

**John 1:1-14****“The Second Mystery”****December 25, 2016****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

Last Lord’s Day morning, from Romans 1:1-6 we considered *the fact* of the incarnation of God: that Jesus was God himself, now become a man for us and for our salvation. This morning I want to consider with you the *nature* of the incarnation, or, at least, what we can know of this impossibly mysterious event and its result in the life of the Son of God. I have entitled the sermon, “The Second Mystery.” The first mystery of our Christian faith is the tri-unity of God, that the one living and true God exists in three persons. We know that is true. We rightly describe God as a Trinity, a single God who exists in three persons. We can identify the three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But *how* God is one and three, this we cannot explain; it is utterly beyond our comprehension. What this means at the level of God’s own life we have no idea. Well the second mystery of our faith is the unity of deity and manhood in the single person of Jesus Christ. And this is a fact as inscrutable as the first.

**Text**

This text is probably the most important statement on the identity of Jesus Christ in the Bible. It is loaded with remarkable and challenging assertions. Were I to comment on the text as I usually do, it would take me half an hour to read it! So, this morning, we will read our text without comment. *Give careful attention now to the Word of God, and, as I read, pay special attention to the pronouns: he, him, and his.*

Some years ago a collection of essays, a *festschrift*, was published in honor of William Still, the man under whose ministry Florence and I sat in Aberdeen, Scotland for three years in the 1970s. In the review of the book published in the Church of Scotland magazine, the reviewer, though having some positive things to say about Mr. Still, an influential and outspoken evangelical in a denomination largely hostile to evangelical conviction, offered his observation that Mr. Still’s sermons were “over-doctrinal, overlong, and over the heads of the congregation.”

Now we sat under those sermons for three years, Sabbath morning and Sabbath night, and I can attest to the fact that they were long, considerably longer (sometimes by an hour or more) than any sermons I had heard before or have heard since. However a large congregation – perhaps the largest Sunday evening congregation in the Church of Scotland and certainly one of its largest Sunday morning congregations – came to hear those sermons and had for years. Old and young, men and women, parents and children filled the church twice Sunday after Sunday. So, if they were *overlong*, the people themselves did not seem to notice or mind. I never thought that the sermons were *overdoctrinal*. But, then, in the Church of Scotland a concentration on the teaching of the Bible, a careful consideration of what the statements of Holy Scripture *mean*, was then and is even more now a rarity. Mr. Still’s sermons were much more like what effective Christian preaching had been for the previous 2,000 years! Mr. Still stressed, as all faithful Christian preachers should, what the Bible taught and especially the central themes of biblical revelation. Those he explored in depth, with real insight, and with an eye to their application to the

Christian life. You can do a lot of that exposition and application in a two-hour-long sermon! I would say his sermons were richly doctrinal, not overly doctrinal.

And that is what I am aiming for this morning. I want to explore in some depth, more depth than is perhaps typical nowadays even in evangelical and Reformed churches, what the Bible says about, and so what we can know about the incarnation of God. I don't apologize for requiring that you think with me, think hard through some difficult and demanding truth. Man is born to think and the fact that he does so little serious thinking is the index of his moral failure and his problem. I know you well enough to know that you want to think and will think about important things. After all, serious Christians will always want to know everything they can about their Lord and Savior. Christians today may think very little about such things, but it is no compliment to them to say this. There were days when even the most ordinary Christians were preoccupied with deep questions. The church father, Gregory of Nyssa, tells us that when he arrived in Constantinople in the middle of the Arian controversy in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the issue of the proper identification or description of Christ's *person* was on everyone's lips.

“Garment sellers, money changers, food vendors,” he wrote, “they are all at it. If you ask for change, they philosophize for you about generate and ingenerate natures. If you inquire about the price of a loaf of bread, the answer is that the Father is greater and the Son is inferior. If you speak about whether the bath is ready, they express an opinion that the Son was made out of nothing.”

I'm pretty sure I have never heard an argument about the nature of Christ's person or his relation to God the Father in the grocery store. Have you? But I doubt it is because we all agree and we know all we can know about this deep mystery. It is rather, I fear, because people don't care and don't think it makes any difference. Even most American evangelicals give scarcely a thought to such questions. Feelings matter more than thoughts and doctrine matters still less. But, of course, the truth matters immensely. It makes all the difference in the world. Jesus told us, you remember, that it is the truth that sets us free. As we noted last time, our eternal life hangs on this fact that God became man when Jesus was born to the Virgin Mary. Our entire faith is built on *this* foundation. That being so, we ought to be clear about precisely what it is that we Christians believe about Jesus Christ.

