

Main Points Revisited: The Incarnation

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[0 : 00] So I kept that in reserve because I thought that would be nice at this time of year and that's what we're going to look at today. We did look at the person of Jesus Christ. We looked at who he is and we said that he's truly God, truly human and that his godness and his humanness are perfectly integrated in unity.

And you can see the significance of that. He's trustworthy because he's God. He's sympathetic because he's human. We know that the price of redemption was paid by somebody with infinite resources, was paid by God and we know that Jesus is to be worshipped.

And we think about the person of Jesus Christ in those ways. But in some ways I think that topic is a topic for reflection and perhaps even it raises philosophical questions which theologians look at and probably a lot better than I could.

But what we're going to look at today is a slightly different angle, not looking abstractly at the person of Jesus Christ but looking at the particular historical incident of the incarnation.

And the more I thought about it, the more I thought this isn't really a matter of abstract philosophy but there's a whole lot about relationships and attitudes.

[1 : 40] The incarnation leads us to what I think we can only call the personal aspects. The personal aspects of the way God is, the personal aspects of the way God relates to human beings and the personal aspects of the way human beings relate to God.

So it brings us, it seems to me, into the realm of psychology, if you like, motivation, relationships, attitudes.

So my proposal today is that's what we particularly learn in the incarnation and you can see whether you agree with me or not. So we're going to look at some classic passages.

There are other passages too. Would you like to open your Bible? If you go to John chapter 1, there is a very important statement there in John 1 verse 14.

Where it says, in John's Gospel, chapter 1 verse 14, the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

[3 : 07] We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

It's quite short. And that's one of the classic passages and I'm going to just go straight on, having quoted that, and refer us now to Luke chapter 1, which is what Ruth read to us.

And I'd like to look at around about verse 35. And the other passage that we're going to look at is in Philippians chapter 2. That's another very important passage about the incarnation.

So let's go to Luke this time. So we've got a little bit more detail about the sequence of events.

So in verse, I've put verse 38, but I think I'm meaning verse 35. Listen to what it says again. The angel, so Mary says, how can this be?

[4 : 19] Since I'm a virgin, how will I have a child since I haven't had sexual relations with a husband?

And the angel answered, the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God.

Let's just look at that sentence there. How does the incarnation take place?

How is it that God becomes human? The Word became flesh. Okay, that's what it says there. But we've got some more detail here. The Holy Spirit will come upon you.

Think of that expression about coming upon. It's used in Acts chapter 1 verse 8, which I'm just going to look up.

[5 : 27] You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And it's also used in Acts 8 verse 24, where this is reference to bad things.

Simon answered, pray to the Lord so that none of the things you have said may come upon me, may happen to me. So the idea of something coming upon us.

How does the incarnation take place? It takes place when the Holy Spirit comes upon Mary. Comes upon her.

So what could have been said? It could have been said the Holy Spirit will come to confront you and fight with you. But it doesn't say that.

The Holy Spirit will come upon you. And it doesn't say the Holy Spirit will become available to you so that you can follow your plans and your agenda.

[6 : 33] It's not about human mastery. It's the Holy Spirit will come upon you. And the sense seems to be of something of power, something of influence and authority, under which we become helpless.

A storm comes upon us. Bad things come upon us. The Holy Spirit comes upon us. And I think it has this idea of a power coming over Mary.

The Holy Spirit will come upon you to become helpless under a superior power. And there's a parallel phrase. The power of the Most High will overshadow you.

Think about that phrase. The power of the Most High will overshadow you. The word for overshadowing is used in Luke 9.34 in the Transfiguration.

When there was a cloud, you remember, and the cloud overshadowed them. And it's also used in Acts 5.15 where people thought as Peter passed by, they would be healed when he overshadowed them.

[8 : 03] When they walked past and they fell under his shadow. And it's an interesting expression, isn't it? The power of the Most High will overshadow you.

It's the idea of something that makes no noise. A shadow makes no noise. When the cloud on the Mount of Transfiguration overshadowed them, it was a silent thing, wasn't it?

