

Christian concept: INCARNATION



It's a bit like ...

- **The Creator becoming part of creation**
- **The greatest becoming the least**
- **Giving up power, becoming vulnerable**
- **Coming to the rescue in person**
- **Embodying the invisible - God with skin on, in a body**
- **Revealing what God is like, helping us understand**
- **God becoming one of us, experiencing human life, able to identify with us**
- **Encountering God 'in the flesh'**
- **Having a living example of how to be a human, from the maker himself**
- **Walking in someone else's shoes**

INCARNATION is the traditional Christian belief that God came into the world in human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. The first Christians believed Jesus was more than just a good man, healer, teacher or prophet but trying to put into words what they had experienced of this incredible man was like trying to catch the wind. Eventually they expressed their belief by stating that Jesus was both fully human and fully God (divine).

Here are some of the ideas which make up the Christian belief in incarnation.

God with us – Emmanuel (Matthew 1 v.23; Hebrews 4 v.15-16; John 11 v.27, 19 v.7)

Incarnation is about God's Son becoming 'one of us', a human. Christmas carols often call Jesus 'Emmanuel', or 'God with us'. Nativity scenes traditionally show Jesus placed centrally with everyone facing this vulnerable tiny baby, God in human form.

Christians believe that when they pray they will be understood because Jesus came and shared human life; he knows the trials and joys of being human. The Bible stresses that Jesus got tired, hungry and even wept; he was human, like us, but also divine.

Giving up power (Philippians 2 v.5-9)

Christians believe in one God but understand God in three ways (trinity): God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. They believe that all the persons of the Trinity were involved in the creation of the universe so when God the Son "became flesh" it was like the creator of becoming part of his own creation. 'Lo, within

a manger lies, he who made the starry skies,' wrote Christina Rossetti. With Mary's consent, God's Son grew within her womb and was born as a human child.



Becoming human meant giving up power and control, like a general leaving his bunker to fight with the troops on the front-line. He immersed himself in a deficient world to put things right. God risked leaving the distance and safety of heaven to become one of us, and in solidarity with humanity, faced poverty and danger.

Revealing what God is like (John 14 v.9; Colossians 1 v.15; 2 Corinthians 4 v.4)

An early Christian writer advised Christians to think of Jesus as they thought about God. It is as if Jesus pulled aside the heavy clouds that hide God from humans and gave a glimpse of what God is like. He is 'God with skin on'.

"The Word (Jesus) became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory" wrote St John (John 1 v.14) What Jesus did and said drew people, crowds of them. He welcomed everyone, rich, poor, outcast, sick - all in need of help. What he taught about God in his sermons and parables e.g. the Lost Sheep and the Lost Son, he lived out in his life for all to see; he was a visual aid to knowing God.



While Jesus called himself 'son of man' – a phrase with a mystical tradition behind it – clearly putting himself in the human camp, his special relationship with God was obvious to his followers. The famous 'I am' sayings in John's gospel e.g. 'I am the Good Shepherd' recall how God spoke to Moses in the Old Testament ('I am who I am' Exodus 3 v.14) and are clearly a statement of divinity.

The disciples got to know Jesus as a human, living and working with him for three years but they also caught glimpses of the 'God man' e.g. when Jesus was baptised (Mark 1), calmed a storm (Matthew 8), raised a child from the dead, (Matthew 9) was transfigured before their eyes (Matthew 17).

Whoever has seen me has seen the Father, said Jesus (John 14 v.9). Whoever welcomes me, welcomes him who sent me (Mark 9 v.37)

Representing God (John 7 v.29, 8 v.19, 10 v.33-39, 12 v.44, 14 v.9, 16 v.28, 17 v.8)

Images of 'Christ Pantokrator' – ruler of all – show Jesus dressed not as an emperor but as a wandering Jewish teacher. In icons perspective is reversed; Jesus is more than his humble appearance suggests.



In John's gospel, Jesus talks about being 'sent' by the Father. He

came with the authority of God, like a company 'rep', to pass on God's words and speak on God's behalf. The crowds who thronged to Jesus were amazed at his obvious authority. Jesus even claimed to forgive sins, God's prerogative. The religious rulers could not deny what Jesus did but questioned his authority and refused to believe he was 'Son of God', accusing him of blasphemy.

Restoring the image of God

Athanasius, a 3rd century Bishop, wrote that humans "were made 'in the likeness of God.' But that image has become obscured, like a face on a very old portrait, dimmed with dust and dirt. When a portrait is spoiled, the only way to renew it is for the Subject to come back to the studio and sit for the artist all over again. That is why Christ came--to make it possible for the divine image in man to be recreated. We were made in God's likeness; we are *remade* in the likeness of his Son."

St Paul wrote of Jesus 'He is the image (eikon) of the invisible God' (Colossians 1 v.15).

Jesus came to show not only what God is like but what humans should be like, real humans as God intended. He acts as a good teacher, coming down to the level of his pupils and being a living example of a real human, in touch with God his maker.

Coming on a mission (John 3 v.16; Colossians 1 v.19-23)

Jesus said he came to 'give his life as a ransom for the lost' (Mark 10 v.45). By becoming human he was able to reveal what God is truly like through his actions and words, but he also

came to take on all that had gone wrong in the world because of human 'sin' or failure. 'Jesus' actually means 'saving one'. Christians say Jesus 'paid the price' for sin through his death on the cross. His human body died, but as the eternal God, Jesus could not stay dead. He restored to humans the possibility of life after death, of immortality or eternal life.

Christians portraying Christ

No-one knows what Jesus looked like. Early Christians did not portray Jesus but used symbols instead. When artists began to represent Jesus, they made him like themselves. But they also had to struggle with how to represent the divine side of Christ e.g. using halos or altered perspectives.



Western Christians have historically favoured pictures of the infant Jesus and the crucifixion. The developing world has focussed on images of Jesus' ministry and involvement in people's lives showing him alongside them in their struggles, their 'brother'.

Christians as the body of Christ

The Bible talks of the Christian church as a 'body' with Christ as the head (1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 1 v.22). Mother Teresa of Calcutta said: Christ has no body now on earth but yours. Christians today are to '**incarnate**' God to the poor and sick, restoring people's dignity and demonstrating what God is like.