

“The Irony of the Incarnation”

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

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The first time I was introduced to O’Henry’s beloved story, “The Gift of the Magi,” was in a high school English class. It was presented as an illustration of the literary concept of irony. For good reason, I would add. Given that the standard definition of “irony” is a situation that lands in a way that is opposite to what was naturally expected, “typically for humorous or emphatic effect,” then it would be hard to find a more perfect literary example. As O’Henry wrote, there were two possessions in which Della and Jim “both took a mighty pride”: Jim’s heirloom gold watch and Della’s flowing hair. On Christmas Eve, Jim buys a gift to benefit his wife’s hair. Della buys a gift to benefit her husband’s watch. But in order to buy the combs for the hair, Jim must sell his watch. And in order to buy the chain for the watch, Della must sell her hair. It is a perfectly symmetrical plot reversal, perfectly crafted irony.

For many years I just kind of assumed that every English student in America must have learned about irony through the lens of this beautifully tragic story. It took me a while to realize that my teachers might have chosen this particular story not only based on its literary merit, but also because one William Sydney Porter, who was born and raised in my own hometown of Greensboro, North Carolina, would later adopt the pseudonym “O’Henry” when he started writing short stories. I might add that he began using that pen name while he was in prison for embezzling funds from his employer; a fact that is itself ironic, is it not, in that a beautiful, heartwarming story of Christmas love was written by a felon doing hard time in Ohio.

If that takes you a minute to process, join the club. Those of a certain age will remember a time when we all got a little confused about irony thanks to Alanis Morissette, who sang about irony being *“like rain on your wedding day. It’s a free ride when you’ve already paid. It’s the good advice that you just didn’t take.”*

“Isn’t it ironic? Don’t you think?”

No, I don’t think. And neither would my Greensboro English teachers. Rain on your wedding day is just a weather report. A free ride when you’ve already paid is just bad timing. True irony has two elements. First, there is a **reversal** of some kind. Circumstances flip so that the result is the opposite of what we saw coming.

Secondly -- and this is very important -- that flip, that situational reversal, has to **mean something**. It is more than coincidence. It is an unexpected turn that points to a discovery or reveal a truth.

If that is our definition, then nothing fits the bill more perfectly than the incarnation of Christ. From the Latin verb “incarno,” which means “to make into flesh,” an “incarnation” is the miraculous embodiment of divinity in human form. The evangelist John explained it this way, that *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh*



*and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."*¹

It is, we have to admit, quite the reversal:

- for divinity to become human;
- for immortality to become mortal;
- for the Creator of the world to become a creature in the world;
- for the light of the world to descend into the darkness of the world.

It is not at all what we would expect. What we would expect is for a holy and righteous God to stay removed, keep some distance, remain untarnished and unsullied by the mess of our human world. It is the ultimate irony that all-knowing, all-powerful ruler of the cosmos would take on fragile, fallible flesh and dwell among us.

But little babe in the manger, even when he grows up, never stops living into this great irony. He never stops defying expectations, never stops flipping tables, disrupting and reversing the normal order of things. He will go on to teach his disciples difficult lessons... that in the world he is recreating "*the last will be first, and the first will be last...*"² that "*whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave.*"³ He will tell a rich young man with many possessions that, if he really wants to be perfect, he should sell his things, give his money to the poor, and trust that his treasure is in heaven.⁴ He tells us that when we are hit, we should turn the other cheek... that we should love our enemies, not just our friends... and that the greatest wisdom often looks like foolishness to the world. Again and again we are taught that the Kingdom of God loves ironic reversals, and that the mission of the babe born in Bethlehem is to turn a broken world upside down, to flip the script so that the most important things can rise to the top -- things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

However, as I said before, an occurrence is not truly ironic unless it means something... unless it reveals a truth or helps us to see the world differently. At the end of "The Gift of the Magi," we discover that the love between Della and Jim was not strained or burdened by the apparent foiling of their gifts. On the contrary, once the gifts were rendered moot, it was undeniably apparent that the love Della and Jim shared was not dependent on things they had or things they gave. This was the revelation. This was the ultimate truth, that when the material benefit of the gifts was taken away, the sacrificial, selfless love that had motivated their giving was left to stand alone – unblemished, undiminished, victorious.

The same is true with the irony of Christ's incarnation. Why would a God of pure holiness enter into an impure, unholy world? Why would an immortal, all-powerful God make himself mortal and fallible, subject to all the weaknesses of humanity, including the ultimate weakness of death? What is the truth that is

¹ John 1:1-2, 14.

² Matthew 20:16.

³ Matthew 20:26-27.

⁴ Matthew 19:21-22.

revealed? It is the same question asked by the psalmist, who looked up at the night sky and wondered why in the world the God of the entire cosmos cared at all about us. *“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established,”* he wrote, *“what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?”* The psalmist then notes the great irony: *“Yet you have made us a little lower than God, and crowned us with glory and honor...”* That truth is so amazing, so unexpected, so unbelievable, that one can only respond with grateful praise. *“O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”*

The meaning of the incarnation, and the great revelation of its irony, is that our Creator loves us so much, so completely, that God would give up every distinction, every benefit and advantage of being God, just to be with us and lead us to the path that leads to righteousness. Instead of being lost in sin, we are reclaimed in love. Instead of being subject to death, we are given everlasting life. To use the words of the apostle Paul, our perishable bodies are raised imperishable. Our mortal bodies are wrapped in a garment of immortality. Death is swallowed up in victory. God’s grand reversal makes our reversal possible.

In 1791, the founder of the Methodist movement John Wesley was lying on his deathbed in London. Prominent clergy gathered around his bedside, joining family members and his longtime housekeeper Betsy Ritchie. They were there to pay homage to a man who had, over the course of a lifetime, preached thousands of sermons in thousands of churches in England, Ireland, Scotland, and the American colonies. He had advocated passionately for the abolition of slavery. In so many ways, he had faithfully abided by a mantra that is still widely attributed to him: *“Do all the good you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you can.”*

As his final breath drew near, his words became infrequent, and increasingly difficult to understand. In her memoir, Betsy Ritchie said that those who knew him best gathered close, but even they were not able to understand his murmuring. And then, out of the blue, he spoke up with strength and clarity. *“The best of all,”* Wesley said, *“is God with us.”* I continue now in Ritchie’s own words... *“And then, as if to assert the faithfulness of our promise-keeping [God] and comfort the hearts of his weeping friends, lifting up his dying arm in token of victory and raising his feeble voice with a holy triumph not to be expressed, again [he] repeated the heart-reviving words, “The best of all is, God is with us!”⁵*

The breath that made this final profession of faith turned out to be his last.

This great irony of Christmas – when an all-powerful God humbles himself completely, even to the extent of being born a fragile, peasant baby, while you and I, the lowly, fallible, imperfect people we are, are lifted up and given a gift we have in no way earned, a chance to be drawn out of the darkness and into the light – is not just a reversal of fortune or fate. It is something that reveals to us and bestows upon us an indelible, irresistible message of God’s steadfast love. It is the surprise twist that no one saw coming. And what does it mean? It means everything. But the best, the best of all, is that God really is with us.

⁵ The Journal of John Wesley, ed., Percy Livingstone Parker, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press), 419.