

A Palm Sunday
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“He became what we are so that we might become what he is.” So wrote one of the church’s earliest theologians, Irenaeus, in the Preface to Book 5 of Against Heresies c. 180 A.D.

It is a central tenet of our faith that the Second Person of the Trinity took on human flesh. The Son of the living God, the eternal Logos, was born in a stable to Mary, the betrothed wife of a carpenter. A few centuries after Irenaeus, in 451, the Council of Chalcedon would declare that Jesus was, “. . . like us in all respects, apart from sin.”

What a horrible, wonderful, thing it is to become “what we are”. We are made in the image of God yet separated from God by our sins. Jesus was tempted in every way as we are yet did not sin. In order to be “what we are” Jesus had to experience the full human despair of our sinful and broken nature. He bore our sins upon the cross. It was our sins, not his, that swelled up in his breast and caused him to cry out in a loud voice “Eli, Eli, lema Sabachthani?” “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Yes, Jesus became what we are. Not just the part of us that could see, hear, taste, smell and feel. Jesus became that the day he was born. In his short life of 33 years, I imagine Jesus enjoyed his human senses. I can only imagine he relished the smell of the freshly cut wood in Joseph’s carpentry shed; or the taste of exquisite wine at the wedding in Cana; or the sounds of the children as they were brought to them for a blessing; or the vision of joy on the face of the widow Nain as her only son is raised from the dead. I even like to imagine Jesus enjoyed the feel of water between his toes as he walked on the Sea of Galilee. As he hung on the cross, his human capacities to see, hear, taste, smell, and especially to feel, were the agents of torment that crucifixion was designed to exploit. But as excruciating as the pain was (excruciate -- Latin: *ex crucis* – from the cross) as excruciating as the pain from the cross was Jesus did not cry out a verse from the Prophet Jeremiah, “My Anguish, my anguish. I writhe in Pain!” Nor, did Jesus

cry out Psalm 69, “But I am afflicted and in pain let thy salvation, O God, set me on high” No, the Psalm that came to Jesus mind as he hung close to death was Psalm 22, “My God, My God why has thou forsaken me.”

We believe that it was the Second Person of the Trinity who became man. As we say in the Creed, “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ the only Son of God eternally begotten of the Father.” As the theologians like to say, “There was no time when the Father was without the Son or the Son without the Father.” Eternally begotten means that there was never a time when the Father and the Son were not in a loving relationship. And, we can add, “with the Holy Spirit.” The mystery of the Trinity is one God in an eternal, loving, relationship of three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

“He became what we are so that we might become what he is.” As if to prove that there is no depths of the human experience to which Jesus’ love for us would not plumb, Jesus became what we are when it is the worse for us, that is to say, when we are utterly alone. Despite their protestations to the contrary, all of Jesus’ friends abandon him. One of the select Twelve is responsible for his betrayal; Jesus’ closest friend denies he even knows him. A denial, we are told that begins with a curse and ends with an oath. Betrayed, abandoned, and denied, Jesus hangs on the cross. In his second letter to the Corinthians the Apostle Paul writes of Jesus, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” In an ancient reflection on the crucifixion, it is said that Jesus became sin for us, and since a Holy God could not abide the sight of so much sin, our sin, God turned away from Jesus. With no friend in heaven or on earth, betrayed, abandoned, denied, mocked and condemned: Jesus was alone. He had reached the nadir of the human condition. He had become what we are when we are most desolate, when we are utterly alone. “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me” The author of love knew what it meant to be deprived of love. God had emptied himself for the love of us and he died.

