

IN THE FULNESS OF TIME

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HE young shepherd boy stirred restlessly, and drew his poor garments closer about him in a futile effort to keep warm. The wind which swept through these western hills was bitterly cold, and from early that afternoon he had been keeping watch over the sheep that nestled sleepily a short distance away, sheltered from the chill night wind by a sort of cave in the hillside. Nearby the embers of a dying fire glowed vaguely, but had long since ceased to provide any warmth. He took comfort in the fact that he would soon be home to eat and sleep well before care of the flock was once again entrusted to him. Already a faint gray light in the eastern sky marked the day's return. He mused over the events of the night—it had been so different from other nights. Until quite late a steady procession of travellers had been entering the city in groups of two and three or ten and twenty, on foot, or riding on donkeys and camels and, occasionally, horses. He knew why they came, for even the shepherd boy had heard of Caesar's edict. Throughout the long hours he had watched the many lights twinkling in the city below him, had envied the people gathered there, for he knew that they were making merry over plentifully supplied tables in the cheerfully warm rooms of inn and private dwelling.

Not only did the presence of many people make the night so different from other nights. The gleaming lamps and fires in the city were more than equalled by the pure white light of the stars. They shone down from the cold sky with a strange brilliance. The very darkness of this wintry night was brisk, and almost alive. It was filled with something—he knew not what, but he was vaguely convinced that some great event was taking place. He did not know then that that star which had shone more magnificently than all the rest had guided three great kings of the east here to Bethlehem. He did not know that a group of others, shepherds like himself, had, hesitating and marvelling, entered a cave on one of these western hills, and seen there a wondrous thing. He did not know that the event for which his countrymen had waited so ardently and so long

had finally come to pass. But it had. In the fulness of time God had sent His only Son to earth. He had fulfilled the promise made to Adam and Eve so many years before when they, humbly repentant after having succumbed to the temptation of Satan, beseeched Him not to abandon them. The Redeemer had come. God was incarnate so that by His suffering and death man might be reestablished in the high estate from which he had fallen.

But was His advent opportune? Would it not have been better, for instance, if He had become man directly after our first parents had sinned, or perhaps, on the last day before the consummation of the world? Or did God choose wisely and well? To dispute the fitness of God's choice of time is to question His infinite perfection. That the Incarnation took place most opportunely, at the time best suited for its purpose we may be sure by the very fact that God had so ordained. Just as His omnipotence made possible this greatest of all the divine acts, so His wisdom determined when the event should take place, and His wisdom never errs, never makes a mistake. We may discern more clearly traces of divine wisdom in the determination of the most fitting time for the Incarnation if we recall just what the Incarnation was, its purpose, and the circumstances attending its occurrence.

The Incarnation was the assumption by the Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, of our human nature. Humanity was so united to the Divinity that both belonged to one person. It was the greatest act of God's omnipotence, the most magnificent display of His infinite power. It was a manifestation of His goodness and mercy, for He did not despise the weakness of sinful man, but rather stooped to help him. In it we may also see His justice, for since Satan had acquired power in the world through the weakness of man, He planned that through man in the Person of the Redeemer this power would be overthrown. Finally, it belongs to the essence of goodness to be diffusive, ever to communicate itself to others. By uniting human nature to Himself God made man participant in His own infinite goodness. Considering the Incarnation in itself, even apart from any thought of its purpose, we must agree that it was better to postpone it and to prepare the world for the coming of a Person of such dignity and majesty by sending before Him a fitting band of heralds. Had the Incarnation taken place in the early days of the world's history man would never have realized its stupendous magnitude, would never have appreciated the boundless love and mercy of God, would never have recognized His infinite

justice. No, it was better that man, before he was admitted to such intimate fellowship with the Divinity, learn more completely and more surely about the wondrous ways of God, the quality of His love and mercy, the extent of His power and justice. For this many years were required. The perfections of God are infinite and knowledge of them can be acquired only gradually by imperfect, finite man.

The primary purpose of the Incarnation was the ultimate redemption of mankind from the bondage of sin. Parenthetically we may note that some authors insist that even if man had not fallen from the state of grace Christ would still have become Incarnate. This opinion however is hardly tenable. The things which do not belong to us by nature, to which we have no natural right, which depend simply and solely upon the Will of God, can be known by us only according as God reveals them. His revelations are to be found in the Sacred Scriptures. Now everywhere in Sacred Scripture the passages which are concerned with Christ's advent upon earth give as the reason for His coming the redemption of mankind from sin. We can but agree, then, with what is so clearly indicated, namely that to free man from the thralldom of sin was the primary purpose of the Incarnation.

It is obvious that there was no need of the Incarnation before sin had been committed. Medicine is not given to a person who is not ill. Before the disease of sin had settled upon the world there was no necessity for the remedies which Christ brought when He came to live amongst men.

