

## RONALD ROLHEISER - INCARNATION – GOD IS WITH US

For many of us, I suspect, it gets harder each year to capture the mood of Christmas. About the only thing that still warms our hearts are memories, memories of younger, more naïve, days when the lights and carols, Christmas trees and gifts, still excited us. But we're adult now and so too, it seems, is our world. Much of our joy in anticipating Christmas is blunted by many things, not least by the commercialism that today is characterized by excess. By late October we already see Christmas decorations, Santa is around in November, and December greets us with series of Christmas parties which exhaust us long before December 25<sup>th</sup>. So how can we rally some spirit for Christmas day? It's not easy, and commercialism and excess are not our only obstacles. More serious are the times. Can we, amid the many cruelties of this year, warm up to a season of tinsel and festivity? Can we continue to romanticize the pilgrimage of one poor couple searching for shelter two thousand years ago amidst the plight of the millions of refugees today who are journeying without even a stable as a refuge? Does it mean anything to speak of peace after various elections this year polarized our nations and left millions unable to speak civilly to their neighbours? Where exactly is the peace and goodwill in our world today?

Closer to home, there are our own personal tragedies: the death of loved ones, lost marriages, lost families, lost health, lost jobs, lost time, tiredness, frustration. How do we celebrate the birth of a redeemer in a world which looks shockingly unredeemed and with hearts that mostly feel heavy and fatigued? The Christmas story is not easily made credible. How do we maintain the belief that God came down from heaven, took on human flesh, conquered all suffering, and altered the course of human history? This isn't easy to believe amidst all the evidence that seems to contradict it, but its credibility is contingent upon it being properly understood. Christmas is not a magical event, a Cinderella story without midnight. Rather its very centre speaks of humiliation, pain, and forced fleeing which is not unlike that being experienced by millions of refugees and victims of injustice on our planet today. The Christmas story mirrors the struggle that's being experienced within our own world and within our own tired hearts.

Incarnation is not yet the resurrection. Flesh in Jesus, as in us, is human, vulnerable, weak, incomplete, needy, painfully full of limit, suffering. Christmas celebrates Christ's birth into these things, not his removal of them. Christ redeems limit, evil, sin and pain. But they are not abolished. Given that truth, we can celebrate at Christ's birth without in any way denying or trivializing the real evil in our world and the real pain in our lives. Christmas is a challenge to celebrate while still in pain.

The incarnate God is called *Emmanuel*, a name which means *God-is-with-us*. That fact does not mean immediate festive joy. Our world remains wounded, and wars, strikes, selfishness, and bitterness linger. Our hearts too remain wounded. Pain lingers. For a Christian, just as for everyone else, there will be incompleteness, illness, death, senseless hurt, broken dreams, cold, hungry, lonely days of bitterness and a lifetime of inconsummation. Reality can be harsh and Christmas does not ask us to make make-believe. The incarnation does not promise heaven on earth. It promises heaven in heaven. Here, on earth, it promises us something else – *God's presence in our lives*. This presence redeems because knowing that God is with us is what ultimately empowers us to give up bitterness, to forgive, and to move beyond cynicism and bitterness. When God is with us then pain and happiness are not mutually exclusive and the agonies and riddles of life do not exclude deep meaning and deep joy.

In the words of Avery Dulles: "The incarnation does not provide us with a ladder by which to escape from the ambiguities of life and scale the heights of heaven. Rather, it enables us to burrow deep into the heart of planet earth and find it shimmering with divinity." George Orwell prophesied that our world would eventually be taken over by tyranny, torture, double-think, and a broken human spirit. To some extent this is true. We're a long ways from being whole and happy, still deeply in exile.

However, we need to celebrate Christmas 2018 heartily. Maybe we won't feel the same excitement we once felt as children when we were excited about tinsel, lights, Christmas carols, and special gifts and special food. Some of that excitement isn't available to us anymore. But something more important is still available, namely, the sense that God is with us in our lives, in our joys as well as in our shortcomings.

The word was made flesh. That's an incredible thing, something that should be celebrated with tinsel, lights, and songs of joy. If we understand Christmas, the carols will still flow naturally from our lips.