

Hail the Incarnate Deity!

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 December 2015

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] I guess we all have our favorite Christmas carol, and one of the challenges, probably an impossible challenge when choosing carols for a carol service, as we'll be having in a couple of weeks, is the challenge to keep everybody happy. The only way we could do that would be by having a cattle service that lasted at least two hours, and be assured that is not what's going to happen in a couple of weeks' time. The solution, or my solution, and I suppose I am in a little bit of a privileged position in this regard, is that I can just choose the ones I like, and hopefully others will coincide in liking the ones I choose.

And at the close of the service this morning, we're going to sing one of my own favorite carols, Hark! The Herald Angels Sing. And the carol is, as you will notice as we sing it, as no doubt you've noticed already on other occasions, it is replete with doctrine. And in particular, and quite fittingly, it gives beautiful expression to a central Christmas doctrine, namely the incarnation. Listen to the familiar words that we sing in the second verse, veiled in flesh, the Godhead see, hail the incarnate deity. And this morning I want us to think about the incarnation, both the fact of the incarnation and the purpose of the incarnation. What does it mean to say that God became man, that the Word, the Son of God, became flesh or became human?

But also why did He become a man? With what purpose? We're going to think about this matter with the help of a text that we wouldn't perhaps ordinarily think of as a Christmas text, but one that speaks very tellingly about both the reality of the incarnation and its purpose. And I'm referring to two verses within the larger passage that we read in Colossians chapter 1. If you turn with me to Colossians chapter 1, and we'll read again verses 19 and 20. And we'll be focusing our attention this morning on these two verses. And we read there in Colossians chapter 1 and verse 19, for God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood shed on the cross. And we can consider these two verses under three headings. The first thing that we want to draw out of our text is what we're describing as the pleasure of the Father, for God was pleased to have His fullness dwell in Him. So we want to spend a little time thinking about that reality, the pleasure of the Father, but also the mission of the Son, for the text goes on to identify the mission of the Son. And then thirdly and finally, we'll think about the centrality of the cross within that mission. So we'll be looking at the person of Jesus, the mission of Jesus, and then the place of the cross within that mission.

First of all then, let's think of the pleasure of the Father. When we look at verse 19, it would be reasonable, understandable, if we were to give primary attention to what the verse says about Jesus. For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him, in Jesus. We're kind of drawn to that.

[4 : 19] What does that mean? What does that tell us about Jesus? And of course, we will be thinking about that in a moment. But in actual fact, the subject of this verse is God the Father. For God, implied God the Father was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him, in Jesus. The verse tells us about that which pleased God the Father. And as we turn to that and think about, well, what is it?

What was it that pleased God the Father? Let's not pass over too quickly or unthinkingly this striking reality, the pleasure of the Father. Our business this morning is to identify and celebrate those things that please God, that bring pleasure to God. Now, what are we told here? That pleased God. What pleased the Father? Well, we read in the verse, for God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him, dwell in Jesus.

But more precisely, in the incarnate Jesus. And that the reference here that Paul makes is to the incarnation seems very clear for at least two reasons. Firstly, the language that we find here in

verse 19, we find Paul using again in the following chapter. We only need to glance over to the following chapter, in chapter 2 and in verse 9, and look at what we read there. Very similar language.

For in Christ, all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form. In chapter 2, Paul uses the same language, but he's even more explicit in making it clear that his reference is to the incarnation. For in Christ, all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form. In our text, he doesn't use the language of in bodily form, but when we compare the two verses, it's clear that he has the same reality in mind. Here he is speaking of the Father's pleasure in the incarnation, in the reality of the incarnation, and the nature of it. And so this is what we can draw from what we read there. So the comparison with this other verse confirms that this is what Paul is speaking about. But of course, it's also true that in this text, Paul is dealing with the reconciling work of Jesus that culminates at Calvary, a work that he performed as the incarnate Son of God. Indeed, a work he could only perform as the incarnate Son of God. And so we are able to state very clearly and confidently that what Paul is saying is that the incarnation pleased the Father. Christmas pleases God. The incarnate Christ pleases God.

