

Christ Church Cranbrook
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan
Sermon for Christmas Day 2012
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

J.B. Phillips was an English theologian who made a big impact in the late 1950's and early 1960's. When I was about 12 years old, I attended a youth week in which the leaders had incorporated material from a little book by J. B. Phillips entitled, *When God Was Man*. This was written back in the 1950's. I am sure if he were writing it today, he would give it the title, *When God Was a Human Being*.

As we explored the message, I had the most important personal epiphany of my life. I suddenly became conscious of the profound significance of the Incarnation. I was stunned by the insight that at one point in history, God became a human being; that is, the One who is eternal entered time; the One who had always inhabited the heavens chose to come and live as a human being upon this earth. As St. John put it, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

There are so many implications to this event. I believe with all my heart that it is true; that on the first Christmas, Jesus was God who came to us in as a human being. I began to ponder what that means for living our lives. I cannot begin in one short sermon to exhaust the subject, but let me simply invite you to consider two things that are true if God has come to live among us as a human being.

First of all, it means that we humans can have a way of understanding what God is, a new access to understanding the mystery of the Creator who stands behind all reality. The creature, whose life is derived from the uncreated, cannot possibly ever completely comprehend the uncreated, but in the mystery of the Incarnation, we have a significant insight into God's nature and purpose.

One of my favorite Christmas stories has to do with a man who one night was trying to get a flock of birds to get out of the snow and go into his barn where it was warm. He thought to himself, "If only I could become one of them for a short while, I could guide them into the light and warmth." That story helped me begin to realize that the chasm between a bird and a human being, vast as it is, is nothing to compare between the chasm between a human being and the mysterious, divine Being that gives life. And I realized that we are as incapable of understanding God on our own as a bird is incapable of understanding humans.

It occurred to me that crossing the chasm from the other side really did occur on the first Christmas, because God, for us and our salvation, chose to cross that chasm and take on a form that we could understand. God became visible; God took on human flesh; God translated God's self into realities that are accessible to our human ways of knowing. We now have a window through which we can see deeper into the mystery of God, not because of our powers, but because of the gift of God's self-revelation that we celebrate at Christmas.

The other implication of the Christmas event is that if God has become a human being, it means that God understands us. God has moved from remoteness and into closeness. When we experience the extremities of human emotion, we need to express ourselves and to know that someone truly understands our experience. People in our lives who have shared similar experiences have bond of understanding and they can share with each other. There is healing, hope, and compassion in that sharing!

John Claypool tells about a play about this aspect of Christmas, which was written by a German Lutheran minister named Guenter Rutenborn. The play was written in 1945 as Germany was reeling from the impact of World War II, and Pastor Rutenborn is struggling with the question that was on so many people's minds, namely, who was responsible for the terrible agony that the world had experienced through World War II. And so the play begins with a group of refugees, displaced persons, milling around, asking who's to blame, and the various answers that were in the air were voiced there.

Some said Hitler was to blame; others said, "No, it was the munitions manufacturers who financed him." Others said it was the apathy of the German people. Then suddenly a man comes up and says, "Do you want to know who is really to blame for all the suffering we've been through? I'll tell you. God is to blame. He is the one that created this world. He is the one who has let it be what it is." And everybody catches up the chorus. They turn with one voice to say, "God is to blame. God is to blame."

And so in the play, God is brought down on the stage tried for the crime of creation. He is found guilty and the judge says, "The crime is so severe that there are going to have to be the worst of all sentences. I hereby sentence God to have to live on this earth as a human being." And the three archangels are given the task of carrying out the sentence.

The first archangel walks to the end of the stage and says, "I'm going to see to it when God serves His sentence that He knows what it's like to be obscure and to be poor. He will be born on the backside of nowhere with a peasant girl for His mother. There will be a suspicion of shame about his birth, and He will have to live as a Jew in a Jew-hating world."

The second archangel says, "I'm going to see to it when God serves his sentence that He knows what it's like to fail and to suffer disappointment. No one will ever understand what He is trying to do."

The third archangel said, "I'm going to see to it when God serves His sentence that He knows what it's like to suffer. I'm going to see to it that He has all kinds of physical pain. At the end of His life, He's going to be absolutely executed in as painful a way as possible."

And with that the three archangels disappear. The houselights go down, and it suddenly dawns on you that God has already served that sentence. He knows what it's like to live as a human being, which means there's nothing you face today that is going to be strange to God. Therefore, the message of Christmas is that God became as we are so that we could better understand what God is, and we believe with all our hearts that God understands what we are. As the old hymn puts it, "Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal" (*Come, Ye Disconsolate*, Thomas Moore).

That is God's way of saving us and guiding us from darkness to light, from sorrow to joy, from death to life. God became as we are so that we might become as God is. There is the mystery of the Word made flesh, the Incarnation, God with us. And that is surely good news for all humanity not just at Christmas, but for all eternity.