

LESSON 20: THE INCARNATION (II)

Instruction for Faith Educators

For Basic Level / Age 8	:	Cover points 1 to 7
For Intermediate Level / Age 11	:	Cover points 1 to 16
For Advanced Level / Age 14	:	Cover points 1 to 24

Revision from previous lesson:

In the previous lesson, we learned that God, in His humility, left the glory of heaven to come as man to dwell among us because of His great love for us. God wanted to unite us to Himself so that we could participate in His divine life. In this lesson, we will learn about some important events that took place when the Eternal Word was born as a human baby.

Current lesson:

1. Read about the birth of Jesus in Luke 2:1-21 and explain it to the students.
2. At the time of Jesus' birth, the Roman Empire was ruled by Caesar Augustus. Because it was a time of peace, many people revered Caesar Augustus. Luke uses this popular reverence for Caesar Augustus to point out that it is Jesus who is the real Saviour and Bearer of Peace to the world (Luke 2:11, 14; 19:38). In the incarnation, God became man in order to bring a real and deep peace to the whole of creation.

Even in the Incarnation, God had planned everything perfectly. Despite the political power of someone like Caesar Augustus, God could make use of him to ensure that the public record of Jesus' ancestry would be kept through the census. It was also because of this census that the Nativity (the birth of Jesus) took place in exactly the place that had already been divinely planned. Surely, God is always in control of everything. St Bede commented, "Augustus only meant to enumerate his subjects, but among them was numbered his God".

3. God had already established a covenant with King David that his kingdom would last forever, and that the Messiah ("the anointed one") would come from his lineage. Luke's passage on the birth of Jesus shows Joseph to be a descendant of David, but since Joseph was not Jesus' natural father, the paternal line of ancestry from David to Jesus seemed to have been cut off. And yet, Joseph adopted Mary's Son by taking her and the Child into his home. In doing so, he had re-established the line of ancestry and renewed the covenant that God had made with David.

In the Incarnation, Joseph's adoption of Jesus as his own earthly son foreshadows our adoption as God's children through Baptism and the gift of the Spirit, which is faith (John 1:12-13, Galatians 3:14-4:7, Ephesians 1:4-14). Joseph's cooperation with God, in making Mary his wife and Jesus his earthly son, was a high price for him to pay in order to do God's will. It was something that would have greatly affected his reputation (which is why he initially wanted to quietly break off his engagement to Mary in Matthew 1:19). In the same way, God adopting us to be His children was not a plan that came easy or at a low

price. His very coming in the Incarnation was precisely in order to make our adoption possible.

In Roman law, adoption was a very serious thing. When a child was adopted into a family, the law required for him to be considered a real member of the family and be given equal rights as those of all the other biological children. We can be certain that Joseph truly loved Jesus and treated Him as his own biological son. In the same way, since the Incarnation has made our adoption possible, we truly become God's real children and are given the same privileges as those of Christ, His Son.

4. Jesus' birth in a manger was a birth unexpected for a Saviour of humanity. Nobody expected that the Saviour of the world would come looking so meek, even vulnerable: a little child being born and wrapped up in swaddling clothes in a manger.

In the same manner, the announcement about Jesus' birth was made to a group of lowly shepherds who were merely ordinary people. In their simplicity and ordinariness, these shepherds were chosen by God to be the recipients of this news (Luke 1:48, 52).

It reminds us that in the Incarnation, the Son of God came into a world that was poor, sick, and sinful. He would suffer at the hands of the poor and the spiritually sick in time to come, not through His own fault but through the sins of humanity. And still, He was willing to do so. The Incarnation therefore reminds us about the humility of God. It is difficult for us to fully understand what it means that God, the Lord of glory, is humble. He became humble for our sakes, so that He might be able to draw us into His own glory.

In one of his homilies on the birth of Jesus, the medieval theologian St Bonaventure described the Incarnation as "the eternal God humbly bending down and lifting the dust of our nature into unity with his own person". Saint Athanasius said, "God became man so that man might become God".

