

SESSION

1

Presence

SESSION 1: PRESENCE

Extract from *Catching Fire*

To grow the capacity of Presence is to nurture a deep sense that God is present and part of our lives and the life of the world. It is to believe that every encounter, every moment, is rich with sacred possibility. It is to look into the eyes of each other and see reflected there God's own being. Christians believe that in Jesus Christ, God has entered the world, 'one like us.' For the early disciples, Jesus was 'The Way' – the way to the heart of God, and the way to fully live. Our central Christian belief remains that: in Jesus, the fully human and fully divine are one. This is the theology of incarnation and it changes not only the way we look at each other, but the way we see and live and have our being in the world.

1. Chapter: from the book "Seeking Spirituality" by Ron Rolheiser: *The Concept of the Incarnation*

The Concept of the Incarnation

Christ has no body now but yours,

No hands but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion must look out on the world.

Yours are the feet with which

He is to go about doing good.

Yours are the hands with which He is to bless us now.

The Centrality of Christ

We measure time in relationship to the birth of Jesus. All dates end with a tiny suffix, BC or AD, indicating whether an event took place before Jesus' birth or after. The whole world does this. There are reasons beyond the purely religious why this is so. Nonetheless, the fact that the whole world records time in relationship to the birth of Jesus does indicate something about his importance. For those of us who are Christians, time obviously should be measured by when Jesus was born. For us, he is the centre of everything: our meaning, our hope, our self-understanding, our church lives, our theologies, and our spiritualities. He is also the guide for our discipleship.

Spirituality, as we saw, is about creatively disciplining the fiery energies that flow through us. Hence a good spirituality requires a certain discipleship. A disciple is someone under a discipline. Jesus laid out certain disciplines to channel our energies creatively. But he did more than this and he was more than this.

Who is Jesus Christ? If Jesus, himself, did a survey today asking each of us personally the question he once asked Peter, 'Who do you say that I am?' he would, I am sure, get a wide variety of answers. Who is Jesus for us, really? An historical person, a God-man (whatever that means!), a great moral teacher, a philosophy, a church, a dogma, a figure for piety, a superstition, a mythical super-Santa, a household god? Who really is Jesus for us?

Most of us who are Christians have at least this in common about Jesus. We admire him, as Soren Kierkegaard once pointed out; however, this is not enough. What Jesus wants from us is not admiration, but imitation. It is far easier to admire figures of great morality and courage than to do what they do. Admiration alone is a weak thing. Imitation is more important, though we need to go even beyond that as regards Jesus. He is more than a model to be imitated. What Jesus wants is not admiration, nor simple imitation (no one

does Jesus very well anyway!). What Jesus wants of us is to undergo his presence so as to enter into a community of life and celebration with him. Jesus, as John Shea says, is not a law to be obeyed or a model to be imitated, but a presence to be seized and acted upon. What exactly does that mean? The task of this chapter and the next will be to try to answer that question.

Undergoing Jesus must be the centre of any Christian spirituality. Within Christian spirituality, long before we speak of anything else (church, dogmas, commandments, even admonitions to love and justice), we must speak about Jesus, the person and the energy that undergirds everything else; after all, everything else is merely a branch. Jesus is the vine, the blood, the pulse, and the heart. But how to understand Jesus? There have been, easily, five hundred serious theological books written about Jesus in the past thirty years. The intent here is not to try to summarise these, but to situate Jesus and the discipleship he asks of us within the context of the central mystery of Christianity, the Incarnation, the mystery of the word made flesh.

Jesus and the discipleship he asks of us can best be understood within a single phrase: *"The word was made flesh and it dwells among us"*. (John 1:14)

The Concept of the Incarnation: 'The Word made Flesh'

The central mystery within all of Christianity, undergirding everything else, is the mystery of the Incarnation. Unfortunately, it is also the mystery that is the most misunderstood or, more accurately, to coin a phrase, under-understood. It is not so much that we misunderstand what the Incarnation means; it is more that we grasp only the smallest tip of a great iceberg. We miss its meaning by not seeing its immensity.

Generally, we think of the Incarnation this way: In the beginning, God created the world and everything in it, including the creation of humanity. But humanity soon sinned (original sin) and became helpless to save itself. God, in his goodness and mercy, however, decided to save humanity, despite its sin. So God prepared a people by calling the patriarchs and then the prophets. Through them, God slowly readied the people (the Jewish Scriptures). Finally, when the time was right, God sent his own son, Jesus, who was born in Palestine nearly two thousand years ago. Jesus was God, but also fully a man. He had two natures: one human, the other divine. Jesus walked this earth for thirty-three years. He revealed God's nature, taught great truths, healed people, worked miracles, but eventually was falsely accused, arrested, crucified, and died. He rose three days later and, for the next forty days, made various appearances to his followers. At the end of this time, with his followers now more adjusted to the new reality of the resurrection, he took them to a hillside outside Jerusalem, blessed them, and ascended, physically, to heaven.

