

LIVING INCARNATELY

One of the first responses I received when my website launched two weeks ago was from Jeanne, a friend with whom I had lost touch years ago. She said, in part, "Tell me about yourself, where you are, and anything you'd like to share." That was a big request! Cliff Cullum, the friend who will be handling most of my email, prepared to take notes on my answer. My first thought was that the biographical materials I had prepared for the website plus the essays, especially the issues of my journal called "A Penny For Your Thoughts," already contain the answers; all she has to do is read. Not until then did I realize what a formidable task I was expecting people to undertake! I really needed a way to summarize the last five years for Jeanne and other friends from the past who don't know where I am or what has happened in my life!

Surprisingly, the first thing that came to mind was not an essay, but a letter I had written in December, 2003, and used in place of Christmas cards that year. Wanting as many people as possible to know about the changes we were facing, I sent out two hundred copies of "The Incarnation Letter," as it came to be called. The response was overwhelmingly positive; perhaps that letter could be useful again!

As Cliff and I read the letter, freshly printed from my computer, I realized that it would serve very well – coupled with the essay "A Room With a View" – as an answer to Jeanne's questions. It was valuable because it accurately recorded how I felt at the start of my life with PLS, since I wrote it eight months before I wrote my first essay on ageing and dying. Then I thought of incorporating it into an essay, so I could not only comment on the letter, but also develop the thought of living incarnately, a challenge I am eager to undertake.

And just that quickly this essay was begun! Here, now, is the letter, with only the address of Drum Hill removed from the end.

IT'S TIME TO CELEBRATE THE INCARNATION!

"Christ Jesus came into the world (The Incarnation) to save sinners (Purpose of the Incarnation) ..." 1 Timothy 1:15.

Dear Family and Friends,

Greetings to you this holiday season. I hope all is well with you and look forward to hearing from many of you in the next few weeks. I have been thinking about the Incarnation a lot and from a different perspective ever since February of this year (2003). Let me explain ...

In the summer of 2002 I began to feel a weakness in my legs which occasionally led to a fall. I went to a neurologist who sent me for physical therapy and began a series of tests. On February 15, before the tests were completed, I fell in a store, breaking my right leg near the hip. Surgery the next day left me with an artificial ball and stem, fitted into my own hip socket. Four days later I was sent to Burke Rehabilitation Hospital in White Plains, NY where I stayed for 15 days. It was there that I began to think of the Incarnation.

When Jesus Christ was born of Mary, he was suddenly thrust into a whole new environment, one which was limiting in so many ways. The Eternal Son of God was one of us! Like all human babies, He couldn't even sit up at first! While that change was much greater than anything we could possibly endure, we can at least get an idea of what it was like. At Burke I suddenly found myself living among

the handicapped – as one of them! It felt like an incarnation and that realization, besides giving me much food for thought, was overwhelming. Like all of the patients, I was limited: wheelchair bound, dependent on others for just about everything. I had to learn new ways of bathing, dressing, and walking, using all kinds of assistive devices. My progress was slowed by the underlying problem, still existing, that had led to my broken leg. But finally, aided by a walker, I was home.

I had many adjustments to make and so, of course, did Leo. We both thought that my being handicapped was temporary, but it looks like that is not the case. I changed neurologists this summer and after further testing, my new doctor diagnosed me with Primary Lateral Sclerosis (PLS). This is a rare progressive disease of the brain that, while not fatal, affects the function of the legs, the tongue and sometimes the arms. My doctor expects that I will always have to use a walker in order to be safe on my feet. Also he requested that I go to a specialist at Mt. Sinai Hospital in NYC for a second opinion. I have been there and am currently awaiting this doctor's diagnosis.

MOVING TO DRUM HILL. Everything changes and that's healthy, for change is a sign of life. I had several changes this year besides becoming handicapped. For one thing, I turned 70. I have always believed that there is a difference between the body and the soul/spirit of a person. The body ages, goes through all sorts of wear and tear until finally it is left behind, while the soul/spirit is eternal and never dies. In my inner being I can honestly say that I am fine, while my body feels every one of its 70 years. I've had to face the fact that I can not do many of the things I did before. So when I saw an ad for Senior Citizen housing at Drum Hill in Peekskill, just a few miles from our house, I could easily admit that I belonged in that category.

Another big change was that beginning with my fall in February, our children began to take me to my doctor appointments, even going into the offices with me! I decided to make things as easy as possible for them, count my blessings and willingly give up some of my independence and privacy. Surprisingly, I have found this to be freeing!

There is a lot of help available at Drum Hill, a former middle school remodeled into apartments, and functioning for the most part as an assisted living complex. Leo and I will be renting a two bedroom apartment with kitchen, living/dining space and bath. Other than breakfast, the meals will be served to us in the dining hall. Housecleaning is also provided weekly, and there is transportation, all sorts of activities, 24 hour emergency response and more. About 150 people live there and I look forward to meeting them.

What a job it is sorting through our accumulated things, deciding what goes to Drum Hill and what to do with the rest! Our children are helping us and so are some of my friends. After we move our family will dispose of the remaining furniture and get the house ready to sell. Again it is freedom that I feel as I part with my excess "stuff." I also feel so loved. What we are going through is a normal part of the cycle of life.

PURPOSE. Jesus was incarnate for a reason: to save sinners. Fifty years ago this summer I was one of the sinners Jesus saved and I am eternally grateful! I believe there is purpose as well for my being handicapped. In time God may show me what it is.

I have no quarrel with God for the things going on in my life. Like Mary, *"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior"* (Luke 1:46,47). My life is in God's hands, and I can safely leave it there. I still think life with God is an adventure!

