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THE HUMILITY OF CHRISTMAS

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Fear not; for, behold, I bring you glad tidings of great joy, that shall be to all the people: for, this day, is born to you a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David.¹



HE story of Christmas is a very old story, and yet, old as it is, ever new; ever new indeed in its inspiration for living hearts. The story was told simply enough by St.

John the Evangelist in the familiar and ever profoundly significant phrase, "the Word was made flesh." He did not fail to inform us also that "the Word was God."² The details of the story were first told by an angel to a group of humble shepherds on a Bethlehem hillside. And when they had visited the manger and seen for themselves the truth of the "glad tidings," they spread the strange divine news among their neighbors; "and all that heard wondered; and at those things that were told them by the shepherds."³

Today, nineteen hundred years later, when this story of the new-born King is recounted, men still wonder. Almost too good to be true is the fact that God became man. There is wonder too that God should have chosen this way to enter our midst. Unlike all other men, unlike all other kings, the King of Kings had the power to choose for Himself His Mother, the time and place and all the other circumstances of His birth. And this is what He chose; poverty, obscurity, and suffering. Every

¹ Luke II, 10-11.

² John I.

³ Luke II, 18.

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detail, to the smallest, was determined in the light of infinitely perfect Wisdom. There are no chance accidentals in the story of Christ's birth. All were selected with the purpose of teaching men the true way to peace, which Christ had come to restore.

It is only when we understand the lengthy prologue which leads up to the Christmas story that we can perceive and appreciate that story's real beauty. We know that in the beginning when God created the world and placed man at the head of all creation, there was perfect peace. Man was made like unto God; and his rational nature, comprising essentially an intellect and free will, was further blessed by preternatural gifts. All creation was made subject to man; and within him there was perfect order between the flesh and right reason, and between these and God. True humility and perfect obedience reigned supreme. But then man did the one mysterious thing which he can do of himself. In unjust pride he revolted against God by sin, and perfect peace was banished.

God is infinite Love so He promised man a Redeemer, a restorer of peace. But because He is also infinite Wisdom, He decreed that Redemption should be long delayed. Since the sin of man was due to his pride, he must be liberated in such a manner that, being humiliated, he would recognize his need of the Saviour. A chosen people was prepared for the coming of the promised One. Prophets were sent and declared details that should characterize Him and set Him apart from all others. He was to come in a wonderful manner, that was certain. Unlike all other men because His Father was God, He was to be born of a virgin mother.⁴ The promised One was to be divine, the prophets revealed: "Wonderful, Counsellor, God the Mighty, Prince of Peace, Father of the world to come" were to be among His just titles.⁵

Throughout this period of preparation man offered sacrifices of reparation and thanksgiving to his merciful Creator and Lord. First fruits and animals were ritually destroyed in homage to the Supreme Lord of all. But all these sacrifices were only a figure of the redeeming Sacrifice, a mere "shadow of the good things to come, not the very image." The blood of these sacrifices could not take away the sins of the world and restore peace. So with the coming of the promised Messiah they were to be abolished.

⁴ Isaias VII, 14.

⁵ Isaias IX, 6.

Centuries passed before all was in readiness. When the fullness of time came, God sent His Son made of woman and under the law. On the first Christmas night the redemption of mankind was begun. It was not indeed the supreme Sacrifice for sins, for that is the work of Calvary and the Cross. And just as the extended preparation for the Saviour stressed man's humbled condition and his need for humility, so in this most blessed opening scene in the drama of Redemption not only the importance of humility but man's humbled condition as well are emphasized. The Saviour of all men was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. God the Mighty comes to us in the frailty and utter dependency of human infancy! The luxuries of a brilliant court and fabulous palace, these are not for the King of Kings. Christ was born of noble lineage; of that there can be no dispute. Throughout His life He was referred to as a son of the royal David. But this Messiah was also, like David, of humble stock, as the prophet notes when he speaks of Christ being born "of the root of Jesse."⁶ Jesse was a poor laboring countryman whose youngest son, David, was chosen by God through the prophet Samuel to be the King of the Jews. But this royal line of David, to which Mary belonged, was not only humble in origin; at the time Christ was born, it was humbled, as the prophet Isaias had foretold, and was as a stump from which a fresh shoot, the long-awaited Messiah, would now spring and flower. Christ was born of this great family, now humbled and actually under Roman domination. As a matter of fact, we know that it was a conqueror's edict requiring the enrollment of the nation that brought Mary and Joseph from their home in Nazareth to this city of David. So Christ was born in Bethlehem where centuries before David had been born in humble surroundings. And because there was no room in the inn for Mary and Joseph, the King of Kings was born in a straw-strewn shelter for beasts of burden. He did not choose for His birthplace the capital city of Jerusalem, where the Davidic palace and the Temple were located. That was to be the scene of His ignominious Death. He did not choose Rome. That was for the Caesars, the rulers of this world, and His kingdom was not of this world. He chose the humility of Bethlehem.

Throughout this simple Christmas story it is not worldly boastfulness and glory, but the profoundest humility that dom-

⁶ Isaias xi, 1.

inates. And that is because Christ wished to show men that humility is so very important in the restoration of peace. It is the very foundation of our spiritual life. Without it we can never be restored to that peace which the world cannot give. True, Christ as God could not be humble. Humility means the acknowledgment of one's limitations. God who is infinitely perfect, has no limitations, no imperfections, and is dependent on no one. But as Man Christ could be humble. And He was humble that man, following His example, might share in the perfect peace and the true glory of God. God became man that all men might know the way, the truth, and the life, and so become more like unto God.

Important though it is, humility is only the foundation for receiving the peace of Christ. The birth of the Divine Saviour would teach us humility, and more. In His earliest moments, as in His whole life, He would teach us not only that are we helpless and absolutely dependent on God for our all, but also that we must obey Him and at the price of suffering. Christ chose to be born in the penetrating chill of a winter night, St. Thomas teaches, that He might suffer for us in body from the very start, and to teach us that we too like Him must suffer.⁷ Obedience to the Will of God must accompany humility. Because of the sin of our first parent, Adam, our natures are prone to pride and selfishness, and to do the will of another is not only humiliating, but very often painful. By pride and disobedience peace was lost to Adam and all men; by humility and perfect obedience peace was restored in Christ for all men. We are sanctified in Him, in the perfect and satisfying Sacrifice of Himself, by a humiliating and humble obedience: the shameful Death on the Cross.

As if His own divine example of humility and obedience were not more than sufficient for us, Christ singled out a creature to be a perfect exemplar of the virtues which lead to peace: Mary, His Mother. She recognized what is so necessary for us to recognize, that we are in a humbled condition. She knew also, as her *Magnificat* shows, that it was the humility of His handmaid which God had regarded when He asked her to become His mother. And it was perfect obedience to the Divine Will which had placed the answer on her lips: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it done unto me according to Thy word."

⁷ *Summa Theologica*, IIIa, q. 35, a. 8, ad 3.

Humility then and obedience: there is no other way for obtaining the peace of Christ. Christ is our King, the Lord of heaven and earth and all, the King of Kings. To Him we as individuals must submit our minds and hearts. To Him the parental rule must bow as to the Father of all men. To Him the nation, whose power is from above, must also submit as to its absolute Guide and Supreme Lord, both in its home policies and international affairs. For the individual, for the family, for the nation there is peace, the peace of Christ, but only in the reign of Christ.