Class Notes #7: Christmas-Epiphany

**Incarnation and Revelation**

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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 of the West at Rome celebrated Christmas on December 25, because the emperor Constantine encouraged the church to adopt the festival of winter solstice as part of its liturgy. Churches of the East celebrated the Nativity as the feast of Epiphany on January 6, which was the date of the 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 at Epiphany. The Roman church also adopted the January 6 festival, when it celebrated the baptism of Christ in the Jordan river and the “first sign” at Cana in Galilee.

The Christmas Eve candlelight service is the sign of salvation in the midst of 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 how unlikely the means of God’s salvation, is and reveal that incarnation is the core of God’s loving will for the world. God is revealed to us through and in Jesus of Nazareth in order that we might understand the divine character of God. God’s intrusion into human history through the incarnation is the source of our joy in the midst of the uncertainties of life under unjust political, social, and economic structures. With knowledge of this revelation, Christians face earthly powers with confidence and challenge evil systems without fear.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The doctrine of incarnation challenges us to ponder the mystery of the incarnate life of God in Jesus Christ in relation to the following theological themes: the virgin birth, the pre-existence of Christ, the adoptionist view of Christ, and God’s accommodation with the lowliness of humanity. Moltmann understands these Christological themes from the perspective of a resurrection faith. In other words, the experience of encountering the risen Christ becomes the theological foundation for interpreting the entire series of Christological events, from the birth to the death of Jesus. For Moltmann, therefore, the doctrine of incarnation is viewed retrospectively from an eschatological faith in the resurrection. The Nativity stories in Matthew and Luke illustrate how faith in the resurrection of Christ influences the understanding of the identity of Jesus: Jesus is confessed as the messianic Son of God by the power of the Holy Spirit, not only because of his resurrection, but also because 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 in the Gospel of John, the statement about the incarnation of the eternal Word is directly preceded with these words: “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” (Jn. 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 divine son and daughtership (83). In this manner, 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 listeners who are in different situations, socially, economically, and politically? It is worth noting that the essays in Richard Horsely’s edited book, Christmas Unwrapped: Consumerism, Christ, and Culture, criticize our contemporary celebration of Christmas as being far from the true meaning of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. Our secular Christmas culture, comprised of Santa, his gifts, and sentimental carols distorts 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 was for celebrating 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. It is remarkable that the celebration of Epiphany recognizes that Jesus came to all people and that his mission was also a “mission to the Gentiles.” Above all, the profound theological meaning of Epiphany is that God is not only revealed to the world, but also *in* the world revealing the world to us. That is, it is in this world that we meet Christ, especially among the marginalized in our communities, our nation, and our world.

Epiphany reminds preachers that their continuing task is to search for the revelation of God and help listeners experience the presence and work 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 preachers use to reflect on both text and context for preaching.

1. Refer to Eunjoo M. Kim, “Rejoice,” *The Living Pulpit* (Fall/Winter 2017). <http://www.pulpit.org/2018/02/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)