In this concept, God walked this earth, physically, for thirty-three years, and then returned to heaven, leaving us the Holy Spirit, a real but less-physical presence of God. The physical body of Jesus the word made flesh, was with us for thirty-three years and is now in heaven.

What is wrong with this? It is right – in its own symbolic, beautiful language – about many things: our sin, God's mercy, God becoming physically to earth. Where it is wrong is that it gives the impression that the Incarnation was a thirty-year experiment, a one-shot incursion by God into human history. In this version, God came to earth physically and then, after thirty-three years, went back home. It uses the past tense for the Incarnation and that is a dangerous under-understanding. The Incarnation is still going on and it is just as real and as

radically physical as when Jesus of Nazareth, in the flesh, walked the dirt roads of Palestine.

How can this be so?

The Hermeneutical Key: 'Giving Skin to God'

The mystery of the Incarnation, simply stated, is the mystery of God taking on human flesh and dealing with human beings in a visible, tangible way. The radical character of this, however, needs some explanation, especially as it pertains to three things: why God would act in this way; the shocking rawness of this kind of act; and its ongoing, rather than one-shot, character.

The Why of the Incarnation

Why would God want to take on human flesh? Why would an infinite power want to limit itself within the confines of history and a human body? Why Incarnation?

There is a marvellous story told about a four-year-old child who awoke one night frightened, convinced that in the darkness around her there were all kinds of spooks and monsters. Alone, frightened, she ran to her parents' bedroom. Her mother calmed her down and, taking her by the hand, led her back to her own room where she put on a light and reassured the child with these words: 'You needn't be afraid, you are not alone here. God is in the room with you.' The child replied: 'I know that God is here, but I need someone in this room who has some skin!'

In essence, that story gives us the reason for the Incarnation, as well as an excellent definition of it. God takes on flesh because, like this young girl, we all need someone with us who has some skin. A God who is everywhere is just as easily nowhere. We believe in what we can touch, see, hear, smell, and taste. We are not angels, without bodies, but sensual creatures in the true sense of the word, sensuality. We have five senses and we are present in the world through those senses. We know through them, communicate through them, and are open to each other and the world only through them. And God, having created our nature, respects how it operates. Thus, God deals with us through our senses. The Jesus who walked the roads of Palestine could be seen, touched, and heard. In the Incarnation, God became physical because we are creatures of the senses who, at a point, need a God with some skin.

Nikos Kazantzakis once explained this by way of a parable:

A man came up to Jesus and complained about the hiddenness of God. 'Rabbi, he said, 'I am an old man. During my whole life, I have always kept the commandments. Every year of my adult life, I went to Jerusalem and offered the prescribed sacrifices. Every night of my life, I have not retired to my bed without first saying my prayers. But ... I look at stars and sometimes the mountains – and wait, wait for God to come so that I might see him. I have waited for years and years, but in vain. Why? Why? Mine is a great grievance, Rabbi! Why doesn't God show himself?'

Jesus smiled and responded gently: 'Once upon a time there was a marble throne at the eastern gate of a great city. On this throne sat 3,000 kings. All of them called upon God to appear so that they might see him, but all went to their graves with their wishes unfulfilled.'

'Then, when the kings had died, a pauper, barefooted and hungry, came and sat upon that throne. "God," he whispered, "the eyes of a human being cannot look directly at the sun, for they would be blinded. How then, Omnipotent, can they look directly at you? Have pity, Lord, temper your strength, and turn down your splendour so that I, who am poor and afflicted, may see you!"

'Then – listen, old man – God became a piece of bread, a cup of cool water, a warm tunic, a hut and, in front of the hut, a woman nursing an infant.'

'Thank you, Lord,' he whispered. 'You humbled yourself for my sake. You became the bread, water, a warm tunic, and a wife and a child in order that I might see you. And I did see you. I bow down and worship your beloved many-faced face.

God takes on flesh so that every home becomes a church, every child becomes the Christ-child, and all food and drink becomes a sacrament. God's many faces are now everywhere, in flesh, tempered and turned down, so that our human eyes can see him. God, in his many-faced face, has become as accessible, and visible, as the nearest water tap. That is the why of the Incarnation.

The shocking raw, physical character of the Incarnation

The Incarnation is shocking in the rawness of its physical character. The English word 'incarnation' takes its root in the Latin word, *carnus*, meaning flesh, physical flesh. But, in Latin as in English, this is a very un-Platonic word. There is nothing spiritual about it. It emphasises, as do its English derivatives (carnality, carnal, carnivorous) the body in its raw, brute, physical tangibility. *Incarnation* means *in-carnus*: literally *in physical flesh*.

We usually do not have much trouble conceiving of Jesus in this way, although, even there, we often hesitate to think of Jesus' body as mortal, sexual, and subject to illness, smell, and other humbling bodily processes. The problem rather, as we shall soon point out, is that we do not attribute the same physical reality to the whole Body of Christ, namely, to the Eucharist and the body of believers.