Nor was it fitting that Christ become incarnate immediately after the first sin had been committed. The sin of Adam and Eve was one of pride. Satan had craftily deceived them into thinking that they could become as gods. They believed that they could live without the loving help and protection of their Creator. They even dared to think that they could attain the end for which they were created, an end far above their finite natures, by their own efforts, without His assistance. "We ourselves shall be as gods" and so, in their pride they turned wilfully away from Him. They repented, it is true, but even so it was better not to reestablish them in grace immediately. Their sin was great. It was this sin of pride that had first disrupted the heavenly court, and now it was to lay a stain on the human race forever. They must, then, realize the enormity of their offence. They must become convinced of their absolute dependence upon God. They must appreciate how vitally necessary to their very continuance in being was His love, mercy, and power. Above all they must learn

the great lesson of humility. Then too, although the intensity of their pride was swept away in their repentance, vestiges of it and weaknesses arising from it yet remained. There was danger that the divine proffer of help might be despised and spurned if it came before man recognized his weakness. And so, "With great wisdom it was so ordered that the Son of Man should not be sent immediately after man's fall. For first of all God left man under the natural law, with the freedom of his will, in order that he might know his natural strength; and when he failed in it he received the law; whereupon by fault, not of the law, but of his nature, the disease gained strength; so that having recognized his infirmity, he might cry out for a physician, and beseech the aid of grace."

Although redemption from sin was the primary purpose of the Incarnation it was not the only one. Christ's advent was also intended to manifest the power of God, to help man live a more perfect life, to keep a fervent faith burning fiercely in his heart. It was to provide for man in the person of Christ a teacher Who would instruct him more precisely in his duties to God, and a pattern, an example for the modelling of his own life. After all, only to have released man from the bondage of sin would have been merely a negative thing: God intended to do more for him than that. In the eternal plan of salvation it was decreed that man should play an active part. He was not to stand by passively and accept all that God had to give. Salvation would be granted only on the condition that man work vigorously in his own behalf. He cannot, of course, be an adequate or even a coefficient cause of his own salvation because it is an end appointed to him by God and lies beyond his nature and his natural powers. He can however cooperate in the work by holding himself aloof from sin, by cultivating virtue, in a word, by his responsiveness to God's grace. He not only can but should, for this is the part that Divine Providence has accorded him in its decree with regard to man's salvation.

To fulfill this duty properly he must be ever conscious and ever confident of God's love, mercy, and power. And here we have the second great purpose of the Incarnation, that is, to lead man to the faithful performance of the duties that God has ordained for him by leading him to a more perfect life. He was to be led to a more perfect life by the implanting and nourishing within him of a deep and abiding love for God and by pointing out to him the proofs of God's great love for him. If we value our immortal souls we must not allow the importance of this lesson to escape us. To speak of love as a

movement of the appetite towards a desirable object is to define it truly enough: but unless we probe, unless we analyze this definition we shall never know its real significance. Love is the dominant factor of man's life. It enters into and colours his every act. Our Lord himself emphasizes its necessity and importance. He refers to it over and over again. When asked which was the greatest commandment He replied, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart.' In order to convince us more surely of its importance He chose the solemn moments of the Supper Room on the eve of His death to command as God and to implore as a friend that we return God's love for us. He made it the fundament upon which the whole structure of His Church was built. In order that she might the more effectively continue His work of saving souls He desired her to be like Himself, a living act of love, and so, made her central and essential act the perpetuating of His own great love. He promised that the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of Love, would remain with her always. All this He has done to convince us how vitally important it is that we cherish a love for God. Nay, He has done more. He has given us a compelling motive. He has furnished us with proofs of God's great love for us. Magnificent proofs they are, and the Incarnation the most magnificent of them all. Without it the others would not have been possible. The death of the Redeemer was a great thing, but His birth was a far greater one. Man could die on the Cross but only God could raise humanity to union with the Divinity. An eternal manifestation of divine power and majesty, of infinite love and mercy, it cannot fail to arouse in us an enduring love and a lasting confidence in the God Who has done so much. "If we have been slow to love" says Saint Augustine, "let us at least hasten to love in return."

In the divine plan of man's salvation the virtue of Faith holds as important a place as does the virtue of Charity. In both the Old and New Law it has been urged at all times: it is indispensable if man would make progress towards God, or the measure of his faith is the measure of his union with God. When He promised not to abandon Adam after his sin He insisted upon faith in the future coming of a Redeemer as a prime requisite for continued relations with Him. He sternly commanded the Chosen People to nourish their faith always: He made it the basis of His covenant with them: when their faith grew cold and they turned away from Him He punished them severely. Our Lord refers to its necessity repeatedly. "Do you believe that I can do this?" He would ask of those who sought His aid.

He promised that faith would move mountains and He kept that promise.