It's something unavoidable. When the cloud comes to overshadow us on a sunny day, we can't do anything about it. It just comes over the top of us. It's something bigger than we are.

We don't have a competition whether we're going to overshadow the cloud or the cloud's going to overshadow us, because it's no competition. The cloud overshadows us because it's bigger than we are.

And here we have what seems to me to be the beginnings of a description of the way God's power works in this particular event.

[9 : 07] Something about the hugeness of the power but something about the quietness of the power. Something about the gentleness of it because a cloud as it overshadows doesn't conflict with us.

It just comes, doesn't it? So I put in my notes an unforceful power. The power of the Most High will overshadow you.

A huge power, but a power which is quiet and gentle. And I press the button. And I ask the question, who does the power in this, as Luke tells it to us?

Who does the power? Whose power is it? And what's the answer? The power of the Most High. So we take that to be the power of God himself.

And we're also given another person who does the power, or it's put in another way. The Holy Spirit. So who does the action? The Most High does this.

[10 : 17] The Holy Spirit does this. Let's ponder that. And let's now turn to the other classic passage I had in mind, the Philippians 2 passage, and see what this tells us about the subject of the incarnation.

So we're now in Philippians chapter 2. Although I put verse 7, I think I meant verse 6.

Verse 5. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. Now see what is being said here. It says in verse 7, He made himself nothing.

So there's a pronoun and a verb. He made himself nothing. The pronoun's implied.

He took the very nature of a servant. Philippians 2 verse 7. He took... Thank you.

[11 : 35] He took the very nature of a servant. And it says in verse 8, He humbled himself.

Be thinking, who is the He that's being spoken of here? Just hold that thought for a moment.

And it says in verse 8, He, the He is implied, became obedient to death. And who is the He?

The same He is the one who, right at the beginning of it, in verse 6, is the one being in very nature God, who did not consider equality with God something to be grasped.

So, here's the question. Who does the action in Philippians? Who is the active person in the incarnation? The answer is? Christ Jesus.

[12:45] So, it's interesting, isn't it? Do you see that we're building up a little picture here? What is happening in the incarnation? We have a powerful, powerful act, an act of a particular quality, by the triune God.

God, the Father, the Father is involved, the power of the Most High, the Holy Spirit is involved, the Holy Spirit will overshadow you, or come upon you, and the Son is involved, because it is the Son who takes, humbles Himself, etc.

So, my first point on this is here we have a mighty act of the Holy Spirit, sorry, of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The way the Trinity works is indivisible. it's not like the Westminster government, where you have one department for transport, one department for housing, one department for pensions, one department for education, and none of them know what the others are doing, and they're all in competition for funding, and it's very difficult for them to coordinate.

And the Trinity is not like that, with three different conflicting departments. The Holy Trinity works in an indivisible way, and we see this here in the Incarnation, don't we?

[14:27] This is an act of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and it's an act of amazing power. The power of the Most High will overshadow you.

And I'd invite you to consider that power would you like to compare the power in the Incarnation with the power required to make a million worlds?

Which, would you say, required more power? I don't know the answer, but it's an interesting question, isn't it? I would say that there's an extraordinary power at work in the Incarnation.

Then I ask, what is the quality of this power? So when we measure power, we usually think of destructive power, like however many times the Hiroshima bomb, don't we?

We say it was a hundred times more powerful than that, a thousand times more powerful than that, and it's measured in terms of destruction. Or earthquakes, number five on the Richter scale, or ten on the Richter scale, it's all measured in terms of destruction.

[15:51] How is this power brought to bear? Here, the power of God is brought to bear not by smashing things to smithereens, but by working quietly, in and invisibly, in the womb of this Middle Eastern girl in a north country village.

And I want to say that this shows us something of the nature of our God. What sort of God is he? What sort of way does he like to work? Well, something to ponder, and perhaps to worship as we were singing, bow down and worship, for this is your God.