5. In the announcement made by the angel to the shepherds, he said that a Saviour had been born. Luke is the only synoptic gospel writer to use the title "Saviour" (Luke 1:69; 2:11; 19:9; Acts 4:12; 5:31; 13:23). During those days, it was a political propaganda that Caesar, the Roman emperor, was the "Saviour" who had brought "salvation" to the whole world. But now, Luke says that the angel declares it is Jesus the Messiah ("anointed One") who brings salvation to all humanity (Luke 2:29-32). He rescues humanity from sin and delivers us from our alienation from God.
6. The angel also calls Jesus as "Christ the Lord". The name "Christ" (Greek, *Christos*) is the same as Messiah (Hebrew, *Mashiach*), which means "anointed One". Many of the Jews were waiting for God to send this Christ or Messiah, thinking that he would be a royal leader, since he was supposed to be a descendant of the king David, and he would restore the kingdom of Israel after all these years of exile (Acts 1:6).

The title "Lord", the most frequently used title for Jesus in Luke and Acts, is reserved for God in the Old Testament.

Therefore, the title “Christ the Lord” points to a Saviour who would be a great King who exercises dominion over the world. Nobody expected that the Saviour of the world would come looking so meek and vulnerable. The Saviour coming as a little child born and wrapped up in swaddling clothes in a manger was not a sight anyone would have expected if this was to be the saviour of God’s people. An “anointed One” should have come in at least some higher degree of loftiness to be paraded around and admired. Whereas this one was born out of the sight of public, with nobody else but a group of shepherds coming to appreciate the sight of his birth.

7. The birth of Jesus in this manner teaches us that God’s greatness is not about showing off. God did not show His power through wealth and domination. Rather, He demonstrated His greatness through a lowly birth, in humility and self-sacrifice.
8. Read Matthew 2:1-23 and explain it to the students.
9. The Gospel of Matthew tells about the Magi who came from the East to worship the newborn baby Jesus. The Magi were most probably people from the priestly community in Persia, who interpreted the configuration of the stars as part of their religious practices (much like astrologers of today). Obviously, they were Gentiles who did not know the God of the Israelites. They came to Jerusalem to enquire about this star that they had seen from afar, indicating to them that a king over the Jews had just been born. This caused Herod very great anxiety.
10. When Jesus was born, King Herod was almost 70 years old and had reigned over Judea for more than 30 years. He was rich and powerful, but incredibly insecure and rather mad. He was very fearful about how much power he actually had, since as king of Judea, he was only a client king of the Roman Empire (a client king is one who is fully dependent on a more powerful state for political, economic, or military support, and who in return is expected to serve the interests of that state). He was not actually a rightful king, because he was not from the line of king David. Because he was not a rightful king by birth, his position was always under threat either from the Roman Caesar or the local Jewish population.
11. After their audience with Herod, the Magi followed the star from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and found the place where the baby Jesus lay. They worshipped Him and offered Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These gifts were standard gifts that people usually used to honour a king or a deity in the ancient world. But from a spiritual viewpoint, these gifts also symbolised some important things about Jesus himself. Gold represented His kingship, frankincense symbolised His priestly role on behalf of the people of God, and myrrh prefigured his death because it was usually used for embalming the remains of the dead.
12. The sighting of the star by the Magi and their coming to visit the baby Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament.

Numbers 24:17: “I see him, but not in the present. I perceive him, but not close at hand: a star is emerging from Jacob.”

Psalm 72:10-11: “...the kings of Tarshish and the islands will pay him tribute. The kings of Sheba and Saba will offer gifts; all kings will do him homage, all nations become his servants.”

Isaiah 60:6: “...camels in throngs will fill your streets, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; everyone in Saba will come, bringing gold and incense and proclaiming Yahweh's praises.”

13. Soon after the Magi left Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary's joy of watching as their newborn baby was visited and worshipped abruptly turned into horror. Herod, overcome by anxiety over the birth of this child who was *born* king, not just appointed king illegitimately like himself, committed one of the most heinous crimes recorded in Scripture. He sent death squads into Bethlehem, just three miles from his palace, to kill all male babies under the age of two. Although Matthew is the only Gospel that records this slaughter of the innocents, history does record how ruthless Herod's frequent actions were. Although Herod was essentially targeting just one baby for assassination, many others died.
14. Joseph is warned in a dream to flee with the infant Jesus and Mary to Egypt in order to escape Herod's attempts to kill Him. The journey of several hundred miles to Egypt would have been a long and tedious trip lasting between ten and fourteen days. According to tradition – likely a true one – Mary held the Infant in her arms while seated on a donkey, which Joseph led by its bridle. They would have been in danger of suffering from lack of water and also getting robbed on the way.