We have already seen how vital a thing is the love which we must have for God. Faith makes this love possible. We cannot love unless we know the person who is the object of our love. Now the knowledge which we have of God naturally is limited. His infinite perfections and powers can be known only very imperfectly by finite man. This natural knowledge is completed and perfected by the knowledge which we have through faith. Through faith we have become possessed of the great truths of revelation, truths which we would never have known if God had not revealed them to us. Such truths are the Trinity, the resurrection of our bodies after death, the life of grace, the Sacramental Presence of God upon our altars. These things we could never know by the natural power of our intellect. They become a part of our knowledge by reason of our faith.

The relation between faith and the Incarnation is obvious. Another purpose of the Incarnation (we may call it the third) was to keep the fire of faith brightly burning in the heart of man, not alone in those who lived before it came to pass, but also in those who have lived or will live since that time. In the Old Law man was justified by obedience to God's precept and faith in the future advent of the Messias. In the New he is justified through grace merited by Christ in His passion and death and by observance of the Law of God as promulgated by Christ, and by faith in the Redeemer Who came and released him from the bondage of his sins.

We have already noted that divine Providence determined to postpone the advent of the Redeemer because of the majesty and dignity of Him Who was to come and in order that men might have time to discover the ineffectiveness of his own natural strength and turn to God for salvation from the miseries into which his darkened intellect and weakened will had led him. Two alternatives remained. His coming could be delayed until shortly before the end of the world or it could take place, in the words of the prophet, 'in the midst of the years.' The secondary purposes of the Incarnation (secondary not because they are less important but because in the process of man's sanctification they continue from where the primary leaves off) made it imperative that the advent of the Messias be not delayed too long. Man was to be led to a more perfect life by keeping the thought of God ever in his mind, by inculcating a love for Him, and by renewing an ardent faith in Him. This more perfect life may be briefly described as the Christian life, a life founded

principally on the virtues of faith and love. Now if the Incarnation, which was to introduce this more perfect life by the cultivation of these virtues, were delayed until the last day man would never have the opportunity of living this life and practicing its virtues. He was to have not only the opportunity but also the duty of living it, of living it vigorously, for this was the part accorded him by divine Providence in Its plan of the redemption and final salvation of mankind. Furthermore, initiation into this life was possible only while some knowledge of God yet remained to men. Any attempt to inculcate faith in Him, love for Him, and a consciousness of duty towards Him would be futile if men were unaware of His infinite perfection and even of His very existence. There was the very real danger that if the Incarnation were delayed too long a while all thought of God would be swept from the minds of men.

And so, in His wisdom God decreed that in the fulness of time the Saviour would be sent to live among men, to redeem them from sin and to point out to them by word of mouth and example the way of salvation. "In the fulness of time"—this is the expression used to denote that time when man would have learned what he had lost through sin, when he would have realized his own weakness and cry out for the protection of the Creator Who lovingly preserves him in every moment and every act of his existence. It denotes that time when man, unutterably weary in his vain striving for real, complete happiness, would begin to forget, to despair, to doubt and thereby incur the danger of losing all thought of and yearning after the divine. We who have lived since the days when Christ walked the earth know when that fulness of time was. History, as well as philosophy and theology, bears testimony to the wisdom and fitness of the divine choice.

It was a troubled world that those Infant eyes looked out upon nearly two thousand years ago, a world staggering under the heavy burden of pain and sin, bewildered by a thousand perplexities and doubts, weary in its quest of truth and happiness, and tormented by the ever-growing fear of all the miseries which overwhelmed it. The greatest men of antiquity had grappled with the problems and offered their various solutions, but they brought no relief. System after system of philosophy and theology was received, enthusiastically adopted, and finally discarded: they availed nothing. Man had done his best, but his best without divine help was not enough. He realized the insufficiency and ineffectiveness of his own efforts but the realization brought him no nearer to God. Knowledge of Him became more and

more vague and confused. We can trace the progress of the estrangement down through the years. It appears first of all in the elaborate systems of polytheism which clogged the ancient theologies. No such system ever sprang into existence, full blown. All started with the concept of God. Series of gods and lesser gods arose from the confusion of God, His works, and the means He used to complete His works. The separation becomes more pronounced in the atheism and agnosticism of the years preceding the birth of our divine Lord. The existence of God was not believed or it was considered that at least if He did exist knowledge of Him and relations with Him were impossible. An external ceremonial, oblations, sacrifices remained, but they were for the most part a travesty of religion. Although the Jews preserved a better knowledge of God and a purer cult in His honour, the bad example of neighbouring nations was not without its devastating effect. Some of them were frankly materialists, others perilously near idolatry, and most, while scrupulously observant of the Law, were far from honouring God with the service of the heart that He desired.

All was in readiness for the advent of the Messiah. The conditions which divine Providence had imposed had been fulfilled. A long line of prophets had foretold and described His birth and the circumstances attending it. The great Saint John the Baptist had announced His coming as imminent. The hearts of men were sore and anguished and they yearned for peace. He came, the Prince of Heaven, bringing with Him heavenly peace, and He came as had been promised—in the fulness of time.

St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, IIIa, q. 1, a. 5 et 6.