The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

In the midst of all the glitter and the hype and the nostalgia that surround Christmas, we can lose sight of the deep mystery that we celebrate each year: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

Christmas is many things to us, some intimate and priceless, some stressful and enervating. For many of us, it is a unique time with family and wrapped in warm memories of many Christmases past. For others, it is a break from the usual competitive and hostile world, a time which brings out the best in the human spirit and fosters giving and receiving and good will. For others, Christmas is a period of relentless demands and draining expectations. For still others, it is a heightening of loneliness and a more acute awareness of the desperate gap between aspirations and reality.

But for all of us, all of the human family, young and old, content and dissatisfied, believing and unbelieving, fed and hungry, hopeful and despairing, the deep mystery underlying our annual celebration of Christmas is the same: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

“How shall I tell of this great mystery?” asks a portion of Orthodox Christmas vespers. “He who is without flesh becomes incarnate; the Word puts on a body; the Invisible is seen; He whom no hand can touch is handled; and He who has no beginning now begins to be. The Son of God becomes the Son of man; Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever.”

This is a mystery we cannot fathom: that the infinite God became a finite human being, that the one beyond space and time began to live within those limitations, that the Divine became the human, ennobling and sanctifying forever the sinful and broken mass we know as humanity. We cannot grasp that. We cannot take in the radically transforming nature of the Incarnation, that the Word becoming flesh in some way infused all that is visible with a new dignity, a new way of being, a new relationship with its eternal and invisible and infinite Creator.

C.S. Lewis wrote, “In the Incarnation, God the Son takes the body and human soul of Jesus, and, through that, the whole environment of nature, all the creaturely predicament, into his own being. So that ‘He came down from Heaven’ can almost be transposed into ‘Heaven drew earth up into it,’ and locality, limitation, sleep, sweat, footsore weariness, frustration, pain, doubt
and death, are, from before all worlds, known by God from within” (Letters to Malcolm).

This insight of Lewis’ sounds very much like that tenet of faith articulated in one of the ancient creeds of the Church, the Athanasian Creed, also known as Quinque Vult. In trying to make sense of the tensions inherent in the paradox of the Incarnation, that Jesus’ two natures, the divine and the human, are manifest in the person of Jesus, who is one, it declares, “One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the Manhood into God.” In other words, a more helpful way of absorbing the mystery of the Incarnation is to regard it not so much as Jesus being pulled down to the human level as Jesus drawing humanity and all of creation up to the Divine level, infusing it with a new dignity and a new unending life and a transforming unity with its Creator.

That is why Jesus can say, “As long as you did it to one of the least of these, my brethren, you did it to me.” That is what gives power to Jesus’ metaphor: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Abide in me, and I in you.” That is the mystery that underlies the new commandment that Jesus gave to us, “Love one another as I have loved you.” That is the reason that the Eucharist is one of the prime Christian sacramental practices, endemic to the followers of Jesus from the very beginning. In receiving into ourselves the consecrated body and blood of Christ, we proclaim the unity of God and human and of all humanity with each other, first revealed in the mystery of the Incarnation.

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” That is a mystery we can never fully comprehend. That is why we need to celebrate its reality year after year, over and over, as its transforming proclamation slowly seeps its way into our lives. Whether we approach this year’s celebration with eagerness or cynicism, hope or apathy, or nostalgia for days gone by, let us open ourselves to the deep ongoing mystery reiterated for us each Christmas: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

John 1:1-14