
I Bow To The Body of Christ

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip
Christmas Eve – Year A**

I admit it: I have always been one of those strange people who enjoys using the name of Jesus.

I don't mean saying "Jesus" as an emotional exclamation, like, when something weird has happened, saying, "Jesus!" I really do mean prayer. I enjoy praying to Jesus, and I don't mind using the name, as complicated and historically bound as it is.

When I was in late high school, I was a pretty much acknowledged Jesus Freak. I was a charismatic Christian, enjoying lively music and the gifts of the Spirit. And I was an evangelical Christian, committed to spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. In college in California, I played guitar in the street and on the beach, where I also organized bible studies and prayer groups. You might say, I was meant to be a priest. There are lots of messages I missed in life, but I got that message.

It was only later that I learned what incarnation was about. Incarnation. The word is Latin for, "in-the-flesh." "Incarnatus Est." "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

I learned what the mystical incarnation was about when I served as an assistant at an Anglo-Catholic parish. An Anglo-Catholic parish is an Episcopal Church that uses lots of ceremony, and vestments, and ritual: lots of Eucharist services, and ancient chants, and signs, and incense, and acts of devotion: lots of genuflecting, and bowing at the name of Jesus.

It came time for me to preach my first sermon at this church, and I was having a good time. Like I said, I enjoyed talking about Jesus; and so, I mentioned the name of Jesus a lot.

I should have known better. But I didn't. A few minutes into my sermon, I realized that something strange was going on. Every time I mentioned the name of Jesus, the members of this Anglo-Catholic congregation were nodding their heads. They were not nodding in agreement with me; they were bowing their heads at the name of Jesus. And I was saying "Jesus" a lot. The more I said the name of Jesus, the more they bobbed their heads. and they were bowing their heads a lot!

Mary bowed her head.

*Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head
"To me be as it pleaseth God," she said.*

Mary bowed her head.

When the pandemic started, almost three years ago, I had just returned with my wife from a trip to India. The Cathedral quickly produced our first completely pre-recorded video service, and I remember greeting the online congregation in the same way I had greeted people in India. There, in India, when we greeted someone, we had become accustomed to putting our hands together, bowing our heads, and saying "Namaste." That gesture became our sign—here in the Cathedral of St. Philip—throughout the first year of the pandemic, when we could not touch each other, when we tried to pass the Peace of Christ without being able to hug or to shake hands. Namaste. Peace be with you. A bow to you.

One way of interpreting the Christian passing of the peace with a bow is to say, "The Christ in me greets the Christ in you." Or, "The Jesus in me bows to the Jesus in you."

Then, as we remember, the pandemic seized us, set in deeply among us, imprisoned us, and forced us to lose encounters with flesh and blood. The pandemic stole some of our incarnation.

We, the church and the world, have spent the past two years becoming incarnate again. Slowly, ever so surely, two steps forward and then one step back, we are becoming incarnate again. We are becoming in the flesh again.

Healthy incarnation takes a long time. Jesus did not just appear one night in a cattle stall. There were months of preparation and pregnancy. Days and nights of worry and care. Fear, for sure, but also love.

Then, gradually the incarnation began to happen. It happened in the same way a parent answers the question of a child. You know that question, from a five year old: "Where do babies come from?" The wise parent has always answered, "Babies come when two people are in love."

It takes two people. Incarnation does not happen by itself. It takes more than one person. It takes us loving each other. Yes, Christmas is about incarnation; and every time we love another person in this world, we are helping incarnation grow in this world. We are making love incarnate. We are making love real.

In the past three years, this church, and the world, have been involved in the ministry of racial reconciliation. Good service and hard work. Some folks—white and black alike—have grown weary of the task. But that ministry, too,—racial reconciliation—is a form of growing incarnation, a way of really learning who the people of God are. It is hard, sometimes, to hear and to acknowledge the pain and suffering of God's people. But as we do, we are bringing the fullness of incarnation to the world.

Recently, watching the world begin to flourish again, walking amidst the lively flora and fauna of the outdoors, rubbing elbows with people of all shapes and sizes, I have begun to repeat the mystical words of Teilhard de Chardin. He said, "Over every living thing which is to spring up, to grow, to flower, to ripen during this day, say again the words: 'This is my Body'." Those are the words, of course, that a priest says when he or she prays over the bread being consecrated for Eucharist; "This is my Body."

Consider the colorful variation of the world—not just in flora and fauna—but in all the people of God, all these wondrously complex human beings, all this glorious diversity. All of us are part of the incarnation of the Body of Christ, part of this evolving glory of God. We are part of Christmas. We are those about whom Teilhard said: "Over every living thing which is to spring up, to grow, to flower, to ripen during this day, say again the words: 'This is my Body'."

*Humbly I adore thee,
Verity unseen,
who thy glory hidest
'neath these shadows mean.*

I bow to the Body of Christ. Bow to the person beside you. Namaste. Peace be with you. Christ is being born in you. Jesus is being born in you!

You are the Body of Christ. I am the body of Christ. Together, we can be the birth of Christ, the incarnation of Christ, in the world.

AMEN.