[7 : 35] Now when we think about the incarnation, let's just be clear about what we understand in that regard. Jesus is the eternal Son of God. From all eternity, he has existed as very God of very God, to use the language of the ancient creeds. And yet, at a given point in time and space, he became man. And what this verse is asserting is that in becoming man, he was not divested of his divinity. He didn't cease to be God or become any less in regards to his divinity. He did not, by the incarnation, by becoming a man, become less than what he eternally was. The marvel, the wonder of the incarnation, the wonder of the incarnation, and the words that we can use, marvel or wonder, they fall short really. But the marvel of the incarnation involved the fullness of deity taking up residence in the man, Jesus. The fullness of deity did not shrink from being shrouded in a human body. The fullness of deity did not recoil from being hidden and divested of his visible majesty and glory that such fullness merited or corresponded to. But not only did God not shrink or recoil from such condescension, he took pleasure in it. This is what Paul is particularly stressing.

God took pleasure in this transaction, in this reality of his fullness dwelling in Jesus. This was no reluctant initiative on the part of God. We aren't to imagine that God was contemplating the mess that the world was in, and he concluded, well, I guess this is the only way. It would be so much better if maybe there was another way, but well, this is the only way, and so we'll just have to do it. No, he takes pleasure in his own initiative on behalf of you and me. God delights in becoming Emmanuel. God delights in dwelling among us. God delights in being one of us while remaining God in all his fullness.

This is Jesus, our Lord, our Savior, very God of very God, and yet also very man of very man. Let's just perhaps pause for a moment and be clear as to what is meant by the language that Paul uses when he speaks of God being pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him. What do we understand by that? That it is the fullness of God that dwells in Jesus.

I think the word that Paul employs here is to be understood as meaning that all that God is, the full complement of his attributes, the totality of his being, nothing that belongs to God in his very essence was withheld from the incarnate Jesus.

[11 : 04] Now, when we try and understand what is meant by the fullness of God, we, of course, acknowledge that we can't come close to knowing what constitutes the fullness of God. In the measure that God has been pleased to reveal something of what that means, well, we can understand, and we thank God for what he has revealed. But we, of course, acknowledge that we don't fully grasp what is meant by, what is implied by the fullness of God. But whatever that is, what we understand and what we don't understand, it all dwells in the man, Jesus. If we can use helpfully, I hope, the words of our own confession of faith, where it speaks of this matter of the incarnation. And we read there, concerning the incarnation, so that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, which person is very God and very man, yet one Christ, the only mediator between God and man. God was pleased to dwell in the incarnate Jesus, and in Jesus to dwell amongst us. Because there is this, also this necessary implication of the incarnation. It's not only that God dwells in Jesus, but as he does so, so he dwells amongst us.

The word became flesh and dwelt amongst us. And of course, as we look back at this time of year, in particular to the incarnation, we stand in wonder at this reality of what occurred when Jesus came into the world. But we mustn't imagine that all we can do at Christmas is look back and marvel at

what happened long ago. We don't only look back because the reality, and the wonderful reality, is that God is pleased today to dwell in the midst of his people. He is with us this morning, and he is pleased to be with us. But we can say more, even as we go our separate ways from being gathered here as God's people this morning. And we all go to our various activities that we might have in the busyness of the week ahead, we go in the confidence and in the assurance that God continues to remain with us, and indeed dwell in us by his spirit. God in all his fullness in you and in me, and that pleases him.

As we move on to consider the mission of the Son, it's important to note that what we've been talking about concerning the pleasure of the Father doesn't end now. What we go on to look at concerning the mission of the Son also comes under the umbrella, if you wish, of what pleases the Father. It pleased the Father to dwell in his Son, for God to dwell in Jesus, but it also pleased the Father for Jesus to do what we now want to go on and consider that he did. What was his mission that he was sent to perform? What did the Son come to do? Or to put it in the language of how we introduced the message, what is the purpose of the incarnation? Not only the reality of it, the nature of it, but what is the purpose of the incarnation? Well, Paul is abundantly clear. Its purpose was to reconcile. We read there in verse 19 and then into verse 20, for God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him and through him, through Jesus, to reconcile to himself all things. The mission of Jesus was to reconcile to God, to himself, and the subject there being a God. And who are to be reconciled? Well, maybe we might think that we could turn to the carol that we spoke of just a few moments ago to answer that question. Who are to be reconciled? Hark! The herald! Angels sing glory to the newborn king! Peace on earth and mercy mild!

