

The Supremacy of Christ *The Letter to the Hebrews*

What Joy? Christmas for the Marginalized *Hebrews 2:14 – 15*

December 15, 2006, HRCF

Introduction: Father Damien

What is the big deal about the birth of Jesus? If we just look out at this coming holiday, what we see is a jumble of advertisements and symbols that really have nothing to do with Jesus: We see long shopping lines, men in red suits, Christmas trees, multi-colored lights, and Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer. We eat the same foods: ham or turkey and lots of carbs. We watch the same movies: *Miracle on 34th Street*, and National Lampoon's *Christmas Vacation*. Maybe because Christmas has become so fattening that it's hard to imagine it being meaningful for someone who's suffering. What meaning does Christmas have to someone like her? The title of our time together asks: What would the meaning of Christmas be if your child was born with severe deformities, if you were in prison, if you had been sold into sex slavery, if you were a genocide survivor, if you were depressed?

And yet as we begin to get behind the meaning of Christmas and unpack the birth of Jesus again, I'd like to tell you a story about a hero of mine that is very significant to me. He isn't as remembered as Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King, Jr. But he is a hero of mine, as much as any of these other people and his life reflects the inner meaning of Christmas. He is known as Father Damien. He was born the son of farmers. He became a Catholic priest in Hawaii – what a great parish, huh?! In the late 1800's, the Hawaiians were helpless to control leprosy, so they started a leper settlement on the remote island of Molokai. If you were diagnosed with leprosy, you were taken by force from your family and sent to this island to die. You'd be dumped in the surf. You'd have to make your way ashore, find shelter in caves or build a shack if you could. You could imagine the anger, the hopelessness, the crime, and the self-pity there; it was life at a low level to say the least. Damien felt Jesus call him to go to that island. So he got there, and he started telling them about Jesus. He made sure he hugged the 600 residents all the time. He was a priest, but also a doctor; he treated ulcers and other problems. He was also an architect and carpenter as he built beds and homes. He always said, 'We lepers.' And then one day, that became reality. Damien acquired leprosy. He knew that would happen, but I'm not sure he knew all the ways it would affect him. On one occasion, another priest visited to show some support but refused to get off the ship. So Damien rowed out to meet him and shouted up his confession. It was humiliating. Damien couldn't even visit his headquarters because of the disease. He worked all the way until April 15, 1889, WHEN HE DIED THE DEATH EVERYONE ELSE WAS DYING. But he gave them a life they couldn't live on their own. As soon as he landed on Molokai, he started to instill in the members of his community a sense of dignity and self-worth. Previously, people tossed dead bodies into shallow graves so that pigs and dogs would eat the bodies. Damien built a cemetery that was clean and fenced-in. People could then die with honor. Others could express honor to them. He gathered people to build new, clean houses, farms, and schools, always building right alongside them. He and the people built a church building to worship God together. Within a few years, the island was transformed. The crime rate went down. It was no longer just a living cemetery for those waiting to die; it was full of pride and smiles. HE DIED THE DEATH EVERYONE ELSE WAS DYING, TO GIVE THEM THE LIFE THEY COULD NOT LIVE ON THEIR OWN. (distilled from Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints*, p.169 – 170)¹

Relevance: The Meaning of Christmas

In an even deeper way, Jesus entered into our world. The meaning of Christmas is that God, in Jesus, has entered into our world. He came to share in all that we experience. Let me set your expectations for what I'm going to do tonight. I'm going to explore the inner meaning of this event, the meaning that the

¹ Specifically, Gandhi said Damien was an inspiration for his social campaigns in India that led to the freedom of India. Gandhi wrote, 'The political and journalistic world can boast of very few heroes who compare with Father Damien of Moloka'i. It is worthwhile to look for the sources of such heroism.' (quoted from en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Father_Damien)

Christian tradition has found in the birth of Jesus. But let me first say that the meaning we can find in Christmas right now isn't too different than the meaning people found in Christmas back then. Back then, there were diseases and famines that would have terrified you, there was a level of violence and sexual exploitation, there was one world superpower manipulating the world through ruthless dictators, there was military and economic oppression, and there were even inner city problems. And people found the birth of Jesus meaningful back then. Why?

This is how: One New Testament letter says, 'Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.' (Heb.2:14 – 15). I'm going to make three points out of this. The birth of Jesus is first, God's partaking, second, God's power, and third, God's paradigm.

God's Partaking

First, the birth of Jesus is God's **partaking**. Just like Father Damien partook of leprosy, God partook of our humanity in Jesus. It's interesting to think of other gods who sit with arms folded and eyes closed, who also tend to be overweight, perhaps because ideologically they do very little intervening in the world. It's also interesting to think about Franz Kafka's novels, and Dostoyevski's, which often raise the question of what would it be like if God never intervened. But most significantly, William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* raises that question. Boys stranded on an island, wanting to be saved, wind up fighting a nasty war. But they are saved at the last by adults, men who are on a British battle cruiser, going off to fight a nasty war. The boys were saved by the adults, but who will save the adults? What would the world be like if God never intervened? It'd be a self-enclosed world, with self-enclosed people. Is that what we'd want? Fortunately God, who had already delivered Israel out of Egypt, strengthened David in the face of Goliath, intervened in the most profound way of all: He became one of us.