Their time in Egypt would have been characterised by hardship and missing their homeland, mixed with the joy of seeing Jesus growing up each day away from the danger they had left behind. They probably also saw many idols of the Egyptian gods with faces of beasts around them. And Mary certainly would have been aware that Jesus her Son had come into this world to save these people too.

After Herod's death (at least one year later), Joseph, once again in obedience to a dream and in fulfilment of prophecy, goes to reside in Nazareth of Galilee. Jesus, therefore, spent his childhood and adolescence in Nazareth.

15. Settling down in Nazareth upon their return from Egypt would certainly have been a very natural decision, as Mary was a native of Nazareth while Joseph had most probably moved from Bethlehem to Nazareth either at a young age, or slightly later because of his work, or much later on because of his betrothal to Mary. But at the same time, the Gospel of Matthew tells us that this decision actually fulfilled a prophecy that the Messiah would be called a “Nazarene”.

Matthew 2:23: “There he settled in a town called Nazareth. In this way the words spoken through the prophets were to be fulfilled: He will be called a Nazarene.”

And yet, there is no Old Testament passage that seems to directly points to this prophecy. How then is Matthew 2:23 to be explained?

- A) During the time of Jesus, Nazareth was a small village in the northern part of Israel (the Galilee region) with only 400 to 500 inhabitants. It was perceived as lowly and rural. Therefore, inhabitants of that village were not seen as being capable of any great achievement. In addition to that, Nazareth was also where the Roman army for the northern region was stationed. Therefore, it was a very much disliked place by the Jews.

Jesus living in Nazareth was a reflection of his lowliness and humility, and this is what Matthew 2:23 is referring to. Even though this verse is not directly quoting a prophecy recorded in any Old Testament passage, the Old Testament is replete with passages that prophesy about the lowliness of the Messiah to come.

- B) Unlike many other places in Israel during Jesus' time, Nazareth was known for having a mixed population of Jews and Gentiles. For this reason, many Jews disdained Nazareth. But yet, growing up among both Jews and Gentiles would have been a providential fulfilment of Jesus' mission to be the Saviour for all nations, not just for the Jews (Matthew 28:18-20). Therefore, Jesus' growing up in Nazareth was also a fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecy that God would save even those who were not Jews (Isaiah 56:1-8). In this sense, Jesus was a "Nazarene".

- C) Isaiah 11:1 contains a prophecy that "A shoot will spring from the stock of Jesse, a new shoot will grow from his roots." This shoot obviously points to Jesus, who is a descendant of King David, son of Jesse. In Hebrew, the word for "shoot" or "branch" is *netzer*. Prophets such as Jeremiah used this same branch image (*netzer*) to speak of the anticipated Messiah-king (Jeremiah 23:5, 33:14-16). Jesus was therefore the "Nazarene" (*netzer-ene*) that Israel had been awaiting.

16. Another reason that Joseph and his family settled in Nazareth would have been his job. Although the English translations of the Bible often record that Joseph was a carpenter (a trade which Jesus eventually inherited), the original language of Scripture in Matthew 13:55 says that Joseph was a *tehton* (which means "stonemason" or "builder"). Most homes in Israel were (and still are) constructed from stone.

Nazareth was only three miles from the ancient town of Sepphoris (or Zippori), which was being developed rapidly under the reign of Herod Antipas. The Jewish historian Josephus described Sepphoris as "the jewel of all Galilee" because of Herod's massive beautification project there. This project would have been the biggest job opportunity for Joseph as a stonemason. It would have been very possible for Joseph to walk for an hour to Sepphoris each day to work, and then to walk back in the evenings. Accompanying Joseph would have been the young man Jesus, who would be learning the trade of his earthly father.

