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THE BALL AND THE CRIB

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FOR while all things were in quiet silence and the night was in the midst of her course, Thy Almighty Word leapt down from heaven from Thy Royal Throne."¹

It may well be that this inspired prophecy was first uttered by a direct ancestor of our Divine Lord, for the book of Wisdom has been attributed to Solomon of the royal line of David. However that may be, centuries after the voicing of the prophecy and about ninety years after its actual fulfillment, St. John, illumined by the inspiring flame of the Holy Spirit, burst forth into that paean which has echoed and reechoed down the corridor of time and space for two thousand years. Daily, in the Mass and at the sound of Angelus bells, the Christian world bends its knee in grateful recognition of a tremendous fact: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt amongst us."²

Until the factual point was proven in the year one, it was as if some artful master of sculpture had begun to work on what he intended to be his masterpiece, and having proceeded as far as the pedestal, felt that he could not even begin in the delineation of that which was to crown the base of his work. The actualization of the statue remained a hope, a desire, an ideal. For centuries people gazed with awe and admiration upon this beautiful pedestal, the while their secret hearts wondered and speculated as to what precisely the sculptor had in mind when he first took chisel in hand. Then came the day when this same master in art with a stroke of supernatural genius created the masterpiece worthy of the pedestal. It was a masterpiece of flesh

¹ Wisdom 18, 14-15.

² John, 1, 14.

and blood and bone—but from whose eyes there shone the light of God, from whose lips there poured forth words of divine authority, and from whose heart there flowed divine love wherewith the world was to be enkindled into a new and superior life; His hands possessed the healing touch of God and His feet were swift to the poor, the humble and the sinner.

The stupendous fact of the fulfillment of the prophecies is told in a simple yet tremendously effective manner by St. John in his Gospel. "In the beginning was the Word," he wrote with his aging hand, "and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."³ "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt amongst us."⁴ It is sheer folly to assert that a human person of his own ability could have penned such sublime words in the recording of an event which had occurred only ninety years before, within the memory of living men. The phrase has all the earmarks of a divine movement behind a human agent. John simply stated the fact that "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt amongst us." It is the "good tidings of great joy" chanted by the angelic choirs on the bleak hillsides of Judea; it is the Evangel in a sentence, the whole Gospel in epitome.

Rivers of ink have flowed in description, denunciation, praise and proof of the Incarnation. Souls have been given the means of salvation and bodies will resurrect to a new life in virtue of the Incarnation. Faith, hope, and charity are enhanced and the natural virtues acquire a deeper significance; human nature has been apotheosized in the Person of Jesus Christ; earth has flowered into a paradise of hope—all because of the Incarnation. It is the pivot upon which our civilization turns. The ancients hoped for it and since the year one millions have placed their hope in it. It is the peak of human history, an advantageous point, from which the mind and heart of man are enabled to view life and happiness in terms of the eternal. "Happy fault" whose glorious Redeemer was the God-Man,—so sings the Church. In the Incarnation, Supreme Goodness is the adequately proportionate answer to the fall and the almost insuperable evil it entailed.

Let us mentally reconstruct the scene of the Nativity, when for the first time the human senses of an Incarnate Good took cognizance of the world of men He had come to save. Luke is the sole Evangelist who writes of that unforgettable night when Christ was born amidst men unconscious of their Saviour. "The night was in the

³ John 1, 1.

⁴ John 1, 1.

midst of her course," when to the sound of angelic harmonies the Word which had been incarnated nine months before was brought forth, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in a manger. Here was to all external appearances but a little mite of helplessness, a little Jewish baby, but in Whom the Messianic hope found its fulfillment, in Whom Abraham rejoiced, for he saw His day and was glad. The Christ, the Mercy and Truth of God, "emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man."⁵ And His name is Emmanuel, God with us. This thought has been beautifully expressed in verse:

Mercy and Truth chose midnight's hour to meet;
 Rightousness in a stable kept her tryst,
 With "Peace on earth," the one the other kist.
 Out upon time's crude floor there crept a Child,
 Alpha and Omega. They it was that smiled
 Out of His own into His mother's eyes

Peace was established once again between the Father and His erring children. Peace of soul, peace of mind and heart, peace that comes from faith, the peace of Christmastide, all these were effected by the Incarnation, with this provision, however, that men acknowledge Christ and His mission.

The birth of Christ as an historical fact is too firmly founded in truth to be gainsaid even by the most blatant rationalist or skeptical agnostic. They admit that a man who was called Christ was born, lived and died; but that a Jewish baby, born some two thousand years ago, was God,—that is a "hard saying" and they will not accept it. To these hard-shelled pagans, steeped in an irrational prejudice, we but present the fact of the Incarnation. We deliberately decline to contest the issue against the arms of irrationality, especially when their doctrines, (for they have doctrines), are but a bundle of defensive justifications of an indefensible flight from God Who is the author of reason. We shall rather concern ourselves with those Christians who professing to follow Christ nevertheless live their lives in a way opposed to His mandates and example; we direct our exhortation to those who, believing in the Incarnation and all that it implies, have relegated it to a place of trifling importance in their lives.

Christmas for some is not Christ's Mass anymore. The anniversary of Christ's birth has become a gala occasion for indulging the natural man to the detriment of his supernatural life. But what is

⁵ Philippians, 2, 7.

demanded is a grateful appreciation of the meaning that Christ's coming has for us; our daily lives must manifest that appreciation.

For the majority of us Christmas is filled with joy and peace because it commemorates the Incarnation, in which God did not disdain to take on the figure and form of flesh "on account of us and on account of our salvation." Indeed, He did not stop at the Crib but went further to Calvary and the Cross to prove His love for us.

Catholics, to whom God has given His gift of the true faith, see Christ Himself in the small white Host uplifted for adoration on Christmas Day. And they rejoice, for He has come unto His own. To be with the children of men is His delight, but His desire goes deeper. He wishes to find a resting place within our souls on that day above all days through Holy Communion. For those who do receive Him in the spirit in which He came, the world loses its attractions; they are presented with the legacy of divine sonship by adoption. Even those who do not admit that a link has been forged between heaven and earth by the Incarnation must acknowledge that "since Christ came into the world, there has no longer been a world without Christ. He entered into it like a dye, the stain of which no amount of washing will remove; like a drop of God's blood which remains ineffaceably there."⁶

Finally the Incarnation has conferred upon "men of good will" the freedom of the sons of God. May we possess this freedom of the son of God and may the influence of the Incarnation in our lives save us from the spirit which Edna St. Vincent Millay laments in her "To Jesus on His Birthday."

For this Your Mother sweated in the cold;
 For this You bled upon the bitter tree,
 A yard of tinsel ribbon bought and sold,
 A paper wreath, a day at home for me.
 The merry bells ring out, the people kneel.
 Up goes the man of God before the crowd,
 With voice of honey and with eyes of steel
 He drones Your humble Gospel to the crowd.
 Nobody listens. Less than the wind that blows
 Are all Your words to us, You died to save.
 O Prince of Peace, O Sharon's dewy Rose,
 How mute You lie within Your grave;
 The stone that angels rolled with tears,
 Is back upon Your mouth these thousand years.

⁶ *Burden of Belief* by Ida Coudenhove.