God and sinners reconciled! And of course, that's true. But the carol falls short of what Paul declares, because notice that Paul goes even beyond that wonderful and marvelous truth. What Paul declares is that this reconciliation extends even beyond sinners. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross. We'll maybe come back to that reality just in a moment. But before we do that, let's just take one step back and consider what is an unstated assumption that lies behind this mission of reconciliation.

Reconciliation, or certainly the need for reconciliation, implies, requires an existing state of strife and alienation and enmity between God and all things.

And that, of course, includes ourselves, sinners as we are. The need for reconciliation of all things takes as a given that a rupture has taken place that has thrown into disarray the whole created order.

[17:13] And this, of course, is what has happened. In the Garden of Eden, our first father, Adam, rebelled against God and rebelled against God and in so doing introduced into creation corruption and conflict and chaos. And we see it to this day even as we look around the world and indeed look around perhaps our own circumstances and lives. Adam's sin resulted in a vast chasm between man and his maker.

In the place of friendship, there is now conflict. In the place of intimacy, there is now alienation and enmity. And the chasm is so great that we cannot bridge it. I can't bridge it. You can't bridge it. We all fell with Adam, our representative head. But in addition to that, each of us in our own lives, in our own life experience, far from drawing closer to God, the chasm becomes ever greater as we continue to rebel against God and to disobey God in any number of ways, some that we're conscious of and some that we're quite oblivious to. But the fall of Adam not only ruptured the relationship between God and man, but rather, as Paul makes clear, creation itself was affected. It was brought in to this chaos. If we think of what Paul says as he writes to the Romans in chapter 8 and verse 20, speaking of creation, he says that creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. Sinners need to be reconciled. But yes, even the created order stands in need of being reconciled to its maker. The crying need of men and women. My crying need and your crying need is for a peacemaker. We need somebody who can bridge the chasm, somebody who can transform the conflict into friendship and the alienation into intimacy. And what Paul tells us so very clearly in these verses is that Jesus is the man. Jesus is that peacemaker that we need. Jesus is the one who stands in the breach. He is the one who bridges the chasm.

He is the one, the only one, who is uniquely able to stand in that place as the one who is fully human and the one who is fully God. As Paul says as he writes to Timothy, for there is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. This is his mission, to bring peace, to reconcile all things. But how does he do it? Well, that question brings us to the third aspect that we want to look at here in these verses, and that is the centrality of the cross in the mission that Jesus has been given, that he undertook, and indeed has undertaken. And there we turn our attention to verse 20, but especially the second half, when we're given the way in which Jesus achieves this reconciliation by making peace through his blood shed on the cross. The way in which Jesus makes peace, the manner in which he is able to reconcile all things to the Father, the answer to the question, well, how does he do that?

And the language that Paul uses here is so very clearly the language of sacrifice. Sin is the problem, and sin has to be dealt with. And sin is dealt with by means of sacrifice. This is what God has established.

[21 : 45] Some may recoil at the very concept. Some may reject it as barbaric and primitive and all kinds of adjectives. But this is what God has established, and this is what God makes clear. Our sin can be dealt with only by that means, by means of sacrifice. And for the sacrifice to be acceptable to God, it has to be a perfect sacrifice. Only perfection. I cannot, in my own strength and resting on any merits I may imagine that I have, offer a sacrifice that will be acceptable to God. My very life would be insufficient for the simple reason that it is not perfect, indeed far from perfect. And in the face of this insurmountable obstacle to reconciliation, a sacrifice needs to be offered, and yet we don't have one that we can offer. In the midst of that problem, Jesus, the God-man comes on to center stage to cry out to the cosmos, I will stand in the breach.

