “transubstantiation” -- the codified belief that the Eucharistic prayer literally turns bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. This belief then calls for certain leads to behaviors. If what was bread and wine is now Christ’s flesh and blood, you need to handle it in certain ways. Mandated belief is the shaper of mandated behavior.

As Anglicans, we have no doctrine of transubstantiation. At one time, we had a doctrine of what we might call “non-transubstantiation” -- meaning our doctrine said you should not believe in the literal changing of the wine. The Episcopal Articles of Faith, written and adopted in 1801 say that “Transubstantiation in the Supper of the Lord, cannot be proved by Holy Writ; but is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture, overthroweth the nature of a Sacrament, and hath given occasion to many superstitions.” Today our Catechism has no mention of transubstantiation; the institution of the Episcopal church has no doctrine; you believe as you will.

Because we have very little doctrine, many people that Anglicanism is relativist: everyone is on their own. But that is not exactly true. What we have is THEOLOGY and plenty of it. We have theology of what happens in the Eucharistic prayer, Richard Hooker, chief theologian to Queen Elizabeth 1. On the topic of transubstantiation, for example, [and translating his Elizabethan English into contemporary language]: “”The Eucharist is about changing LIVES, not bread.”

I hope you all recognize this theology in all we do with the Eucharist: we come to the altar together to change US, to receive God into our hearts and into our community of loving persons. You may believe as fact “transubstantiation,” but don’t expect the church to adopt rituals appropriate to that doctrine. Our **theology** is strong here. The role of Eucharist in changing our lives is an essential aspect of Anglicanism. We strive to bring the community of one bread and one wine even to those whose circumstances do not allow them to join us here; our Eucharistic visitor program is active and central in our ministry.



Those of you who were raised Roman Catholic, probably know about the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; this body was originally called The Inquisition.” (Aside note: the use of the word Roman to indicate the institution whose head is in Rome is encouraged for Anglicans. We are all of us as part of the “Catholic,” i.e. universal church) In 1966 Pope John Paul II proclaimed the new (4th) name and declared its mission: “to promote and safeguard the doctrine on the faith and morals throughout the Catholic world.” There is no such body in the Anglican communion.

We Episcopalians and in our larger communion, Anglicans, live with little doctrine ... little institutional prescription on what is fact and what behaviors are appropriate in light of those facts.

<sup>3</sup> The concept of theology dates at least to [Augustine of Hippo](#) who lived in the 4th century CE and articulated much that we hold even today as contemporary theology, which he described as: "reasoning or discussion concerning the Deity." Theologians use methods as diverse as analysis and mystical inspiration to understand, explain, test, critique, defend or promote all manner of concepts of God: of Christ (Christology), of the church (ecclesiology), of the so-called “end times” (eschatology).

Richard Hooker defined theology as "the science of things divine." Hooker, a 16th Elizabethan, lived one hundred and fifty years before the Scientific Revolution or Enlightenment. “Science” did not mean what it means today. Rather, it refers to a systematic way of thinking, whether the source of the thinking is observation, modern science or divine inspiration.

Theology then is our BEST thinking and pondering (thinking with the heart as well as the brain) about God: the divine and the mystery we know as the divine. It isn't our casual or superstitious thinking. It is “learned.” Many people have devoted much more thinking, research, pondering on these topics than we. With theology, we seek to know what they said too. “Theology is critical [deeper] understanding of God, humanity, and the world.” [Thompsett, p. 6]

<sup>4</sup> In Anglican theology -- as Hooker lay its foundation -- the Gifts of God are bestowed upon humanity only when we as reasoning humans are able to comprehend “the eternal distinction of what is divine and what is human” as we contemplate the union of these in Christ.

In his insistence on reason and logic rather than emotion and individual experience, Hooker lays down the central tenet of Anglicanism” the incarnation is:

“Union in distinction.... The Eternal Generation of the Son by the Father is our example of very idea of relationship is derived. There can be no closer union; yet for that very reason it involves two distinct terms: Father and Son” (Thornton 1924, p. 66).

The distinction of divine and human is that of giver and receiver. God is eternal and, by nature, unchanging. Human is finite and by nature capable of growth and change. In the Person of Christ these two natures stand together and distinct. Hooker says of this wonder:

This admirable union of God with man does not change God because for God there is nothing more natural than not to be subject to any change. ... Yet, the very cause of his taking upon him our nature was to change it, to better the quality, and to advance our condition. ... There are in it many glorious effects proceeding from so near copulation with Deity. God from us can receive nothing; we by him have obtained much (Hooker 1994, Chapter 54, 4-5).