NEW TOPIC. Have you read the book Peace Like a River by Leif Enger? If not, let me highly recommend it to you. I received the book as a gift last Christmas and have read it three times – so far! The book was on *The New York Times'* best sellers list for months. It is a novel, extremely well written by a good storyteller, and so interesting! I'd be glad to hear how you like it.

Wishing you God's blessings now and in the new year.

COMMENTS ON THE LETTER. The specialist that I saw at Mt. Sinai confirmed my doctor's diagnosis as well as its rarity. He said in his long career he had only about a dozen patients with PLS. A year later I was tested again by my doctor and examined by the specialist. Both stood by their original diagnoses. My arms, hands, and fingers are fully involved in the disease, along with my legs and tongue. I knew they would be affected when my 4th and 5th fingers on both hands began to tingle with the same sensation that I had noticed much earlier in my 4th and 5th toes on both feet.

I said that God may show me the purpose for my being handicapped physically. Well, he has! I am convinced that God wanted me to write what I had learned about him and from him, and that my writings were to be made available to the world through the Internet. For the past three years I have been writing and for the past two weeks my website has been functional. The message I have been given to proclaim requires that I be elderly and handicapped in some way in order for it to be believable. God does all things well!

There is another purpose that I can see: and that is, that I might understand from a different angle the impact that the incarnation can have on our lives. I have always had the utmost respect for the incarnation, which I limited to the birth of the eternal Son of God as a human baby named Jesus. I knew, of course, that Jesus remained God Incarnate (God in the flesh) throughout his earthly life, including on the cross; that everywhere Jesus was, there was God. Until my stay at Burke, however, I had never linked that powerful word with something that we could experience, at least in part. That realization, which was simply a new point of view, is what filled me with awe in the hospital and gives purpose to my life today. An obvious difference between Jesus and us is that he was both God and a man, while we who believe in him are humans in whom the triune God lives. But we must never underestimate the latter! Just think: everywhere we go, God goes too, because God is inside of us. If we can grasp that truth, then we are ready to explore the lifestyle that Jesus lived, a lifestyle that we can choose to live as well. I'm calling it ...

LIVING INCARNATELY. Meditating on this concept all week has been so fruitful! Now I see that this kind of living has three components:

1. Placement.
2. Purpose.
3. Proper attitude and behavior.

The verse I used to start my letter shows the first two parts as it applies to Jesus: *Christ Jesus came into the world (Placement) to save sinners (Purpose)*. Paul revealed in many of his letters that he traveled about (Placement) with a goal in mind: he wanted people to be saved (Purpose). As for the proper attitude and behavior, let's look at Paul's description in 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1 – *So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God – even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.*

And what was the example of Christ that Paul followed? He described it so beautifully in Philippians 2:5-8 – *Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very form of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!*

From these verses, let's see how those who live incarnately think and behave:

– Like Paul, they are aware of God at all times, so that whether they are eating, drinking, making tents, shopping, cleaning, teaching or preaching, they do it all for the glory of God.

– They care very much for – and are comfortable with – all sorts of people, especially wanting them to be saved. They want to present Christ to others, to draw people to God.

– With this end in mind, they are careful about their behavior, putting the good of others ahead of their own desires. They are not perfect, though! Jesus alone is in that category.

– They are humble, obedient servants who do not flaunt their credentials or feel themselves better than those they serve. They mingle and blend in with people without forgetting who they are or their purpose.

People who live like this play a powerful role in promoting the kingdom of God. Philip was such a person (Acts 8:26-40). God sent him southward on the road toward Gaza (Placement) where he met an Ethiopian government official who was on his way home from a visit to Jerusalem (Purpose: to tell this man about Jesus). What I applaud is the humility Philip displayed when approaching and teaching this man who was different from him in many ways. No wonder the story ended in the man's conversion and baptism!

The married couple, Priscilla and Aquila, in an incident recorded in Acts 18:18-28, displayed the same characteristics. It was not by accident that they found themselves in the synagogue in Ephesus the day Apollos from Alexandria preached (Placement). Realizing that there were things he needed to learn (Purpose: teach him), they invited Apollos to their house after the meeting. There, in private, they perfected his message. Apollos was very receptive to their kind corrections. When he left to continue his ministry elsewhere, it was with their blessing.

Paul not only described the proper attitudes and behavior for God's servants, he lived according to what he wrote. That's why churches sprang up everywhere he went, even if he only stayed a couple weeks. First, God was in the area in a general sense. Then, directed by the Spirit, Paul and several other workers came, bringing God to the area in an incarnational sense. Next they found local believers, stirred up their faith with solid teaching and encouragement, and then together they presented Jesus to anyone who would listen, with varied results. Many people's lives were changed permanently as God came to live in them, too. Whether they believed the message or not, no one ever forgot the time when Paul and his team were in town! (As I was typing this, I felt as though I were describing a Billy Graham campaign! Certainly Dr. Graham lives incarnately.)

When we moved to Drum Hill, as you can tell from the letter, I was sure God was involved in the change. We had been there only a few days when a resident said to me, "We don't talk about God enough in this place." Knowing that God was not only in Drum Hill but also had moved in along with me, I smiled at her and thought, "That's about to change!" And it did! If you read my essay, "A Room With a View," you will see some of what happened there. That essay also tells of my transfer to Sky View Rehabilitation and Health Care Center, where I have lived for 21 months now as a resident of the nursing home. I fit in with the others; I am one of them; we all need help!

A kind nurse said to me a few days ago, "It must be hard for you. You must get angry at times. You must wish you could do some of the things you used to do." I thought a few seconds and then, to her surprise, shook my head no. I have no regrets. I look forward to living incarnately until the Lord calls me Home. Join me, will you?