Class Notes #7: Christmas-Epiphany

**Incarnation and Revelation**

Required Readings: Class Notes #7; Buttrick, Conclusion; Moltmann, III/1-3 (pp. 73-93); Hickman, et al., Ch. 5/A, B, D-J.

Suggested Readings: Horsley.

Introduction to the Season of Christmas-Epiphany

Ancient Christian communities celebrated the Nativity of Jesus on two different dates. Churches in the West at Rome celebrated Christmas on December 25th, since the emperor Constantine encouraged the church to develop its liturgy by adopting the festival of Winter solstice. Churches in the East celebrated the Nativity of Jesus as the feast of Epiphany on January 6 which was the date of ancient solstice in Egypt. Prior to the adoption of the festival of December 25 at the end of the 4th century, Eastern churches in the regions of Constantinople, Cappadocia, and Syria celebrated both the nativity and the baptism of Jesus on Epiphany. The Western Church also adopted the January 6 festival (12 days later Christmas) and celebrate the baptism of Christ in the Jordan and the “first sign” at Cana in Galilee.

Christmas Eve candlelight service is the sign of salvation in the midst of the darkness, and Christmas decorations and music reveal the universality of God’s love and the engagement of God with the world. The church’s celebratory colors during the time of Christmas and Epiphany are white and/or gold.

The Doctrine of Incarnation

Christmas celebrates the in-breaking of God’s commonwealth and the historical significance of Jesus Christ. The Nativity accounts announce that how unlikely the way of God’s salvation through the incarnation is. The incarnation is the core of God’s revelation based on the loving will of God. God is revealed to us through and in Jesus of Nazareth in order for the humans understand the divine character of God. God’s intrusion into the human history through the incarnation is the source of our joy in the midst of the uncertainty of life under the unjust political, social, and economic structure of our society. With knowledge of this revelation, Christians face earthly powers with confidence and challenge evil systems without fear.

The doctrine of incarnation challenges us to ponder the mystery of the incarnate life of God in Jesus Christ in relation to such theological themes as the virgin birth, the pre-existence of Christ, the adoptionist view of Christ, and the accommodation of God to the lowliness of humanity. Moltmann understands Christology from the perspective of the resurrection faith. In other words, the experience of encountering the risen Christ became the theological foundation of interpreting the whole Christological events—Jesus’ birth, life, and death. For Moltmann, therefore, the doctrine of incarnation is viewed retrospectively from the eschatological faith in the resurrection of Christ. The Nativity stories in Matthew and Luke are intended to say that Jesus is the messianic Son of God by the power of the Holy Spirit not only since his resurrection but from the very beginning of his birth. More precisely, the story of the virgin birth is not a report of a gynecological miracle but a confession of the community of faith that Jesus is the messianic Son of God (82). Jesus Christ was born from the Holy Spirit and those who believe in Christ are “born from the Spirit” to be God’s children. Thus, the Holy Spirit is the divine mother of believers. That is why the Gospel of John directly precedes its statement about the incarnation of the eternal Word by saying: “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of a man, but of God (John 1:12,13). Jesus Christ becomes the “first born among many brothers [and sisters] (Rom 8:29). He is called “the only begotten Son of God,” for he is the archetype of the divine sonship and daughtership (83).

In this way, Moltmann’s understanding of the doctrine of incarnation is grounded in the Trinitarian concept of God. “It is the Holy Spirit, not Mary herself, who is coworker with the messianic Son of God and who together with him will redeem the world. The history of Christ is a Trinitarian history of the reciprocal relationship and mutual workings of the Father, the Spirit, and the Son” (86).

The doctrine of incarnation challenges preachers to ponder the following theological questions in relation to the celebration of Christmas: 1) What is God’s way of peace-making? 2) What does God’s revelation in the lowly form of humanity mean for the listeners who are in socially, economically, and politically different situations?

It is notable that the essays in Richard Horsely’s edited book, Christmas Unwrapped: Consumerism, Christ, and Culture, remind us that our contemporary celebration of Christmas is far from the true meaning of the incarnation of Christ. Our secular Christmas culture comprised of the Santa and his gifts and sentimental carols have distorted the real meaning of God’s lowly presence through incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth.

The Doctrine of Revelation

In the ancient Eastern Church, the feast of Epiphany celebrated Christ’s birth and baptism, and the coming of light into this world’s darkness. When the feast was introduced into the Western Church in the 4th century, it became the feast of the Magi and the celebration of the mission to the Gentiles. Epiphany marks the recognition that Jesus came to all people. His mission was also a “mission to the Gentiles.” Epiphany means not only that Christ is revealed to the world, but that God is *in* the world revealing the world to us. It is in this world that we experience the presence and work of God. We meet Christ among the people of our community, our nation, and our world.

Epiphany reminds preachers that their continuing task is to search for the revelation of God and help the listeners experience the presence of God in their lives. Where is God? What is God doing in the world in order to make and keep human life human? These questions should be the hermeneutical lenses for preachers to reflect both text and context for preaching.