Some of us have said to God, 'You just don't understand me. You don't know what it's like to be me.' Sometimes it becomes a matter of pride: 'My life is so complicated that no one can really understand me, even me.' Yet God in Jesus partook of our existence. The One who soared above the heavens became an infant, contained in a womb, completely dependent on his mama for sustenance. All of us were completely helpless like that, and Jesus joined us in that experience. His family was poor, so poor that they couldn't pay the standard baby dedication price at the Temple. Some of us come from families that have really struggled. His people survived multiple attempts at genocide. Most of us can't imagine that. Jesus shared in our pimples, puberty, and public teasing, like all of us. When Jesus was a kid, he was probably clumsy, awkward, like us at one point. According to tradition, Joseph died when Jesus was still young, so Jesus probably had a shortened childhood. Some of us had the experience of losing an earthly parent. And that's just Jesus' *early* life. Look at what he endured later: mocking, conflict, death threats, betrayal, public shaming, and crucifixion. Never mind Jesus' supernatural ability to understand our pain. As a solitary individual, he knows it first hand!

'Since the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of flesh and blood.' If you want a fairly good reflection on that, read about Anne Rice. The former author of vampire stories became a Christian just recently. She writes in her book *Christ the Lord* from Jesus' seven year old perspective. The most interesting thing for me is to compare Anne Rice's vampire novels before she came to faith with the Jesus novels that she's started to write. Why go from one to the other? She said that she doesn't plan to write more vampire novels, because she felt like it was her way of exploring the human condition. Vampires for her represented humanity, linked to eternity yet not fully alive – in fact, dying. But a few years ago, she met someone, someone who is linked to eternity yet fully alive: God wrapped in human flesh. If God partook of humanity, including human diseases, suffering, limitations, and frustrations, then God knows us, and even empathizes with us: We who are mostly water, who live on a swirling ball of mostly dust in a universe of mostly nothing. And her life has been transformed. Even in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in September of 2005, Anne Rice, who lived in New Orleans and has been very active in rehabbing the city, took the time to say, 'This is the Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, celebrated by angels, visited by shepherds, and the Magi. This is the Christ of the four gospels in whom I believe. In a way, the novel is the story of Christmas told in a new way – from the point of view of Jesus Himself when he is old enough to start talking seriously about the mysteries surrounding His birth. – My life has led to

this book.’ (Sep.2005, http://www.annerice.com/bs_b_ChristTheLord.htm) ‘...I feel *Christ the Lord* is the finest book I’ve ever written, and it represents the culmination of a long personal journey in which I searched for the most meaningful task I could do.’

Let me share about three people who have found this meaningful. First, one of my own experiences. I was going through a time of feeling slightly depressed. Me saying, ‘It reminded me of my dad.’ Jason changed the subject. I talked for 10 more minutes, then he went to sleep. I turned to my side and wept.

The second person: I have a friend who really doesn’t like Christmas because she’s divorced and it’s hard to be single on these holidays, because she’s lived through the death of her son and she finds the focus on children painful, and because she’s Jewish. About 45 years ago, she had a son, Jaime, who was born with severe birth defects. The doctors called it all kinds of different things: severe mental retardation, chronic seizures, and a few other things which meant that they didn’t really know what was happening. Jaime required lots of care, parental and professional. He died at age 36, though he was never taller than about 4’8”. But sometime towards the end of Jaime’s life, our friend discovered Jesus. She was worn out, so she gave her life to him. For the last 10 – 15 years or so, she has been discovering that Jesus entered into all of human brokenness on an even deeper level than she ever imagined. His birth into this world in helplessness was just the beginning of God’s partaking in her pain. Although she doesn’t like Christmas as the holiday it’s become, she loves Christmas spiritually, in its deeper meaning.

The third person: One of the young men in our neighborhood (we live in a high crime, low income area) wanted to start a new life. So he moved into our house in the summer of 2003. He enrolled at Roxbury Community College. Unfortunately, during Thanksgiving of 2004, he was involved with at least 2 other people in a terrible crime: assault with attempt to murder. It’s unclear what role he played exactly in the whole thing, but he surely didn’t stop his two friends. They were caught and went to jail. He has been awaiting trial for over two years now in the Suffolk County Jail near the North Station stop, and of course we’ve gone to visit him. During this time, though, he has felt like if God could come to earth, then God could meet with him in prison. He got baptized a few months ago.

If you are going through something, the most poignant question you’re asking is not a philosophical answer to the origin of pain, but a personal answer to the apparent lack of empathy around you. ‘Am I alone in this?’ And the response from the baby Jesus in the manger is, ‘I am with you. I have entered this world to be with you.’

God’s Power

But why? Why did God partake of our humanity? To share His power. That’s the second point. The birth of Jesus is God’s power unleashed among us in the beginning stages of a coup. ‘Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.’ (Heb.2:14 – 15). We’re talking about power making someone else powerless, and freedom from slavery. We are talking about a Regime Change.

