

“The Incarnation and the Nativity.”

Every profession has its own unique jargon; even we who are in the Church. And at this time of year, there are two terms that occupy a prominent place in our theological conversations, and those words are “nativity” and “incarnation.”

And in case you were wondering, the official title for what we are celebrating is “The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ,” and the principle that’s at work is the Incarnation. But what does all that mean? I’ll tell you.

The word nativity simply means “birth,” but in this context we’re talking about the birth of Jesus. And the word incarnation refers to the “act of something being made flesh,” and in this context we are talking about God becoming an honest-to-goodness, flesh-and-blood human being.

And so, what the author of our gospel reading is telling us is that, 2,000 years ago, “nativity” and “incarnation” came together in a special way: God took on human flesh and was born into this world, in the body of a baby named Jesus.

However, it’s important to remember that the gospel writers simply *proclaimed* the birth of Jesus; they never tried to describe *how* it happened, only that it *did* happen. And what Christians have been struggling with, since Day One, is the *why* of it all. Why did God become a human being?

In response to that question, all sorts of theories and arguments have been posited by some very smart people. But what I like best is something written by a 19th century Danish philosopher and theologian; a man by the name of Søren Kierkegaard. He once wrote a short parable to describe the *why* of the Nativity and Incarnation, and I’d like to read it to you.

Once upon a time there was a certain king who was very rich. His power and preeminence were known throughout the world. Yet something was missing in his life that kept him unhappy— he desired a wife. Without a queen, the palace was empty.

One day, while riding through the streets of a small village, he saw a beautiful peasant girl. So lovely was she that the heart of the king was immediately won. He desired her more than anything he had ever wanted. On succeeding days, he would ride by her house on the mere hope of seeing her for a moment in passing.

He wondered how he might win her love. He thought to himself, “I will draw up a royal decree and require her to be brought before me— and then I shall make her the queen of my land!” But as he considered, the king realized that she was a subject and would be forced to obey. He could never be quite sure that he had won her love.

Then he said to himself, “I shall call on her in person. I shall dress in my royal garb, wear my jeweled crown, my best rings, my silver sword, and my most colorful tunic. I will overwhelm her with my majesty and position and sweep her off her feet to be come my bride.” But as he pondered the idea, he knew that he would always wonder whether she had married him for [love, or for] the riches and the power that he could give her.

Then he decided to dress as a peasant, drive to town, and have his carriage let him off. In disguise, he would approach her house. But, somehow, the duplicity of this plan did not appeal to him.

At last, he knew what he would do. He would shed his royal robes. He would go to the village and become one of the peasants. He would work with them. He would live with them. He would suffer with them. He would actually become one of them. This he did, and in so doing he won his wife.

In other words— and to paraphrase 1st John 4:19— she loved him because he first loved her. You see, the Nativity and the Incarnation— in other words, Christmas!— was God’s answer to the question “How can I get these people to fall in love with me?”

I'm sure God thought about trying to command us to be in a relationship with him— and maybe that's a bit of what the Ten Commandments are all about. But being in a relationship with someone, and loving that person, are two very different things.

And I'm sure God thought about trying to amaze and astound us into a relationship with him. "Look at all that I've created, and all that I control, and all that I've done. How about that?" And that might actually attract a lot of people into relationship with him. But would it necessarily cause them to love God? I don't know.

And so, like the king in the parable, God realized that the only thing he could do was to become one of us. And in the baby Jesus, God was born into the world of men and women. He became one of us.

He grew up among us, and had a family just like the rest of us. He learned to work with his hands, and he shared our labors. During the great festivals of the year, he danced with us. When a member of the community died, he grieved with us. And when a new member was born into our community, he celebrated with us. And for 33 years, God was one of us. And because of all this, we knew him, and we loved him. And we loved him because he first loved us.

And that, my friends, is the Christmas story. It's a love story. It's the story of how far one person will go, how much one person will do, for another person. And it's a story that tells us that what makes relationships truly special aren't the things we can *get* from them, but rather the things we can *give* to them. And maybe that's why we exchange gifts at Christmas, because it all began with one big gift: God's gift of himself.

In the end, when we talk about Christmas, we can use all the big words we want; words like Nativity and Incarnation. But if we focus on all that jargon, we're likely going to miss the real point of it all: that God loved us so much, that it wasn't enough for him to remain in heaven with us on earth. He came to be with us, to love us, and earn our love for him.

But even though Jesus has returned to heaven, his Spirit remains with us, and there's no place where we can go that he isn't already there. And whenever we want to talk to him, he's right there next to us, and he's all ears.

And forever, because of Christmas, not only can we have a relationship with God, but everyday we can renew this grand, divine love affair between God and his people, who once walked side by side.

Amen.