The subject is a difficult one, however, and requires thought. It took some centuries, a long time for the church herself to decide precisely what she could and could not say about the identity of Jesus Christ, how best to say what can be said, and, in particular, *what it means* to say that he is at one and the same time God and man. The Puritans were fond of quoting Augustine's remark that “Just as there are shallows in Scripture where a lamb may wade, so there are depths in Scripture where an elephant may swim.” We are in the deep water this morning!

The story of Christmas is beautifully simple and straightforward in one way. It is this perfect simplicity that makes it possible to retell the story in Sunday School Christmas plays or to sing it in our Christmas carols and hymns. The annunciation; the angels appearing to the shepherds; the Virgin Mary pregnant and, as they traveled to Bethlehem to register for the imperial tax, heavy with child; the birth of the baby boy, the wise men, and so on. These are shallows even little children can wade in.

But that same history discloses a fact and a doctrine so complicated, so mysterious, so difficult accurately even to state that the early church's finest minds and hearts long struggled to represent the Bible's teaching in the most reliable form of words. Indeed, this is a doctrine so deep, so beyond human comprehension that try as we might we can only touch the key that unlocks the meaning of this greatest of all events. No one's hand has ever closed around it nor, I suspect, will a human mind ever be able fully to grasp the nature of the incarnation. *Finitum non capax infiniti*: the finite cannot comprehend the infinite!

Now John, in the famous prologue to his Gospel, tells us nothing about the baby in the manger or the shepherds or the wise men. He gives us no details at all about the Lord's birth. But he tells us what it was that happened when Jesus was born. What happened was, as Christian theology now puts it, *the incarnation of God the Son*. At one level we understand that. Jesus was God and became also a man. But think of the problems posed by John's statement: "the Word became flesh" or, as we might otherwise take John's meaning, combining his statements in v.3 and v. 14: "the Creator of heaven and earth became a human being." Did God the Son by so becoming a man cease to be God or, at least, cease to be as fully God as he had been before? Both reason and Scripture combine to assert the impossibility of that. God cannot cease to be God. He is in his very nature eternal and unchangeable. And, indeed, the Scripture repeatedly represents Jesus Christ *as* the living God. John says as much here in speaking of his glory.

But if he remained God, in what sense was he now a man? How much like you and me is he? The Gospels represent him as a human being, who had to grow up from infancy, was dependent upon his mother and his father, who grew not only physically but intellectually and spiritually. He knew more when he was older than he had known when he was young. He matured as a human being. He was, as we are, subject to weakness. He got tired, hungry, sick, and sore. When cut, he bled. He needed food and sleep. There were many things he did not know and could not do. Yet how can we say such things about someone who is, at the same time, Almighty God and so pure spirit, omniscient, and omnipotent?

Questions such as these almost immediately began to agitate the church's mind and led to a succession of false starts in an effort to understand and to define the identity of Jesus Christ. We have the evidence of that already in the New Testament, such as in John's first letter, where the apostle mentions one such false understanding of Christ's person. And the mistakes were predictable. There were those who held that Christ, being God, could not have been a true human being and so, in fact, only *appeared to be so*. Conversely, there were others who proposed that no true man could possibly be God and consequently Jesus Christ could have been *only a man*, though a man elevated to a higher status and position than any man had ever been before; a sort of demi-god. He could not be *the* God precisely because the Gospels describe him as so genuinely a human being.

Don't suppose that such ancient opinions are of no relevance to us today, as if we have moved beyond such obvious errors. They are, in fact, exactly the opinions that many professing Christians hold today. Many liberal Christians find it impossible to believe in the deity of Jesus Christ and think of him rather as a man who enjoyed a unique and profound closeness to God. Many conservative evangelicals, on the other hand, whatever they may confess when they recite

the creed, actually have a view of Jesus in which his deity overwhelms his humanity, so much so that they don't really think of him as a man like us; he is instead super-human, a superman, if you will.