So let's come, having thought that this is a powerful act of the Trinity, let's now think of, that it's more than just power. It's not simply a display of God's power, but there needs to be a particular mindset on a personal level.

So let's look at the mindset involved. Let's go back to Luke chapter 1. Is there any particular attitude, relationship that is required or brought to bear in the person, this is Mary, who is intimately involved in this wonderful action of God?

[17:32] Now you notice that God doesn't just zap her and then she finds out she's pregnant and she doesn't know why, that the first thing God does is he comes to speak to her.

And let's think of the incarnation, we have divinity and humanity perfectly combined. How do you do that?

Do you do it by welding? Do you do it by glue? Do you combine humanity with divinity with steel rivets?

It's not like that, is it? There is something about divinity and humanity that when they're combined, it has to be by a combination involving personhood, by agreement with willingness.

Seems to be profoundly part of how God relates to people and how people relate to God. It's certainly true regarding Mary. Let's ask ourselves what attitudes were found within her and the first one is faith.

[19:02] She's asked to consider an impossibility which is what she does and she says, you remember the words, how can this be? Verse 34, how can this be?

divinity grow within humanity?

How can this be? And the angel says, this is the power of God. Now you might remember that there's a contrast with Zechariah, whose story was told a few verses earlier, he was also told an

impossibility, you will be a father, your wife will conceive a child, and the impossibility that he was faced with was that his wife was beyond childbearing age.

So it was impossible but I think it was a less impossible impossibility than the impossibility that Mary was faced with. But do you remember how he failed to receive this?

Because he didn't believe, I'm just looking for the text, verse 20, you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time.

[20 : 29] Please notice the importance of words from God being received by faith. Zechariah failed in that, but Mary did not.

And in verse 45, Elizabeth says, blessed is she who has believed what the Lord said to her will be accomplished. So I ponder this and I think in this great event of the incarnation we have not only the almightiness of God but we have in the whole way that this works the reception of this miracle by faith.

You see, Mary is not a blank canvas onto which God imprints willy-nilly. He engages her in a relationship and from her point of view or from her side of it faith is absolutely necessary.

Now you might say, would the incarnation have been possible if Mary had disbelieved?

Have a think about that. She believed what was said but we're definitely told in Hebrews 11 verse 6 without faith it is impossible to please God.

[22 : 00] without faith it is impossible to please God. And in this event of the incarnation one important part of it is the faith of the recipient of Mary.

She believed God. Now some gods so-called gods are not particularly gods who look for faith. they just do what they please.

They zap people here or give that to them give them blessings and whatever. And the whole business of promising and believing is not part of it but with the Bible the God of the Bible is a God who relates to people by his word by promising things which we are to receive by faith.

Now the incarnation in the womb of Mary is a one-off totally unique and God no angel is going to come to any of the ladies in the congregation here and say God wants permission to inhabit your womb for nine months.

That was a one-off but for every person there is the prospect that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith and for everyone God comes to us and says do I find faith because that's how I work I promise I would come into your life but I can't and won't do that unless I find you a believer

Zechariah disbelieved didn't he and was rebuked for it and it's so important for us as believers if we're to have God in our lives you understand the sense of what I'm saying that we constantly live by faith there's another thing that was there in Mary's mindset and that is the aspect of submission at the end of the conversation with the angel verse 37 the angel says nothing is impossible with

[24 : 30] God and Mary says I am the Lord's servant may it be to me as you have said notice again the importance of the words that were said and she says may it be to me as you have said she's saying I trust you I offer myself to you as your servant I am at your disposal may it be to me as you have said let's be hypothetical suppose Mary had said I don't trust you I'm not going to open up my life to the working of God the insides and the depths of my body and life and mine keep out what would God have done well it's very hypothetical because God is sovereign but it is true that the way God chose to work was to tell her what was going on to come in this particular manner to look for her faith and to work through her words of submission

