

The Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was arrested, imprisoned, and eventually executed by the Nazis. Shortly before the Christmas of 1943, he wrote a letter to a loved one. A portion of it reads: *“Life in a prison cell reminds me a great deal of Advent. One waits and hopes and patters around. But in the end what we do is of little consequence. The door is shut and it can only be opened from the outside.”*

That’s a good description of the human race before the coming of Christ. We were imprisoned by sin. The door was shut and could not be opened except from the outside. And on that Christmas Day, God opened that door and entered the cell of humanity and lives among us.

And we can say on Easter and on every Easter of our deaths, he opens the door and leads us out. Until then, however, he remains with us as Emmanuel.

I. Someone once asked me, “Why Jesus? I can’t seem to know him.” It may be his is looking for him in too limited way. Before we can answer such a question, we need to first ask: *“Why the incarnation?”*

\*Let me ask you, what is more meaningful to you, an email or a letter? Yes, a letter, for we know it has been touched by the flesh of one’s hand, written in that particular handwriting of that particular person.

\*Taking this a step further, I might then ask, *“What is more meaningful a letter from one we love or a visit?”*

\*The Old Testament Scriptures were God’s letter, but in Jesus God *visits us*.

God could have loved us from a distance, but chose not to because real love goes to *where another is*.

*“Why the Incarnation?”* - Because a God who is everywhere can feel as nowhere.

\*We are not angels without bodies, but sensual creatures who live with our senses.

\*God deals with us through our senses and that means a God with skin

+When the prophets were called by God they are asked to physically eat the scroll of the scripture and digest the word into their own flesh. In so doing, people will be able to see the Word of God in a living body rather than a *lifeless parchment* – truly the transubstantiation of God.

\*The prophets come to us, however, in words on paper, in letters *not flesh*.

+Someone came up to me the other day and gave me a check, saying, *“I forgot the card at home, I apologize.”* To which I said, *“You are the card”,* words of the flesh.

I think when someone asks, "Why Jesus?" it may be because they limit the incarnation to the 33 years. They see the incarnation as a one shot incursion by God into human history, in which God came and then went back to heaven.

III. No, the incarnation is still going on and it is as real and radically physical as when Jesus first walked the dirt road of Palestine.

I live in a body so I am incarnate. When I die, I leave this body and I will be discarnate. When God in Jesus took on the flesh of a body, he became incarnate. However, Jesus *never took it off*.

\*Remember the resurrection appearances? Jesus still had the flesh of humanity.

\*Remember when Jesus said to Saul (later St. Paul), "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*" "*Who are you?*" replied Saul? "*I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.*" The person of the historical Jesus and the body of believers are identified as one - the *Word made flesh who dwells among us*.

The incarnation began with Jesus and it has never stopped. Yes, in the Ascension, the physical body of Jesus left the earth, but the Body of Christ did not because God's incarnate presence continues, as before in the Word proclaimed, in the Eucharist consumed and in the *Body of Believers*.

We pray to God *in heaven*, but we also pray with God *beside us*. Our prayers must take on the flesh of those around us.

Some say they want God, but that they do not need church and that means rejecting God incarnate.

\*A Christian believes in God in heaven, but we also believe in a God who is incarnate inside human beings.

\*A theist might say, "*I don't need church, only God above*" but a Christian cannot live without it, for here Christ takes on flesh next to us.

+A while back, for one our study days, a therapist (who treats primarily priests) was invited to speak. He said a few years ago, he bought a home in Florida and then went church shopping. The first one he checked out had a pastor he recognized – best not go there!

In the next one, he recognized no one. Perfect! But during the Lord's Prayer he felt this young girl's hand take his, to which he thought: "*Oh my God, they hold hands! We don't even talk to one another in Boston!*" Then afterward she said, "*Wanna come back for pancakes?*" "*No, that's okay, really, I can't...*" But he went and has continued to have pancakes for many years

because one young girl next to him took him by the hand. There was *Christ incarnate*, in that young girl.

#### IV. That little girl was not the generator of God's power, but she was the channel of that power.

We are the flesh that gives *reality* to *God's power*.

Priests who leave the priesthood often say it was because: "*I did not feel loved.*" People, who leave the Church, say much the same thing. Invariably it was because they were not actively connected into this Body, to Christ beside them.

We welcome visitors to the Cathedral so that they might feel somewhat connected to that Presence. Your voice, your words, your touch are Jesus' *when they welcome* and that of the Inn *when they turn away*.

Remember how I said that during my pastoral year as a seminarian it was my first Christmas away from the family whom I love? It was then I discovered I wanted to spend every Christmas here as his priest. You see, Jesus was speaking to me through this body, calling me not only from above, but *among* and it is the incarnate Christ *I fell in love with*.

+I once had a funeral where the family was in the front row, but everyone else must have been twenty pews back. It was then that I asked everyone to come forward to surround this family. One of the family members said to me afterward that it lifted them up so very much.

This is why I beg for people to sit next to one another in Mass – to fully experience the power of Christ present next to them. When we are present to one another, it is then that we experience the fullness of his presence *incarnate*.

Sometimes God can surprise us in very humorous and quite incarnate ways.

+I was having one of those faith difficult days, having difficulty seeing God in my life. Looking to the heavens, I asked "*Where are you God?*"

Downtrodden, I rode my bicycle on to the Williamsburg ferry looking for a little peace of mind. A few minutes later, I hear the roar of motorcycles, one after another coming on the ferry – "*Great, no peace, having faith issues and now I have to deal with Hell's Angels!*"

They were a rough looking bunch and eventually they surrounded me on every side. All wore leather jackets with words inscribed upon each one of them. I looked closer and each one of them read: "*Bikers for Jesus.*" Yes, there he was, incarnate surrounding me.