



April 2013

Volume 86 Number 4

Dear Friends,

Christmas and Easter The stories about the beginning of Jesus' earthly life, and those about its end, have a remarkable number of elements in common. They are the only times angels appear in the Gospels; they are the times when Jesus is referred to as the "King of the Jews"; Roman authorities, mentioned by name, figure in both stories; in the one, Magi come to the infant Jesus in the manger with spices, in the other, women come bearing spices to what they expect will be the dead Jesus in his tomb. Shepherds populate the one story, and images of the Passover lamb are never far from the other. Mary is a principal figure in each tale, and what Jesus' body is wrapped in receives special mention in both. "Bethlehem," I am told, means literally "house of bread," and the manger in which the infant Jesus is placed is, of course, a feeding trough; the night before he is crucified, Jesus takes bread, breaks it, and says, "This is my body which is given for you." The one story includes an unexpected brightness in the heavens, the other, an unexpected darkness. As you think of the two stories, what other elements seem to have a resonant relationship?

In the Creeds, we go directly from "born of the Virgin Mary" to "suffered under Pontius Pilate." I suspect most of us, if we were asked to describe Jesus to someone with little knowledge of him, might focus on the works he did. We might say that he fed the hungry, healed the sick, that he welcomed outcasts and children, he taught, and he stood up against religious hypocrisy. We would probably go through the events of Good Friday with few qualms—the death of a good person with passionate beliefs is, alas, because of history, easy to believe. But when we got to the part of the story that follows the burial, I wonder if we would place some distance between our views and the Gospel account. "Some say he was raised from the dead," we might add.

Or we might improvise, "His spirit continues to live on in all of those who share his passion for justice." Interestingly, the points on which the early church focused, "born of the Virgin Mary" and "on the third day he rose again," are probably the parts with which modern, Western, liberally-educated Christians are most uncomfortable. And the parts we find it easiest to talk about—

teaching, healing, good works, and so on—do not appear at all in the two Creeds at the heart of the Christian tradition.

Christmas and Easter both wrestle with the deeply mysterious relationship between the divine and the mundane, between the realm of God and the realm of our experience. At Christmas we read that “the Word became Flesh,” but when we try to explain how that happens or what it fully means, we quickly get into murky territory. At what point is Jesus a fully divine person of the Trinity—at conception (in which case how does the fetus become divine?), at birth (what about the birth effects the transition from a human fetus to the Son of God?), at baptism (then what about the Christmas story?), at the Transfiguration (that feels a little late), or at the Resurrection (in which case what do we make of all the healing, teaching, and wonders that he did before that first Easter morning?)?

Smarter and wiser Smarter and wiser people than I have sought to answer all of these questions, and if they all came to the same conclusion, we might rest easy even if we did not fully understand. But the answers and theories and explanations go back and forth between scholars, denominations, and ages. What happens at Christmas is a mystery, not a puzzle—that is to say that to affirm that “the Word became Flesh” draws us ever more deeply into its meaning; there is not a simple and final answer to be found if we are sufficiently diligent and clever.

In popular literature what we call “mysteries” are really only puzzles. There is a perpetrator and, according to the conventions of the genre, when the detective solves the case, there is no uncertainty as to the key question of “who.” Along the way, we usually also learn “how” and often even “why.” Physical death is presented as the ultimate evil, and its seemingly unnatural appearance introduces anxiety and disorder into the world described in the story. There are few “mysteries” in which the central death is the result of natural causes. Usually, someone has taken it upon themselves to end, in advance of natural causes, the earthly life of another, and order can only be restored if that person is removed from society. Mysteries generally do not address the mystery of death, settling instead for focusing on questions of timing and means. No one actually takes anyone’s life; the murder just takes what years might have otherwise remained. The exact nature of the crime depends significantly on what one believes about life and what, if anything, comes after our experience here.

And if the Incarnation (all those questions above about when and how the Word becomes Flesh) is mysterious, so also is what happens at the end of Jesus’ earthly life. It is important to note that Jesus dies, which is to say that he is not technically immortal. One way to understand, or explain away, the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus is to say that he did not really die—or that the human part of him died but his spirit somehow remained untouched by his bodily experience.