I will offer myself as the sacrifice. I will die in the place of sinners. And that is what He did. That is what He did. He came into this world. The eternal Son of God became flesh. He dwelt among us. He was obedient to His Father, even unto death. And there at Calvary, on the cross, He died, offering Himself as the ultimate and perfect and sufficient sacrifice for sinners. At the cross, God was reconciled. It is a done deal. There is nothing you can or are required to contribute. Jesus has already reconciled all things at Calvary. And yet we say that and we're left somewhat, perhaps, perplexed. If that's true, is it then the case that all are reconciled? Are all now friends with God? Well, there we need to turn to what the Bible says about the manner in which we profit from, the manner in which we can experience that reconciliation. And it is through faith, all who believe. Reconciliation with God waits not upon human achievement, but upon human acceptance. We can't achieve it, but we must accept what Jesus has done on our behalf. Jesus, the peacemaker, stretches out His hand to you, that nail-disfigured hand. And He says to you, take my hand. Trust in my finished work on your behalf. Believe in me and enjoy peace with God, peace that I have already secured on the cross. In this mission of reconciliation, the cross occupies the central place. And Paul grants it that central place in what he states here in our text.

As we draw things to a close, we need to say a couple of things concerning the reconciliation of all things that the sacrifice of Christ secures. Just picking up on something we said just a moment ago, it is important to stress that the reconciliation of all things, properly understood in the light of all the biblical material. That we bring to bear on the matter. Does not give support to any kind of what is sometimes called universalism. The contention that ultimately all are saved.

That is not what Paul is declaring when we think of what he's saying in the light of the rest of the biblical material. What then are we to conclude concerning those who reject the reconciling work of Christ? In what way are they reconciled to God? The manner in which Paul speaks seems to suggest that in some way they are. I think we can express it in terms of pacification. At the last day, all will be pacified and brought, in the words of Paul as he writes to the believers in Philippi, all will bow the knee and confess with their tongue that Jesus is Lord. All will do that.

[26 : 43] Those who in this life have recognized what Jesus has done, have embraced Jesus, have trusted in Jesus, have been reconciled to God, have been brought into friendship with God, they of course will bow the knee and confess with their tongue. But what Paul says is that all will do that. And in that sense, all will be pacified in regard to their relationship with God. Of course, the reference that we just made to the last day also reminds us that the cosmic reconciliation envisaged in this passage is to be understood in the framework of that which is already true and that which is not yet true in the matter of salvation. Reconciliation has a present aspect, but it also has a future aspect.

Its final cosmic consummation will find expression in the new heavens and the new earth where righteousness dwells, where we will see and experience what it means for all things to be reconciled to the Father through the Son. And we look forward to that day, but until that day comes, it's not for us simply to wait for it to arrive. We are those who have experienced reconciliation with God. We are now God's agents of reconciliation. We live in a fractured world and we live here in order that we might represent God as his ambassadors, performing, engaged in a work of reconciliation. We plead with men, be reconciled to God.

But we also strive to make visible God's passion for peace and reconciliation on every front, in our relationships, in our families, in our communities, in our nation, in our world.

Our reconciling remit extends to all creation as we care for and live in a frustrated and violated creation, but that remains his creation. And we do so in the absolute confidence that the day is approaching when all things will be fully reconciled to the Father through the Son. And as we so live our lives or seek to live our lives representing God, seeking reconciliation, this too pleases the Father.

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross.

[29 : 52] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for this great work of reconciliation. We thank you for Jesus, the Prince of Peace, who came into the world to make a peace.

We acknowledge that we, as a people, as the human race, were far from you and incapable of approaching you, incapable of even coming partway towards you. But we thank you that in your grace and in your mercy, you are the one who took that initiative to bring us back to yourself. And we do thank you for the manner in which you did so, in the giving of your Son, Jesus. We thank you for the life that he lived, but we thank you especially for the death that he died and the blood that he shed, that he shed for us. And we thank you in his name. Amen.

Amen.