

## DECREE OF THE LORD

**“Y**OU ARE MY SON; this day have I begotten you.” The Lord of creation and eternity speaks through the mouth of his spokesman David. David, king of Israel and singer of psalms, lived almost 3,000 years ago; yet his prophetic words are recalled as often as the birth of Christ is recalled, for they form the Introit of the Christmas Midnight Mass. These famous words are the theme of the second psalm, one which the commentators call messianic as being prophetic of God’s Anointed One of the Eternal Testament.

The whole psalm considers the conspiracy of nations against the Lord, the Lord’s reaction, and concludes with an exhortation to the rulers to acknowledge the supremacy of the Lord.

Why do the nations rage  
and the people devise vain things?  
The kings of the earth rise up,  
and the princes conspire together  
against the Lord and his Christ:  
“Let us break their bonds asunder  
and cast away their chains from us!”  
But he who dwells in heaven laughs at them;  
the Lord derides them.  
Then in anger he speaks to them;  
he terrifies them in his wrath:  
“I myself have set up my king  
on Sion, my holy mountain.”  
I will proclaim the decree of the Lord:  
The Lord said to me, “You are my son;  
this day have I begotten you.  
Ask of me and I will give you  
the nations for an inheritance  
and the ends of the earth for your possession.  
You shall rule them with an iron rod;  
you shall shatter them like an earthen dish.”

And now, O kings, give heed;  
take warning, you rulers of the earth.  
Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice before him;  
with trembling pay homage to him,  
Lest he be angry and you perish from the way,  
when his anger blazes suddenly.  
Happy are all who take refuge in him!

David's song applies very well to the problems we face today. Life is a problem; problems arise one after another; in endless procession they come; the solution of one uncovers another to take its place. Conflicts involve kings, presidents and rulers; they range all the way from international crises to conflicts within a country, conflicts within an individual family, even to interior conflicts which oppress a particular individual. Today's people don't need preachers or philosophers to remind them of their problems and struggles. They have television, radio and newspapers constantly dinning troubles into their minds. Today's people don't want reminders, they want solutions.

What is the solution to every problem confronting us? It's simple; listen to David the psalmist: return to God, "serve the Lord with fear, . . . with trembling pay homage to him . . . lest you perish." This is, however, easier said than done. Pious platitudes often catch our ear, but rarely do they help us in struggling with problems. It's a far cry from reading a cookbook to producing a light fluffy cake, or from reading the "how to" manuals to making cabinets. The answer then is not to be found in this part of David's psalm but in the earlier part: "You are my son; this day have I begotten you." God the Father is speaking of his Son, the Son begotten from all eternity, Who always was, is now, and always will be. But his speaking is in a human fashion for he is referring to "this day," the day when divine love came to men as a Visible Man; when divine help came to men as a Helpless Man; when God himself came to men as God-Man. "You are my son; this day have I begotten you." "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son" for our salvation (*John 3:16*). This Son so loved us that he permitted the scourging and hanging on a cross of his own body for us. "Greater love than this no man has than that he lay down his life for his friends" (*John 15:13*). Yet God does not ask us to die for Him, although in a certain way He does ask us to lay down our lives for Him. He does not ask that we go out and be martyred tomorrow (although it may happen); what he asks of us is a spiritual martyrdom. He

asks us to practice virtue, and virtue is difficult to acquire; He asks us to live His law of love and this requires a laying down, a laying aside of sinful habits. He has given only two commandments:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. And the second is like it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets (*Mt. 22:37-40*).

But He does not ask the impossible. He does not ask us to do anything beyond our capacities which are enlarged by the gift of His grace. What the Lord commands us seems to be hard and burdensome. But, as St. Augustine reminds us, a thing is not hard to do when the one who commands it helps us to accomplish what is commanded.

"This day have I begotten you." This day has Christ come to earth to live among men; to live as a man in order to show men how to become gods. In a very real way, this day He begot us too, for it is also written in the psalms: "I have said: You are gods and all sons of the Most High" (*Ps. 81:6*). And this is the point which St. Paul brings out in his epistle to the Galatians, used in the Mass of the Sunday within the Octave of Christmas:

As long as the heir is a child, he differs in no way from a slave, though he is the master of all, but he is under guardians and stewards until the time set by his father. So we too, when we were children, were enslaved under the elements of the world. But when the fullness of time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts crying, "Abba, Father." So that he is no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, an heir also through God (*Gal. 4:1-7*).

