

THE FITNESS OF THE INCARNATION

In the stillness of a winter's night, more than nineteen hundred years ago, over the cold, bleak plains of Bethlehem there floated the voices of an angel choir singing of the birth of a new-born King in the city of David. That little Babe of whom the angels sang is none other than the Eternal God—God born of the Father from all eternity, man from the moment of the Incarnation. The Eternal God took human flesh and was born in time in order that man, the heir of a lost paradise, might regain his inheritance. Absolutely speaking, it was not necessary for God to repair human nature fallen from primitive justice, since there is no obligation incumbent upon the Creator of redeeming the creature; or, even if God willed to redeem mankind there were other ways known to omnipotence by which the same effect could have been obtained—either by pardoning the fault without requiring satisfaction or of exacting only such satisfaction as could be given by man. But once God willed to demand condign satisfaction, that is, satisfaction fully commensurate with the fault, then the Incarnation was needful for the human race. For no mere man was able to satisfy for the sin of all mankind, since mere man is something less than the whole multitude of mankind¹ and also because sin has a certain infinity since it is an offense against the infinite God.² Hence, it was requisite for one to make satisfaction who was at once man—since satisfaction was expected of man—and God—for only the infinite God is capable of satisfying for an infinite offense. Now, God willed to exact perfect satisfaction, and therefore in His mercy He decreed the Incarnation, for in no other way could the sin of the world be expiated. But God, all-wise and all-perfect, would not have so willed if there was not a fitness or appropriateness in the incarnation of obtaining the end. The reason of this fitness can be looked for: (1) on the part of God; (2) on the part of the nature assumed; (3) on the part of man.

To take human flesh was not in any manner unbecoming to God. God is all-perfect and the immeasurable riches of His invisible perfections exceed the grasp of any finite intelligence. It would seem most fitting that the invisible perfections of God

¹ St. Thomas, *Contra Gentes*, L. IV. C. 54.

² *Summa*, 3a, q. a. 1, ad lam.

should be made known to the human intellect by the things that are visible. For this end was the whole world made. "The invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made."³ The immensity, harmony and grandeur of the visible universe manifest in some degree the infinite wisdom and power of the Master-hand that formed it and shapes its destiny. "The heavens show forth the glory of God and the firmament declareth the work of His hands. Day to day uttereth speech, and night to night showeth knowledge."⁴ Now, in the mystery of the Incarnation the perfections of God are manifested in the most excellent manner, especially His wisdom, His power, His justice and mercy—His wisdom because He thus found a way to pay a debt most difficult to discharge; His power, for there is no greater or more wonderful work than for God to become Incarnate; His justice, because "on man's fall he caused the tyrant to be overcome by none other than man, and yet He did not snatch man forcibly from death:"⁵ His mercy because He could not bear to see the desolation of His creatures and therefore wished to extend His hand to comfort them.

But not only do we see the divine attributes in the mystery of the Incarnation; we find in these very attributes the reason why this mystery was accomplished. When the Angelic Doctor wishes to prove that it was fitting to God to become incarnate he bases his argument on the infinite goodness of God. That, in general, is fitting to a thing which belongs to it by its nature. Thus it is fitting for man to reason, because that is conformable to his rational nature. In like manner, it befits the nature of a wild field flower to diffuse its perfume on the surrounding air; so, too, does it belong to the nature of a meadow-lark to greet the new-born morn with song. Now, the very nature of God is goodness; He is the supreme good. Whatever, then, belongs to the nature of goodness befits God. But it belongs to the nature of goodness to communicate itself to others. It was fitting, therefore, to God, the supreme good, to communicate Himself in the most supreme manner to the creature, and He did this by uniting Himself to human nature in a union more intimate than which cannot be conceived."⁶

³ St. Paul, Rom. I, 20.

⁴ Ps. XVIII, 12.

⁵ St. John Damascene, De Fide Orthodoxa.

⁶ Summa, 3a, q. 1, a. 1.

God united Himself to create human nature. If the proper condition of human nature is attentively examined, there appears in it a special fitness to be assumed by the Son of God. Since man is a composite of a spiritual and corporeal nature, and, as it were, occupies the borderland of both natures, all creation seems to be interested in whatever pertains to the salvation of man. The inferior corporeal creatures are for the use of man and are in some way subject to him. The higher spiritual creation, the angelic, has in common with man the attainment of the last end. It would seem fitting then that the universal cause of all creatures should take to Himself in unity of person, that creature whereby He is in touch with all creation.⁷ Moreover, sin in man admits of expiation, because man's choice is not immovably fixed on its object, but from good may be turned towards evil, and from evil brought back to good. An angel, on the contrary, has a fixed discernment of things through simple intuition; and as he is fixed in his apprehension, so is he fixed also in his choice. Hence an angel either does not choose evil at all, or takes to it irrevocably, and his sin admits of no expiation. Since, therefore, the expiation of sin was the chief cause of the Incarnation, it was more fitting for human nature than for angelic nature to be assumed by God.⁸

