



**"There Were Shepherds Watching"**

# DOMINICANA

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## THE FULNESS OF TIME

Christmas for the Christian has a unique position. It stands as the final tableau in a gigantic spectacle extending over four thousand years, and as the first scene in a world-embracing drama that is yet in the acting. It is a wonderful manifestation of the supreme wisdom of Him who holds "the destiny of things in the palm of His hand." "I will move all nations," said the Lord through the mouth of His prophet Aggeus, "and the desired of nations shall come." To accomplish His will and to carry out the last detail of a project staggering in its immensity, He disturbed the earth and the hearts of men, and when this was done "the fulness of time was come when God had decreed to send His Son, that we might be redeemed and again adopted as children."

In the preparation for the greatest event that ever occurred on earth—the birth of Jesus—Paganism played a conspicuous part. The energies expended, the results achieved during the rise, development and downfall of tribes, kingdoms and peoples, were not to be lost, but in the all-wise providence of heaven they were to be great determining factors in some line or other. Looking back over history, we see how even the vices and worst failures of man were put to a good use at the hand of God.

The original religion was a pure monotheism. God's revelation was not dimmed or perverted till long after the dispersion from Babel. The idea, however, of a One, Supreme, Universal Deity could not long remain pure by a mere oral tradition, and when the tribes wandered farther and farther from one another, and when the evil and vices in man began to assert themselves, the divine light no longer shone out in its pristine brightness. Man saw beauties and wonders indescribable and sublime in creation; the order, the harmony, the providence of it all impressed him in a remarkable manner. Still, reason, darkened by crime,

weakened by vice and almost destroyed by abuse, no longer saw in this the transcendent beauty of a single God. Each divine attribute or manifestation was given a symbol, but from symbolism they soon degenerated to the adoration of these very signs. "The cow is God," said the Egyptians; "the sun is God," said the Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians. The more cultured and progressive the people, the more rapidly increased the hierarchy of their heaven, till with the Greeks and Romans it reached a state we could never explain if we did not realize to some extent what it means to turn away from God. Every brook, river and sea was crowded with nymphs, sprites, gods and goddesses. The very passions and the most loathsome sins of man had exemplars and models in the heathen empyrean; the crowd was so great one could not see the high courts of Parnassus and Olympus for gods.

But such a condition had to end. After the Romans had absorbed every deity they found in all their conquests, there yet remained a vacant spot in their hearts. Mankind was disgusted, and St. Paul says he saw an altar in Athens—one raised, no doubt, in sheer desperation—an altar to the "Unknown God." The world was ready, as far as religion was concerned, to welcome anything new, to give almost anything a trial in its hope for something lasting. The time was ripening when God should manifest Himself.

Philosophy went through as many changes as theology, because the two were inseparably united. Here, again, all was darkness. The questions of the origin of man, his work on earth, and his destiny hereafter were forever being asked and forever going unanswered. The monotheistic doctrine which could have saved them was lost, and poor unaided reason wandered through labyrinths of doubt and speculation until it was ready to drop from exhaustion. God gave light to some men like Plato, Aristotle, Seneca and Cicero, but it was not enough. It was but a salt that saved the universe from general unredeemable corruption. Great as were their doctrines, they could not stay the sins of the teachers, much less the crimes of the people at large; and sublime as were their tenets, they did not satisfy the cravings of intellects made for certain knowledge. So, when Pilate, half in jest and half in despair, asked Our Lord, "What is truth?" he voiced a query that was continually on the lips of anxious men. From a groundless devotion to a multitude of gods the reaction

was sure to come when men would adore no God whatsoever. Man was made supreme. The Ego was the only thing worth while, if the heart could not rest in something higher. Men doubted about their souls; debated whether they existed or not; made systems of suppositions and sacrificed their reason on the altar of the most untenable theories. To the anxious inquiries of the why and the wherefore of things, philosophers shook their heads, put on a look of sagacity and calmly informed the world, "We do not know, we cannot know," and a logical sequence was, "Why should we worry?"

