The earthiness of Jesus

SAVATIONIST ECOTHEOLOGIAN MATT SEAMAN TAKES A STEP BACK FROM THE SANITISED VERSION OF JESUS THAT IS SOMETIMES PORTRAYED AT CHRISTMAS AND FOCUSES ON THE EARTHINESS OF THE INCARNATION

Jesus is God and yet Jesus is human. This complex idea has been wrestled with throughout the existence of the Christian faith.

Over the centuries there have been various views on the relationship between Jesus’ divinity and humanity. For example, two views at either end of the spectrum, both deemed deviant by the majority of Christians, are: that Jesus was only an extraordinary human; thereby denying Jesus’ divine nature; and a position called Docetism, where Jesus is believed to be a completely spiritual being that really didn’t take on any form of physicality and only appeared to be human.

As Salvation Army doctrine states, “we believe that in the person of Jesus Christ the Divine and human natures are united, so that he is truly and properly God and truly and properly man.” Hence, as a movement we share within orthodox belief around the divinity and humanity of Jesus.

Although, it is sometimes the case that the purely spiritual nature of Jesus can receive more consideration, so as we come once again into the season of Christmas where our focus is on Jesus as God coming to earth, let’s take some time to reflect on the earthiness of Jesus, the earthiness of the incarnation, how the divine became earthly and how this might influence our own lives.

REALISTIC PICTURE

In Luke’s gospel, we read of Jesus as being born on Earth, being born of Earth, wrapped in cloths from Earth and laid in an Earth-bound manger.

Through the context in which Jesus came to Earth we are given reason to reflect on sights, smells and sounds that are unmistakably earthly. The picture painted by the gospels does not lend itself to being pretty, clean or sanitised. It can be easy to overlook or downplay the earthiness, the physicality and the messiness of Mary giving birth to Jesus, giving it a miraculous, spiritualised cleanliness.

Think about the potentially rough-ewn wood of which the manger may have been made (there was no laminex then!) and the likely dirtiness of the stable (vacuuming or even hosing the place down would not have been an option). The clean and sanitised hospitals of today are a far cry from a feeding trough in a shed.

In many religious traditions, salvation can be linked with escaping the physical world and all the mess that is within. However, Jesus’ birth within the world where “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us … full of grace and truth” (John 1:14) doesn’t really support such a great separation between the spiritual and the physical.

Theologian Ronald Rolheiser argues that Jesus’ birth “assures us that we can find meaning and salvation without having to denigrate either our bodies or the physical world”, and that Jesus coming to earth breaks down the divide between the spiritual and the physical. A God of the body as well as of the soul, a God who is found in animal sheds as well as in churches, a God of the indoors and the outdoors, and, to quote Methodist Charles Wesley, a God of nature and of grace.

If we think further about the
everyday of Jesus’ incarnation, it becomes apparent that God so loved the world that God actually became part of the world. God through Jesus Christ actually became a physical reality, which, therefore, means that the divine became a being of minerals, bodily fluids, atoms and of molecules. God became part of God’s earth.

CREATION CYCLE

As Christian feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson states, the incarnation is a “radical, divine reach into the very tissue of biological existence and the wider system of nature. Jesus of Nazareth was an earthling, a complex unit of minerals and fluids, an item in the carbon, oxygen and nitrogen cycles … the atoms comprising his body once belonged to other creatures. The genetic structure of his cells made him part of the whole community of life.”

The food and drink that Jesus consumed during his earthly existence came from creation, and went back into the cycle of life on earth. What a deep mystery this is, yet what an amazing story. The creator of all things became part of the creation in order to bridge the divide and to bring about healing and redemption!

This, of course, takes us further than the story of Christmas. In John 3:16 we read that Jesus Christ is a gift given because “God so loved the world,” – the Greek word for world is kosmos. In this, we can gain appreciation of the gift of Jesus Christ for the healing of all of God’s creation. Through the incarnation of Jesus – the divine and earthly becoming one – Jesus brings about the reconciliation of all things on earth and in heaven to God (Colossians 1:20).

Through the incarnation of Jesus, we are given a story that links clearly with the earthiness of everyday life. As theologian lecturer Rev Dr Michael Trainor writes, this earthly story in Luke’s gospel “concerns all Earth’s members, human and non-human, organic and inanimate. It is about God, angels, demons, human beings, soil, seeds, mountains, waters, animals”. The story includes Jesus being nailed to Earth’s wood at the cross and then laid in an earthly place of rest before his resurrection.

In this wonderful story of salvation through Jesus Christ, Rev Dr Trainor argues that we are presented with “a fundamental truth about following Jesus: how one treats Earth and freely shares its fruits are central. An authentic disciple of Jesus is ecologically contemplative and environmentally respectful.”

Called by God, empowered through the Holy Spirit, we as followers of Christ are called to imitate Jesus and move further towards holiness.

How might we each individually and collectively move closer towards living Christ-like lives that respect the entirety of the earth that God has created, that God through Jesus Christ has become part of, and knows intimately through the incarnation?

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