Back and forth the opinions went, slowly, in fits and starts, each proposal carefully being corrected by the examination of the Word of God until the church, for all time, settled her mind on what could safely be said about the incarnation and the incarnate God. And many of you will know that formula. *Jesus Christ was truly God and truly man, equal with the Father according to his deity and equal with us according to his humanity, except for sin.* He is to be acknowledged *in two natures*, one divine and one human, and those two natures exist in his person without confusion, without alteration, but equally indivisibly and inseparably, the characteristic properties of each nature perfectly preserved in their union in the person of Christ. Taking the data of Scripture together, this has seemed to the believing church ever since to be what can and what must be said. To say, as John says, that the Word became flesh, the Creator of heaven and earth became a human being is to say that this single person now exists as both the living God and a true human being.

But what does that mean? How is that possible? How in a single personality can there exist a true and authentic humanity and a true and authentic deity *without mixture or confusion*? The church, with her Bible open before her, has never sought to explain this or to answer such questions. The reality is too great for us; it is beyond us. Our minds are too small to comprehend it. But in seeking *to state* the doctrine, to make clear what was being asserted and what was not, the church went on to make several important clarifications.

*I.* The first of those clarifications was to say that when God the Son, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, became a man, he took to himself *an impersonal human nature*.

Now that phrase strikes us as about as clear as mud. What on earth is an impersonal nature? Well, think about it. There are not two Jesus Christs; there is always, everywhere in the Bible, only one. Never in the Gospels does the Lord Jesus speak of himself as "we," as if he were two persons, one God and the other man. He is everywhere spoken of and he everywhere speaks of himself *in the singular*. "I am the Lamb of God," "I am the light of the world," "whoever comes to me, I will never drive away," even "Before Abraham was I am," and so on. Jesus is a person, an individual if you will. But Jesus, as we said last time, did not begin to be a person when he was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary. He had been a person from eternity past. It was *he*, Jude writes, *the very person of Jesus* who delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt in the days of Moses. Personal pronouns before the incarnation, personal pronouns after the incarnation, but always in the singular. As John puts it in v. 2, "*He* was in the beginning with God." "All things were made by *him*." "We beheld *his* glory."

At the incarnation, God did not unite himself with an independently existing human being, with another individual or person. Rather, he added to his already existing person a human nature, however mysteriously and inscrutably. We can say the words, but we hardly understand what they mean. But, however we attempt to understand this, the human nature that was formed in Mary's womb did not for even a moment exist by itself, but was at the first instant united with and taken up into the person of God the Son. Say what you will about this strange phrase, *the*

*impersonality or non-personality of Christ's human nature*, if Jesus Christ is but one person, a person who had existed from all eternity as God, then God did not add a person to himself but only a nature at the incarnation. So the church's formula: one person, two natures. An impersonal nature is a difficult idea. We encounter no impersonal natures anywhere else in life. Person and nature are two sides of the same coin for us. So we struggle to know what the phrase might mean. But how else are we to confess, as the Bible teaches us to confess, that there is but one Jesus Christ, who existed from all eternity, but who had now become also and truly a man? To say that Christ's human nature is impersonal is important protection against any failure to appreciate the integrity of the two natures, that he is and remains truly God and truly man, even as he remains one person. *Two distinct natures* in one person is the burden of that phrase "impersonal human nature."

II. The second clarification of the church's understanding of the incarnation and of Jesus as the God-Man was what came to be known as the doctrine or teaching of *the communication of the attributes*.

Once again, some of you may be saying to yourself, "I've been a Christian for years and years and I've never heard once about the communication of the attributes." Perhaps not, but whether you knew what to call it, you assumed the fact described by that phrase. To be sure, it isn't the baby in the manger or the wise men, but it is an essential element of the Christmas story. Again, there is something of immense importance at stake here, the very nature of the incarnation itself. How carefully the church's best and wisest men considered these questions and from every side and vantage point! They understood that errors at the foundation must spell disaster later on. If the incarnation is not rightly understood, nothing else will be. The first great work on the incarnation, by Athanasius, made precisely this point. Get the incarnation wrong and by a fixed law you will get salvation wrong as well.

And so just as the integrity of each of the two natures – one fully divine and the other fully human – was secured and protected by our confession of the impersonality of the human nature of Jesus Christ, so the union of each nature with the person of Christ was secured and protected by this confession of the communication of attributes or properties, *that is, the communication of the properties or attributes of each nature to the person of Christ*. The properties or attributes of the two natures were not communicated to each other; that would destroy the integrity of each. Jesus Christ is not partly God and partly man. He isn't a humanized God or a deified man. He is both God and man, each nature in its perfection and its essential identity. Each nature distinct from the other, but both natures coexisting in his single person.