I am the Lord's servant may it be to me as you have said and I think there's something very important here God is not the rapist of the human body nor the human soul he does not force himself against the will of the recipient and the incarnation is not divinity forced onto humanity but exactly epitomizes this idea that God comes to people in his gentleness in his power with his words with his promises and looks for faith and how is it with you when God comes to you do you say I trust you I'm your servant come into my life do in my life what you will have you asked him to do that have you responded as you've heard him say things like that to you if you've never heard him say that sort of thing what would you do if he did say that what response would you give because Mary says let it be to me according to your word an act in which a particular mindset is required on the human level faith and submission and thirdly the incarnation is an act which required a particular mindset on the part of God so it's not simply power from the human point of view and it's not simply power from the divine point of view either what is the attitude well we have an attitude on the part of the father and we can quote Romans 8 32 have all those things come up on the screen

in one go yeah I didn't mean to do that never mind Romans 8 32 let me quote this little verse here where it says

God did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all God did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all don't think that's just to do with the incarnation but it certainly includes it God gave his son to come into this world to die it required a certain attitude on the part of God and you may say God doesn't have attitudes God doesn't he's above all that he just gets on and does his sovereign divine will so God you might say is like the Beijing authorities when it was the Olympics and they needed a motorway to go through and if there was a row of old houses with some people still living in them they said well that's too bad we're just going to blow that motorway through there get on the bulldozer and knock it all down because that's the way we do!

there's no personal attitude taken into account for that and you might see God as a sort of almighty bulldozer driving God but then it shows how wrong you can be doesn't it the Bible is very emphatic that God takes a certain attitude to people so here the attitude of the father he did not spare his own son he did not spare so if you've got a baby you've had a baby some mums didn't want do you remember they didn't want their children to have mumps measles rubella I'm glad I managed to say that they didn't want them to have that injection and every mum thinks shall I have my little child have that nasty needle in their arm or whatever it is and they cry it will be too painful there will be tears and tantrums spare the child don't let them have it well

[30 : 22] God did not spare his son his son bore! all the unpleasantness all the trials and troubles of coming to this world God did not spare son and if you've got children and they're really naughty you might say oh I couldn't bear to lift a finger against them I couldn't bear to punish them I couldn't bear to withdraw the slightest privileged poor child will weep and cry it will be terrible spare the child spare them that I think the old proverb was spare spare the!

spare! spare! that's the one I was trying to think of yes but God did not spare his son God didn't say oh no it's too difficult for him oh no he'll be upset by it it'll hurt him God didn't say that he allowed all these things to happen so there's an attitude on the part of the father but I wanted to think particularly of the attitude on the part of the son so Philippians we're going to come back to Philippians chapter 2 which are the same things that we looked at before but I'm asking not who did it but what attitude did they take in doing it so you remember in Philippians 2 verse 7 he made himself nothing he made himself as it were a nobody now what's that program is there a program called secret boss something like that secret millionaire is there secret millionaire yes where the boss of a big company comes down and works on the shop floor with his employees or his or her employees and finds out what it's really like to be there and at the end all is revealed and they say wow you're

Sir Alan Sugar or whatever you know never recognized you and Sir Alan Sugar or whoever it is says because you work so hard I'm going to give you all a double pension or whatever it does like that but to begin with he's unknown now on the program of course it works because at the end they think how wonderful he is but Jesus came to endure the contradiction of sinners and many of them still didn't believe and many of them still hated him what sort of attitude does it take to make yourself a nobody under those circumstances in verse 7 it says taking the very nature of a servant taking the very nature of a servant so if you imagine from Downton Abbey Lord Grantham anybody ever watched Downton Abbey oh yeah right okay somebody will understand the illustration so it's a country house

Lord Grantham is the big big boss and he's used to giving orders and being served and one day one of the house maids says to him get me some toast and marmalade this instant and he says excuse me you don't tell me what to do perhaps he might say perhaps he might take the very nature of a servant and perhaps he might say oh okay just this once what was it toast and marmalade where is that what is toast how do you get toast you heat bread oh right okay I'll go and do that what sort of attitude would it require for Lord Grantham to say yes okay I'll go and get the toast and marmalade and then in verse eight he humbled himself so Lord Grantham might say well I've already done that