Its ongoing character

Finally, and of critical importance, is question of the ongoing nature of the Incarnation. The Incarnation is not a thirty-three year experiment by God in history, a one-shot, physical incursion into our lives. The Incarnation began with Jesus and it has never stopped. The ascension of Jesus did not end, nor fundamentally change, the Incarnation. God's physical body is still among us. God is still present, as physical and as real today, as he/she was in the historical Jesus. God still has skin, human skin, and physically walks on this earth just as Jesus did. In a certain manner of speaking, it is true to say that, at the ascension, the physical body of Jesus left this earth, but the body of Christ did not. God's incarnational presence among us continues as before. What is being said here?

An initial distinction is key: 'Christ', as you know, is not Jesus' surname name. We do not say 'Jesus Christ' in the same way as we say 'Susan Parker' or 'Jack Smith'. Jesus did not have a surname. The word Christ is a title, connoting God's anointed, messianic presence on this earth. Scripture uses the expression the 'body of Christ' to mean three things: *Jesus*, the historical person who walked this earth for thirty-three years; the *Eucharist*, which is also the physical presence of God among us; and the *body of believers*, which is also the real presence. To say the word 'Christ' is to refer, at one and the same time, to Jesus, the Eucharist, and the community of faith.

We are the body of Christ. This is not an exaggeration, nor a metaphor. To say that the body of believers *is* the body of Christ is not to say something that Scripture does not. Scripture, and Paul in particular, never tells us that the body of believers *replaces* Christ's body, nor that it *represents* Christ's body, nor even that it is Christ's *mystical* body. It says simply: 'We *are* Christ's body.'

Scholars disagree among themselves as to precisely how literally Paul meant this. When he says we are the body of Christ does he mean this in a corporate or a corporeal way? Are we Christ's body the way a group animated by a common spirit (say, for instance, the Jesuits) are a body? Or, are we a body like a physical organism is a body? With some qualifications (and, of course, some exceptions) Scripture scholars agree that it is the latter. The body of believers, like the Eucharist, is the body of Christ in an organic way. It is not a corporation, but a body; not just a mystical reality, but a physical one; and not something that represents Christ, but something that is him.

This has immense implications. It means that the Incarnation did not end after thirty-three years, when Jesus ascended. God is still here, in the flesh, just as real and just as physical, as God was in Jesus. The Word did not just become flesh and dwell among us – it became flesh and *continues* to dwell among us. In the body of believers and in the Eucharist, God still has physical skin and can still be physically seen, touched, smelled, heard and tasted.

But this is not simply a truth of theology, a dogma to be believed. It is the core of Christian spirituality. If it is true that we are the body of Christ, and it is, then God's presence in the world today depends very much upon us. We have to keep God present in the world in the same way as Jesus did. We have to become, as Teresa of Avila so simply put it, God's physical hands, feet, mouthpiece, and heart in this world. Scripture scholar, Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, summarises the importance of this less simply than Teresa, but very accurately:

The community mediates Christ to the world. The work that he spoke is not heard in our contemporary world unless it is proclaimed by the community. The power that flowed forth from him in order to enable response is no longer effective unless manifested by the community. As God once acted through Christ, so he now acts through those who are confirmed to the image of his Son and whose behaviour-pattern is in imitation of his. What Christ did in and for the world of his day through his physical presence, the community does in and for its world. In order to continue to exercise his salvific function the Risen Christ must be effectively represented within the context of real existence by an authenticity which is modelled on his.

The Difference between a Christian and a theist

What difference does it make whether one believes in Christ or whether one simply believes in God? What does Christ add to God? What does being Christian add to theism?

The difference is huge, not just in theology, but especially in spirituality, in the way we are asked to live out our faith lives. A theist believes in God. A Christian believes in God, but also in a God who is incarnate. What is the difference? To put the matter into street-language, one might say: A theist believes in a God in heaven whereas a Christian believes in a God in heaven who is also physically present on this earth inside human beings. The theistic God is transcendent and, if not wholly so, present in matter only as some vague ground of being, but has a physical body on earth. The Christian God can be seen, heard, felt, tasted, and smelled through the senses. The Christian God has some skin.

The Christian God is *in-carnus*, has concrete flesh on this earth. This may seem rather abstract to us, but its implications colour every aspect of how we relate to God and to each other – how we pray, how we look for healing and reconciliation, how we seek guidance,

and how we understand community, religious experience, and mission. This, however, needs explication. So let us turn to look at what it means concretely in terms of spirituality, to believe in the Incarnation.

2. "Suddenly we become Aware," by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

Faith does not spring out of nothing.

It comes with the discovery of the holy dimension of our existence.

Suddenly we become aware that our lips touch the veil

That hangs before the Holy of Holies.

Our faith is lit up for a time with the light from behind the veil.

Faith opens our hearts for the entrance of the holy.

This is how close we are to the holy.

When we open ourselves up to the possibility

That God can be there in any moment,

Miracle is all around us.