Christmas Day 2018: John 1:1-14

“Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain [him]; how much less this house that I have built!” (1 Ki 8:27). That’s what Solomon said when he dedicated the first temple. Would God dwell in a place conceived in the mind of an architect and drawn up on blueprints, in a building constructed with tools of men, in a temple made by human hands? The answer came in the form of a cloud, the visible manifestation of the glory of the Lord, so thick that the priests couldn’t even minister in the temple. Yes, God would dwell on earth. Yet that was only for a time. Solomon’s temple was destroyed and Ezekiel himself says that he saw God’s glory depart from the temple. A new one was eventually built in its place, but that was not where God’s glory would stay.

Solomon’s temple was only a foreshadow of a greater presence of God: the Word that was with God and that was God himself, and the Word by whom God made all things, this Word came into the world. “The Word became flesh” (Jn 1:14), a temple made without hands, conceived in Mary’s womb, yet he is just like us. God became man, a real historical human person, body and soul, with a human nature, personality, will, and intellect, having a name and a birthday. Just like you. Will God really dwell on earth? Today the Church answers with a resounding yes. Yes, God has taken up residence on earth in the Word made flesh.

This is what it means to say when John says: “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (v 14). The word “dwell” should mean “tented”, or more precisely here, “tabernacle” or “templed” among us. It means more than taken residence or merely having a body, but that God has chosen to share permanently in our humanity. God will not un-become man or leave mankind. What God had intended from the beginning, for man to be with God again as in the beginning, he does finally and permanently by becoming man through his son’s incarnation. Mockery, beatings, crucifixion, and even death: God will not move out; the incarnation will not cease. As Jesus said, “Destroy this temple”, the temple of his body, “and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn 2:19). Two natures, divine and human, united in the person of Jesus Christ at his conception, never again to be separated. Nothing will stop his presence with us.

In the person of Jesus Christ, in his flesh, the apostles beheld, heard, and handled the eternal God, the one who has life in himself and from whom all life proceeds. As they said, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands” (1 Jn 1:1). Even in Bethlehem, the eternal God could be heard, seen, and touched: wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. And yet he is also God. From conception, and even in that manger, Jesus Christ was the all-knowing, all-powerful, omnipresent God. As John said, “We have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (Jn 1:14). The glory of God that once dwelt in Solomon’s temple had returned to Zion in a permanent dwelling, in the person Jesus.

God did not come to earth merely to look around, for sightseeing or to “experience” the human life, in the way that we might travel to London or Paris and then come back home. The human nature that he assumed wasn’t a mask or disguise, something that he can take off whenever he wants. He came with a human nature like ours, so that he can bear our sins, our burdens, and our sorrows. The Word became flesh because we are flesh, subject to pain and misery like us, able to suffer the effects of human depravity and sin and the abandonment of God the Father. He assumed sinful human existence, with all its frailties and failings and consequences, because he’s the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He didn’t do this to show off his power. He didn’t come to suffer because it was fun. It was his love and compassion and mercy for sinners. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was born in human flesh because God’s will is that we should be saved from our misery of sin and death.

“The Word became flesh . . . full of grace and truth” (v 14). The eternal God dwells with man as man not for God’s own sake but for our sakes. It is an act of generosity, undeserved by us. If you want to know who God is, then look at Jesus Christ. In him you truly see God: not a tyrant or judge or boss or slavemaster, but the God who loves freely, who gives himself, who dies for you without condition or repayment.

God has not stopped being man in Jesus Christ, so God has not stopped to be your help and Savior. Wherever Jesus is present, he is present as true God AND true man, divine and human natures forever united. Referring to our Lord’s ministry, St. John said, “We have seen his glory” (v 14). God’s glory was seen and continues to be seen in the person of Jesus Christ. Indeed why doesn’t Jesus leave the human body after all his work is done? Why continue to be in the flesh? Because he is the resurrection. He never stops being the resurrection for us. And in the flesh he honors our bodies as well because we now live in him. This is not just a dying lump of flesh, this is his redeemed body for the resurrection. The glory of the resurrection is at work even in me, a sinner!

And this glory and power of the resurrection is here, not because this building is the temple, but because Jesus himself is here. And I don’t mean in an abstract “spiritual” sense because we believe that the Holy Sacrament is truly the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, because he says it is, and therefore the glory of God himself is here. This is truly the body of Jesus Christ that was given for you and his blood that was shed for you. And because it is the body and blood of God, it is able to save you, to cleanse you of all sin, to conquer death, hell, and the devil, and to strengthen faith as we take it by faith. He is the bread from heaven, therefore, you too have life, eternal life. So we can say with John and confess, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory”.

Will God really dwell on earth? Can the creation contain the Creator? Is the finite capable of the infinite? “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us”. John writes at the very end of Revelation: “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God” (Rev 21:3). God dwells with man as a man in order that he might remove and atone for our sin. The incarnation will never cease; neither will God’s love for you, a love enfleshed in Jesus Christ.

Christmas, then, is not only a celebration of what God once did, but it also celebrates what God has continued to do and will one day bring to completion. The infant Jesus is God’s work of salvation for us. His birth is our birth, his life if our life, his resurrection if our resurrection. And he now dwells with us to bring us to his final fulfillment.