I've given you toast and marmalade once the servant might say always do that I want that to be your the way you look at every single day more to be done he took the very nature of a servant being found in human likeness an appearance as man he humbled himself so don't just make toast and marmalade once but get your stuff out of the master bedroom go and live downstairs with the servants quarters what attitude does it take to become obedient to death verse 8 what attitude does

it take to become obedient to death you think of the first world war when the it was usually the lads wasn't it the 19 20 year olds would go out to fight for king and country and they would say I want to go and do this I want to go and do this for my for my mum and I want to go and do this for my sisters and I want to go and do this for my baby brother and I want to go and do this for my old dad and our village and everything around me what sort of attitude does it take to become obedient to death does take an attitude doesn't it you have to have something going on in your head to be willing to do that so what is the attitude of the son of god well in chapter 2 verse 3

[36 : 03] I think he pretty well pins it down he says to his readers do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit but in humility consider others better than yourselves and I think it's exactly the mindset that the son of god had in humbling himself in the incarnation it's the attitude of self sacrifice for the benefit of other people it's an attitude of self less ness it's the opposite of the pride and the self centeredness which says the only thing that matters is me you could imagine people thinking that the only thing that matters is me and what the son of God says is what I care about is what happens to them and think about the way the thought begins your attitude should be the same as that of

Christ Jesus verse 6 who being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but made himself nothing it sort of needs another word in there to make it clear so do you think this is the word who this is the word despite being in very nature God took the form of a servant despite being in very nature God took the form of a servant it makes sense wouldn't it it preserves that contrast between the highness of God and the lowness of the human condition sort of makes sense but I would suggest that's not the word that is implied in the passage I think the word that's implied in the passage is because because he is in very nature God he humbled! Because it is in the nature of God to be like this he did not count equality with God something to be grasped but made himself nothing taking the nature of a servant I think what the incarnation is doing is showing us a deep truth about the sort of God our God is that in his glory and in his magnificence we could say of him in a true sense but in a mysterious sense there is humility within divinity and it's that attitude of course that Paul is saying needs to rub off on the other believers he says for your community this should colour the sort of community you have have the same mindset that Jesus Christ had verse five so you guys don't do things thinking the only thing that matters is me don't do anything out of selfish ambition or vain conceit but think of others as being more important than yourselves and he says this about it's a theme of that chapter indeed of that letter and he says if you look across in chapter 2 verse 20 he talks about Timothy and he says I've got no one else like him who takes a genuine interest in your welfare everyone else looks out for his own interests not those of Christ Jesus when I was a school teacher we had a deputy head who was a very strong character and then the position of head was vacant and a new head came along and at one staff meeting he commented on the behaviour of the deputy head and he inadvertently said I don't think he meant it to come out like this he said we can't impose such and such on the pupils like a little tin god and the deputy head said well I don't know which I find most offensive the little or the tin god part of what you just said about me I'm sure it wasn't meant to come out like that but that's the way it came across a little tin god now do you think Jesus is behaving like a little tin god he's behaving like god and how does god behave he doesn't strut around bossing people around he comes in his humility and sacrifice to save us think of another example of the Roman emperors who got to the point where they believed their own PR and were billed as gods and I think began to think they were gods and how did those gods behave well they demanded obedience they forced themselves onto their population by force and demanded worship and they were god men if you like but here is the real god man here's the incarnation it's not a man becoming god but god becoming man and it's not done by power nakedly not it's not just an act of power although it is an act of power but it's an act in which humanity is approached with a word of promise to be received by faith and submission to the goodness of god that's how god relates to humankind and god himself is not in pride and self glory just thinking of himself alone as it were but in sacrifice and humility and it is a mystery but it's a wonderful mystery what a wonderful god we have what a wonderful saviour is Jesus and what a wonderful thing to love him and trust him and for him to be in our lives let's sing together 384 thank you

[43 : 29] Thank you.