Man must have some ideal. The inborn sense of hero worship must have expression, be the object worthy or otherwise. Paganism sought an outlet which was to be its last act in its preparation for the coming of Christ. To absorb the individual, to utilize all personal effort and to make the state supreme was the idea that became an obsession with the ancients. This was to be the final move, in as much as Paganism was interested, that would usher Christ into the world.

Egypt struggled with Assyria only to be conquered. Assyria fell before Babylonia, and eventually both paid homage to Persia. Ambition moved Xerxes to attempt the conquest of the world, only to be turned back by a handful of Greeks. Repeated trials but served to strengthen the people of Hellas, and in time the valiant Grecian soldiery and the unconquerable Macedonian phalanx crossed the sea and marched victoriously through the lands that once held Darius the Great as king, till only uncharted country made them stop, and forced tears to their eyes that there were no more lands to conquer.

Though the land that gave birth to Pericles, Lycurgus and a host of prominent men was to have a lasting influence on the world through its arts, sciences, and especially its language, its political prestige was to go, and the little country of Greece was to pass quickly from hand to hand.

A sturdy race was growing up about the Tiber—a race whose destiny it was to rule the earth. Surrounding tribes and petty kingdoms soon felt the power of these conquerors, and all turned to Rome as to their center. In the year 264 B. C. the Romans left their country to subdue other lands, their first objective being Carthage. They waged three bloody Punic wars, sometimes with dismal failure, but with ultimate success. Spain fell; Gaul passed into their hands; Caesar entered Germany and Britain,



and presently the entire globe was at the feet of Roman conquerors. Civil strife broke down the divided consular power and the supreme authority was vested in one man. Augustus sat on the Imperial throne, Dictator and Pontifex Maximus. Universal domination by one people was an accomplished fact, and God's will was done.

However, all this long and vast preparation was only an indirect action toward the fruition of heaven's decree. The promised Redeemer was not to spring from Egypt, Greece or Rome, but from Palestine. The Jews, thousands of years before, had been segregated from the pagan world. It was necessary that the seed from which should germinate the Saviour should be planted in sacred ground. By divine disposition Jacob and his family went into the land of Goshen, there to increase and multiply and to learn art and science from the Egyptians. Material prosperity demoralized them, so before they were entirely corrupted God led them out of the country that had turned into a land of bondage, both physically and morally, and directed their steps to the land promised to their forefathers. In the desert their destiny was clearly made known to them at the same time they were going through a process of purification. Finally, they entered the "land flowing with milk and honey," there to await the advent of their King. Reverses, trials, persecutions and exiles were necessary to keep before the minds of this people the lessons taught them in the desert. God sent terrible prophets to rouse them from their sins and to awaken them to a sense of virtue.

The idea, however, of a spiritual Deliverer eventually passed from the minds of the Jews. The Law, given to keep them prepared for the Christ, became their sole religion. As a result, they groaned under the Mosaic injunctions, rebelled against the killing formalism of the Pharisees, were fanatical against the scepticism of the Saducees, and rendered desperate by Roman oppression. The sceptre had passed from the favored tribe, as was foretold, and the weeks announced by Daniel were over. All Palestine was in a ferment.

Roman sway embraced the confines of the then known world, nevertheless, the pagans saw that that universal sway did not bring the peace and liberty for which they had so ardently longed. Their minds were dying for truth as they turned from an empty philosophy in disgust; their hearts were craving an object wor-

thy of their love. The Jews were roused to the acme of excitement by the words of the Prophets; were made desperate by the loss of liberty and the sight of pagan rulers in the Holy City.

The world was ready. God had ordained all things well. Both Jew and Gentile needed and were expecting some kind of a redemption, so surely now "the fulness of time was come, when God had decreed to send His Son." "And it came to pass that in those days there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; because he was of the house and family of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his espoused wife, who was with child. And it came to pass that when they were there her days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her first born son, and wrapped him up in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger."

The last act was over. In the stillness of a wintry night and in the sombre darkness of a lonely stable God came down to earth. War was over, and the earth was silent at the approach of its God. In that moment of quiet the King of Peace descended to renovate the face of the earth. Of all the manifestations of the omnipotence of God this preparation of the world for the coming of His Son ranks among the greatest.

—Bro. Joachim Walsh, O. P.