So that, not only is God Father of the Christ; He is by His own Spirit of adoption our Father since it is by His Spirit that we become His sons.

And St. Paul elaborates this point further in his epistle to the Romans:

For whoever are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. Now you have not received a spirit of bondage so as to be again in fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons, by virtue of which we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself gives testimony to our spirit that we are sons of God. But if we are sons, we are heirs also; heirs indeed of God

and joint heirs with Christ, provided, however, we suffer with him that we may also be glorified with him (*Rom.* 8:14-17). We ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in hope were we saved. But hope that is seen is not hope. For how can a man hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. But in like manner the Spirit also helps our weakness. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself pleads for us with unutterable groanings. And he who searches the hearts knows what the Spirit desires, that he pleads for the saints according to God. Now we know that for those who love God all things work together unto good, for those who, according to his purpose, are saints through his call. For those whom he has foreknown he has also predestined to become conformed to the image of his Son, that he should be the firstborn among many brethren. And those whom he has predestined, them he has also called; and those whom he has called, them he has also justified, and those whom he has justified, them he has also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who has not spared even his own Son but has delivered him for us all, how can he fail to grant us also all things with him? (*Rom.* 8:23-32).

We too, are the sons of God! We have been begotten by the Almighty Father. "The Spirit himself pleads for us with unutterable groanings." "If God is for us, who is against us? He who has not spared even his own Son but has delivered him for us all, how can he fail to grant us also all things with him?" And since we have been begotten by the Almighty Father, we have a claim on, we have a right to the divine assistance and divine strength. But divine strength is not given to us until we are fully aware of our own weakness and know that the strength we receive is indeed his gift and not the reward of our own excellence. This, then, requires something that Christian writers have discoursed about for centuries, the foundation for all the other virtues; this requires excising the cancer of pride and transplanting in its place the sound tissue of humility. And in this is the story of Christmas, for this is the story of Christ, the story of Mary, the story of Joseph. And since these are our models, this must be the story of each living Christian.

Humility will reveal to us our proper place in relation to God's creation: more important than other created things; less important than other men; nothingness in relation to the infinity and majesty of the Triune God. Humility will reveal to us our strong points as well as weak. It will give us a frame of reference against which we can make judgments regarding

our responses to problems facing us. With humility, we can perceive how much of the response can come only from God, how much we must provide with our own natural talents and capacities. With humility we can properly assess our strength and perceive which difficulties should be overcome first; then by the removal of lesser difficulties prepare the way for the removal of the greater. Constant exercise of the virtue will eliminate a number of problems which might otherwise arise, and will keep us in close contact with God with the resulting preservation of our interior spiritual peace.

Obviously then, we must acquire this Christmas virtue of humility. How is this done? By going to its font and tapping the flow at its source, by going to Christ Whose coming we recall in the liturgy, by becoming one with Him in the Eucharist. And we must do this not just on Christmas day, but as often as we can. The acquiring of virtue is difficult and requires a great number of repeated acts before the habit is engrained. Although God could in an instant give us virtue to a very high degree, this is not His normal way of proceeding. Just as children only grow gradually and as the human mind perceives truths slowly one after another, so do the sons of God advance only after many struggles with temptations and even after many falls. And by giving us the example of His own life on earth, God who has become man shows men how to become gods. When we communicate with Christ in the Eucharist, we become one with Him; not that He becomes us, but we become Him: "I have said: You are gods." And since we are sons of God, living by His Spirit, we know that His Spirit is pleading for us, asking for the graces we need, directing the course of our lives.

This then is the meaning of Christmas: that the solution of our problems and the success of our struggles lie in communion with God, in our breathing and living according to the life of the Spirit of God. For this has Christ come into the world: "that they may have life and have it more abundantly" (*John* 10, 10).

—Aquinas Farren, O.P.