This is also why we see Jesus using many building metaphors in the course of his preaching:

Matthew 7:24-27: "Therefore, everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a sensible man who built his house on rock. Rain came down, floods rose, gales blew and hurled themselves against that house, and it did not fall: it was founded on rock. But everyone who listens to these words of mine and does not act on them will be

like a stupid man who built his house on sand. Rain came down, floods rose, gales blew and struck that house, and it fell; and what a fall it had!”

Luke 14:28-30: “...which of you here, intending to build a tower, would not first sit down and work out the cost to see if he had enough to complete it? Otherwise, if he laid the foundation and then found himself unable to finish the work, anyone who saw it would start making fun of him and saying, ‘Here is someone who started to build and was unable to finish.’”

17. Read Luke 2:41-52 and explain it to the students.
18. In Biblical Judaism, there were three pilgrimage festivals, meaning that the Jews frequently travelled to Jerusalem to observe the rites at the temple there on these festivals. One was in autumn, and two were in the spring. The biggest holiday that would bring in pilgrims from all over the known world was the holiday of Passover.

At the time of their exodus from Egypt, the people of Israel observed Passover in their homes. Once Solomon constructed the temple in Jerusalem, Jerusalem became the central location for Passover. Instead of a household observance, Passover became a pilgrimage festival. By the time of Jesus’ public ministry, Jewish people from everywhere made their way to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover and the Week of unleavened Bread. Consequently, bulging crowds squeezed into Jerusalem every year for the celebration. Many historians have speculated that up to 200,000 Israelites made the pilgrimage to the holy city each year for Passover. However, one ancient historian estimated that as many as 2.7 million Jewish people streamed into Jerusalem for the festival. Imagine the difficulty associated with trying to find a house or a room in which one could observe Passover. Extended families used every bit of available space when gathering for the meal.

19. The Passover ritual would take place at the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple was where animals were offered as sacrifices. It was also a place where the Psalms were chanted by the Levites and the priests would be performing the stipulated rituals. On such a busy day, it would have been so easy for Joseph and Mary to miss out on Jesus. Being such a small family, they would very probably have been travelling with other families (relatives) who would share the Passover lamb together. Joseph and Mary probably thought that Jesus was busy playing with his cousins and other relatives’ children. Imagine the panic which seized them when they realised He was missing and as they retraced their footsteps to look for Jesus in these huge crowds that were visiting Jerusalem. Mary was probably sobbing for fear of losing her beloved Son in this crowd of hundreds of thousands of people.
20. Have you ever wondered what Jesus was talking about to people at the Temple? The Passover feast had just ended, so what would he be talking about there? An intelligent guess would be, the Passover! And the irony was, here was this little boy who was destined to be the Passover sacrifice itself in less than 20 years to come! And he was probably prophesying and telling the men about things that were to come. They must have been very amazed at how He understood things. He probably had a depth of interpretation of the Passover which nobody else heard before.

21. After a three days' search, Mary had the joy of finding Jesus in the Temple. When she took Him to task for separating Himself from the family, He replied, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" These are the first words coming from the lips of the Word Incarnate to be recorded in the Gospel. In these words, Jesus sums up His whole person, His whole life, His whole mission. They reveal His Divine Sonship; they testify to His supernatural mission. And these words also reveal that He was perfectly aware of His own divinity and what His Father required of Him, even though His earthly parents did not understand what He meant at that time (Luke 2:50).
22. Nothing else is revealed about Jesus' growing days in Nazareth except that He lived under the authority of His parents (Luke 2:51). The Son of God teaches humility by His example in obedience to His parents. The Incarnation is the greatest act of humility possible. By it the Son of God, eternal, almighty, infinite, voluntarily took upon Himself human nature. He who is the Creator came and subjected Himself to the authority of the created.
23. St John Chrysostom (4th century): "God is now on earth, and man in heaven; on every side all things commingle. He became Flesh. He did not become God. He WAS God. Wherefore He became flesh, so that He Whom heaven did not contain, a manger would this day receive."
24. St John Henry Newmann: "The Incarnation must be the most significant point about the Catholic faith that brings all its beliefs together."



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