As I said, you have believed this even if you never thought about how to describe it. As you well know from your reading of the Gospels, sometimes things are said about Jesus that could only be said of a human being, and sometimes things are said about Jesus that could only be said of God. *But it is always and everywhere the same Jesus who is being described*. Jesus can say, "I thirst," and he can say "before Abraham was I am." The one statement only a man can make, the other only God. But both statements were made by the same person. The deity and the humanity belong to the same person.

And so, in those early centuries, the church was put on its mettle to answer questions like these: Is it right, is it possible to say that Mary is the mother of God? This was a question asked long before the veneration of Mary reached the lengths to which it would go in the Medieval Church. This was not a question about Mary but about Christ himself, about the incarnation. Could it ever be said that God had a mother? On the other hand, did she give birth only to a man? She didn't give birth to a nature; she gave birth to a person, but if that person was God, was she God's mother? Or, in a similar fashion, can we say that God suffered and died on the cross? How can the eternal die? But if Jesus is God and died on the cross, can we not sing Isaac Watts' immortal line, "When Christ the Mighty Maker died for man the creature's sin."

And then there was this question: is it right for Christians to worship Jesus Christ *per se*, or are we to worship only his divine nature? We are commanded not to worship the creature but only the creator. Christ's human nature is obviously a created thing. Precisely how, then, are we to worship Jesus Christ? This is the swirl of issues that would inevitably be raised by John's statement that "the Word became flesh."

And the church's solution to such problems, a solution that has satisfied her greatest minds ever since, is this way of speaking about the communication of the attributes or properties. Each nature, the divine and the human, is defined by a set of properties. Think about it. How would you define a human being? How would you define God? The properties would overlap somewhat, because man is made in the image of God, but in most respects the attributes of each nature would be different, very different. God is spirit, eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, for example. Man, on the other hand, begins to be at some point, is a body and a soul, is possessed of only modest power, knows only a few things, and can be in only one place at a time. A man could be weary sitting by the well in Samaria, but God could not. God knows the future in exhaustive detail, man does not.

But both John and Paul say that *Jesus* created all things *and* say that he was ignorant of many things and that he died. Again and again the Bible says things about Jesus that could be true *only of one of his natures*. And this is what the early theologians meant by the phrase *communication of the attributes*: the attributes of each separate and distinct nature are communicated *to the person of Jesus Christ*. We can say of Jesus what is true of a human being and we can say of him what is true only of God. The attributes of each nature have, by the incarnation, been imparted to the one person. We can say that Jesus died even if God cannot die; we can worship Jesus Christ as God even if he was truly a man; we can even say that Mary was the mother of God even though God is eternal. We can say such things only because the properties of each nature belong to the one person, Jesus Christ. God did not die on the cross, to be sure, but Jesus did and Jesus is God. God the Son was not born to Mary, but Jesus was, and Jesus is God the Son. Is your head spinning yet?

But do you see my point? We are certainly not explaining this. We do *not* know *how* Jesus is God and Man *at one and the same time*. We have no inkling of the personal psychology of the incarnate God. We have no way of understanding *how* the same person could be omniscient and ignorant, *how* he could be everywhere and at only one place *at the same time*, *how* he could be eternal and dead *at one and the same time*. But that is what we must believe about Jesus since he is but one person and, at one and the same time, both eternal God and authentic man.

It was because the church understood that the identity of Jesus was fundamental to everything she believed and everything she hoped for – for herself and for the whole world – that she devoted her faithful intellect so carefully and at such length to seek the best possible way to describe who and what he is. She knew he was both her Maker and her Savior, her elder brother and her eternal King. She knew she would never understand this, but she also knew she needed to describe as accurately as possible what it was possible for her to know about the incarnation of God. God had revealed this truth in his Word and she wanted to go as far as divine revelation would take her and then not one step further. Surely we ought not to regret spending some time now and again just thinking through the extraordinary thing that happened – indeed the impenetrable, the wonderful mystery of the event – when God became man.

And is it true? And is it true,  
This most tremendous tale of all,  
Seen in a stained-glass window's hue,  
A baby in an ox's stall?  
The Maker of the stars and sea  
Become a child on earth for me?

No love that in a family dwells,  
No caroling in frosty air,  
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells  
Can with this single truth compare –  
That God was Man in Palestine  
And lives today in bread and wine.