I’m spiritual, not physical....The relationship of the “spirit” (whatever that is) to the “body” (and we are very clear about the body’s identity) is itself a sort of mystery. One way to try to make sense of our nature is to say that we have a spirit (a “psyche” from which we get not only “psychic,” but also “psychology”) which at the time of death detaches from the body and goes into a spiritual realm. The image of an escape pod comes to mind. In this view, the spirit is immortal—it is liberated at the time of physical death. St. Paul comments that even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day (2 Corinthians 4:16). He seems to posit the existence of an “inner nature” which is unencumbered by bodily deterioration. Thinking of that inner nature as one’s spirit is not a great leap. Jesus on the cross says, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit (Luke 23:46). The Hebrew and Greek words for “spirit” are the same as the

words for “breath,” so when the text continues, “Having said this, he breathed his last,” it suggests that Jesus is returning to God the spirit/breath which God gave to him when his life began.

Whether the spirit which enlivened Jesus is the same spirit that enlivens us (“there is one body and one spirit...?”) is an interesting and open question which we might discuss more suitably at Pentecost than at Easter. The Creeds do not mention the spirit of Jesus when they refer to his death: “He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.” There is no reference to “but his spirit returned to his Father.” When Jesus does return to where he came from, it is, awkwardly for modernists, described in physical rather than spiritual or metaphorical terms: “He ascended into heaven.” I think the Creeds suggest that everything about Jesus died on Good Friday, and everything about him was alive again on Easter morning.

One thing which makes the Christian faith engaging is that we believe this is true and we know it is impossible, and we do not like to have to choose between knowledge and belief. My sense is that most of my class and generation would rather be thought of as people of knowledge rather than belief, and so they either reject the Easter story or translate it into terms which are acceptable to knowledge: it is a metaphor, it is a manifestation of a myth common to many cultures, it is the creation of primitive writers who wanted something to hold onto in a time of uncertainty and stress, or it was a clever conspiracy perpetrated on the credulous to serve the self-interest of an entrenched class of [reader’s choice to fill in this blank].

As it was in the beginning In recent years I have come back to an image I first heard from my tutor when I was studying Shakespeare in college. I elaborate a little on what he said, but it was something like this. Imagine a fetus in the womb, and imagine that he has the ability to observe and reflect on his situation and may even have some intimations, through careful listening, of life outside the womb. He might well think, “I have everything I need. I am never hungry, I sleep when I am tired, and I awake when I am ready. I do not have to work or be anxious about finding, keeping, or losing a job. All of my needs are met. I have heard that leaving the womb is painful and difficult, and no one who has left has ever returned to say that the departure was a good thing. I wish I could just stay here forever and that nothing would ever change. My life is full, perfect, and complete.”

You and I could make a long list of all that is missing from the life of the fetus, of all the wonders, joys, and delights that await him in his new life, and of all the extreme limitations of his current existence compared to what comes next. But that would make no sense to him because he only understands what he has experienced himself.

Our anxiety about leaving the only life we know is entirely understandable. To create an entire world-view defined by the limits of our experience may be intellectually less defensible. Developing a higher degree of comfort with mystery—what is true but what we cannot fully understand—seems to me actually more reasonable than to suggest that the limits of experience-based understanding and reason are identical to the limits of possibility.

Evidence and its limits Jesus acknowledges the futility of trying to prove beyond reasonable doubt the existence of our life after our earthly death. He tells the parable of poor Lazarus and the rich man, who both die and find their heavenly roles to be the reverse of their earthly relationship (Luke 16:19-31). The rich man begs Abraham, who seems to be in charge of that sector of heaven, for permission to go back to warn his brothers so they at least might escape his fate. As Jesus tells the story, Abraham replies, “They have Moses and the prophets, they should listen to them.” The

rich man then plays what he thinks is his trump card: “No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” In a response whose irony was certainly not lost on Luke, writing some 40+ years after the first Easter, Jesus puts these words in Abraham’s mouth: “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” Our ability to believe in a life after this life grows more certainly out of our understanding of, and relationship with, God than from any other witness, claim, or experience.

So how one experiences Easter, and what one thinks of whatever may follow this earthly life, may be more shaped by the portions of the Creeds which come before and after the sections about Jesus than by anything we say about the event of Easter itself. Jesus and Luke suggest that understanding God to be the creator of everything—heaven and earth, seen and unseen—is the first step toward an understanding of life and the universe which is not limited by our experience and what we deduce from that experience. Perhaps the next step is to believe, or accept, that Scripture shows (reveals) the true and full nature of God. Therefore, if we are to understand creation, we need to look less to ourselves and more to the creator. For when we see God truly, what by our lights looks impossible, by his light seems inevitable. From that perspective Easter is not a jarring anomaly impossible to believe, but the expected fulfillment of a promise by one whose word became flesh so that, in the mystery of God, our flesh might be raised to his life.

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