God became incarnate to take away the sins of the world and thereby to place within the reach of man the end for which he was created. There were other ways known to God by which the same effect could have been obtained, but there was not a more "fitting way of healing our misery." In order that man may attain that perfect happiness for which he was created, God requires of him faith, hope and charity. Now, man is assisted in the practice of these necessary virtues by the Incarnation of the Son of God. In faith, for through the mystery of the Incarnation God dwells with him and instructs him in the way that leads to eternal life. Since the perfect happiness of man consists in a knowledge of God beyond the natural capacity of a created intelligence, there was needed in this life a certain foretaste of this knowledge to guide him to the fulness of it. This foretaste is by faith. But this knowledge whereby a man is guided to his last end ought to be of the highest certitude: to obtain which perfect certitude man needed to be instructed by God Himself

⁷ *Contra Gentes*, L. IV, C. 55.

⁸ *ibidem*.

made man.⁹ St. Augustine says: "In order that man might journey more trustfully towards the truth, the Truth itself, the Son of God, having assumed human nature, established and founded faith."¹⁰ (In hope, which is thereby increased and strengthened.) By the fact of God having willed to unite human nature to Himself in unity of person, it is shown to men that man can be intellectually united to God and see Him face to face. It was, therefore, fitting for God to assume human nature, thereby to life up man's hope to happiness. Consequently, since the Incarnation men have aspired more after happiness.¹¹ "I am come that they may have life and may have it more abundantly."¹² (In charity, for in this mystery we see the love of God for men.) Because the perfect happiness of man consists in the enjoyment of God, it was necessary that the heart of man should be disposed to desire this enjoyment. We know that the desire of enjoying anything springs from the love of it. Therefore it was requisite for man, making his way to happiness, to be induced to love God. Nothing, however, induces us to love any one so much as the experience of his love for us. Now, God's love for man could not have been more clearly shown than by the mystery of the Incarnation.¹³ "What greater cause is there of the Lord's coming than to show God's love for us?"¹⁴ Besides the theological virtues, man needed to be instructed in the moral virtues; otherwise he could not attain that happiness which God has prepared for him. Before the coming of Christ man received his instruction in the practice of virtue from teachers who were often at fault, for even the holiest of men are but fallible. But through the Incarnation, Christ became the teacher of men, He the God-Man, is an infallible guide and a living example. "Man who might be seen was not to be followed; but God was to be followed, who could not be seen. And, therefore, God was made man, that He who might be seen by men, and whom men might follow, might be shown to man."¹⁵ Finally, by the mystery of the Incarnation we are made partakers of the divine nature, for Christ in uniting Himself to our nature communicated to it the

⁹ *Contra Gentes*, L. IVC. 55.

¹⁰ *De Civitate Dei*, XI.

¹¹ *Contra Gentes*, loc. cit. sup.

¹² St. John, XIII, 15.

¹³ *Contra Gentes*, loc. cit.

¹⁴ St. Aug. *De Catech. Rudibus*, IV.

¹⁵ St. Aug., *De Nativitate Domini*.

full participation of the divinity which is the true bliss of man and the final goal of human life.¹⁶ "God was made man, that man might be made god."¹⁷

Since the work of the Incarnation sprang from the immensity of divine charity, and since so much good accrued to man because of this work, we may wonder why God deferred His coming for so many centuries. To this we must answer that God, in His infinite wisdom and beneficent charity, decreed that most fitting time so that the coming of the King might redound to the greater good of the subject. "When the fulness of time was come, God sent His Son made of a woman, made under the law."¹⁸ God did not send His Son at the beginning of the human race, for the work of the Incarnation was principally ordained as a remedy for sin, and medicine is given only to the sick. "They that are in health need not a physician but they that are ill. . . . For I am come not to call the just but sinners."¹⁹ Nor was it fitting that the Incarnation should be deferred until the end of the world. Then, perhaps, the remedy might come too late. If it had been deferred so long, the perversion of the human race, which under the natural and under the written law always went on increasing, would have come to such a pass that all knowledge of and reverence for God and all regard for morality would have totally disappeared from the earth. But when the types and prophecies of the law had been fulfilled, when the heart of man had been sufficiently prepared to profit by the Word, then God sent His Son to dwell with men and to lead them back to Him.

Human reason, enlightened by Divine Revelation, may comprehend the fitness of the incarnation of a Divine Person in the plan of redemption; created intelligence may see something of the awful grandeur, of the infinite wisdom and of the immense charity of the Eternal God as manifested in this mystery. But human reason cannot hope to enjoy an adequate understanding of so great an act of God's love and power; to the finite intellect it must always remain the mystery "unsearchable . . . hidden from eternity in God."²⁰

—Sylvester Considine, O. P.

¹⁶ Summa, 3a, q. 1, a. 2.

¹⁷ St. Aug., De Nativitate Domini.

¹⁸ St. Paul, Rom. I, 20.

¹⁹ St. Matt., IX, 12, 13.

²⁰ St. Paul, Eph., III, 8-9.