Without taking away from our responsibility, the biblical analysis says that there is a person with a personality that set evil into motion: the devil. In the western world, we have a non-spiritual world view. So we think matter is all that matters, and we tend to poo poo the idea of a spiritual reality. But what if there is an Enemy? What if there is a devil? Then we are dealing with something – and Someone – that we don’t have much understanding about. And we will need the help of Someone even more powerful. I wonder if we’re honest enough to admit that.

The problem of evil is never fully explained unless we include an Enemy, with a capital E. If it were just a matter of sociology, for example, then we would have solved the problem of evil already. For example, Lance Morrow is an essayist for TIME magazine who wrote a book a few years ago, called *Evil*. He went to talk to Slobodon Milosevic, Saddam Hussein, and other dictators. He looked at genocide incidents. He went to places of major human moral failure. And his conclusion, which I thought would have been much more robust, was very disappointing. Evil, he says, is like a low-lying fungus. It can spread very far, very fast, but it’s shallow and hard to pin down. But it all sounds so impersonal, so detached, and that’s the way

we can sometimes start talking about evil because we all want to diagnose the human condition, but without 'offending' anyone in particular, or saying anything really meaningful about responsibility.

Specifically, the devil had the power of death, and that all people but Jesus were enslaved by this fear. That makes some sense. Death is the tyrant waiting for every human being at the end of our lives. We try to escape him by eating healthy, doing aerobics, and even taking Viagra and Botox and other things that give the appearance of reversing the aging process. We try to escape death by becoming famous, by becoming the 'best' in our field, by leaving buildings and scholarships in our name and living on after we die. Brad Pitt's character Achilles in Troy fought for immortality the only way he knew how: getting fame. But even if you manage to do that, what happens? Some kid walks into a building named after you, and do they think of you? No. If they did even for a brief moment, do you get to enjoy that? Do they experience you? No; you're dead! Death comes for all.

So in fact people will witness a mugging and often do nothing. Why? Why are we afraid to get involved? Our fear of death. We think we're putting ourselves in danger. Why are we often afraid to risk our grades? Our fear of death. We can feed the world – we have enough food – but we don't. Why don't we? Our fear of death, because losing our stuff feels like dying. It's a question of will, and fear.

So God became a baby in order to enter into our humanity, but also to ELEVATE OUR HUMANITY. He has shown us that there is life on the other side of death, and he lived his entire life that way. He died the death we were already dying, in order to give us the life we could never live on our own. Jesus became THE EXEMPLARY HUMAN BEING, THE NORMATIVE HUMAN BEING, AND THE TRULY POWERFUL HUMAN BEING. And he shares his power with us.

Illus: me moving into East Palo Alto and being afraid to die, literally. Taking Dona Chela to work and being afraid to 'die' in my career.

Illus: What about a genocide survivor? Corrie Ten Boom is a woman who survived Nazi Germany. During World War II, on February 28, 1944, Corrie Ten Boom and her sister Betsie were arrested for housing Jews in their home in Holland. They were taken eventually to Ravensbrück, a prison camp in Germany where they were treated horribly. Corrie watched labor camp guards strike Betsie for being too weak to shovel. Betsie later died. Corrie was discharged in 1945, and she began to share all over Holland, Europe, and the United States what God had done in those dark days. Then, she went to Germany, and this is what she writes in her book *The Hiding Place*:

"It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbrück. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there--the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie's pain-blanching face.

He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. "How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein." he said. "To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!"

His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people in Bloemendaal the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.

I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.

As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.

Those who believe in Jesus share in Jesus' new humanity by having Jesus' Spirit placed in us. He shared in our mortality that we would share in his immortality. He shared in our nature that we would share in his nature. He shared in *our* humanity that we would share in *his* humanity.

God's Paradigm

This makes the birth of Jesus God's paradigm. God invites us to enter into other people's lives in a way that follows after His desire to enter into their lives. This is a living paradigm. So it wasn't just Father Damien who went to Molokai. Jesus went to Molokai, as he lived his life out through Father Damien, as he poured out his love through Father Damien. Jesus entered the leper colony.

God's paradigm for us to enter into other's lives: He enters our world, our lives, our humanity. Even when the other person's life is the embodiment of pain and death, he calls us to begin that process of dying in order to be with that other. Even when the other person is the estranged roommate or that person you don't like, and you feel like you're dying by being their friend. Jesus enters into that dying, holding out hope that there is life on the other side.

It's not just an abstract thought. The birth of Jesus becomes God's paradigm for all the followers of Jesus to follow after Jesus in the same way, with the same power, into the same suffering. For the Christian, it is our paradigm, power, and partaking as well.

don't know if you've read much science fiction, but if you've read Frank Herbert's "Dune" series, you'll recognize that the main character can see all possible future paths, but almost all of them end in death. So even though he can see infinitely far into the future, he is constrained to a certain path because all the others lead to death. His "redemption" comes when he voluntarily chooses a path that leads to death. I had never made the connection before, but it's really true. We try to hedge our bets as much as we can. That's why the death of young people shakes us up—they've "failed" in this regard, and it opens up the possibility that we might, too. Hence all the talk of "meaninglessness" and so on.