



The Word Was Made Flesh and Dwelt Amongst Us

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"While all things were in quiet silence
and the night was in the midst of her course,
Thy mighty word leapt down from heaven
from thy royal throne." (Wis. XVIII, 14-15)



ALL THINGS WERE INDEED in quiet silence. The calm chill of the Palestinian night breathed a restfulness that was yet charged with expectancy, for the plentitude of time had come. The people that had walked in darkness were to see a great light and to them that dwelt in the region of the shadow of death, a light was about to rise. (*Is.*, IX, 2) God was about to speak to Jews and Gentiles by His Incarnate Word, Who was the brightness of His glory and the image of His substance. (*Heb.*, I, 1-2) The only-begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all time, God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father, by whom all things were made—Jesus Christ was about to be born for our sins.

Within the kingdom of Judea the people were busy about many things and were not aware of the greatness of the time. They paid but scant attention to the Jewish maid and her husband making their way from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be enrolled in the general census that had been commanded by Caesar Augustus. Saint Luke is quite specific about this enrollment. He could have let the whole affair pass with the use of the generic term "census," but he chooses to be particular and his detail is not without reason. For his words show us how the prophecy of Micheas—"And thou, Bethlehem Ephrata, art a little

one among the thousands of Juda: out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be the ruler in Israel." (V, 2)—was fulfilled through the medium of the Roman Emperor. As Bossuet has written: "But what do ye, ye rulers of the world? . . . For God has far different designs which you carry out, even though they do not enter your minds." Indeed it was quite fitting, as Saint Thomas notes, that Christ be born at a time when the whole world was being enrolled and was in a state of servitude. For the Saviour came to restore to us the liberty of the children of God.¹

Coming to Bethlehem and finding no room in the city proper, Joseph with his betrothed—this is the literal meaning of the Greek word which Saint Luke uses to emphasize Mary's virginal purity—came to the outskirts of the city and made ready for the birth of the Redeemer in a cave used as a shelter by shepherds and their flocks. The Evangelist's description of the birth of Christ is magnificent in its simplicity: "And it came to pass that when they were there, her days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son and wrapped him up in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger: because there was no room for them in the inn." Even the German rationalist Weiss writes of these verses that "down to our own days, these delicate details have for the great as for the lowly a charm that never wanes." The simple Greek word *eteken* (*brought forth*) tells us nothing of the circumstances that attended this wonderful event. This verse is a perfect example of the charming simplicity that permeates the entire chapter. We are not told explicitly that Mary underwent no suffering at the birth of her Divine Son. The expression "wrapped him in swaddling clothes" is Luke's way of describing the Holy Virgin's painless childbirth. A woman who underwent the ordinary process of giving birth could not, immediately after bringing forth a child, care for her child as Mary did. Once again we must salute the subtlety and delicacy of the Evangelist's mode of expression. Saint Thomas notes that since the pain of childbirth is caused by the infant opening the womb and since Christ was born from the closed womb of his immaculate Mother, there was no pain in that birth. In another beautiful passage the Angelic Doctor writes: "As by His death Christ destroyed our death, so by his pains he freed us from our pains; and so he wished to die a painful death. But the mother's pains in childbirth did not concern

¹ S. Theol. III, q. 35, art. 8, ad 1.

Christ who came to atone for our sins. And therefore there was no need for His mother to suffer in giving birth.”²

After she had wrapped the precious Babe in swaddling clothes Mary then laid Him tenderly in the manger from which the animals were accustomed to eat. As we have said before, the place of Christ’s birth was most likely a cave used by shepherds for their flocks. Saint Luke indicates this when he uses the word “*manger*.” Then with touching pathos he adds: “Because there was no room for them in the inn.” Having expressed the glorious fact of the Saviour’s birth, filling us with joy, he proceeds to temper that joy with these words in which we can catch a passing glimpse of the sorrows that were to befall the Redeemer. For this same Divine Child, born of a most pure Virgin, adored by shepherds and kings, was later to hang on a cross, “the object of man’s contempt, the outcast of the people.” (*Ps. XXI, 7*)

There is a most salutary lesson which all of us should draw from the fact of Christ’s birth in a cave in Bethlehem. The city of his birth, says Saint Thomas, was quite fitting. For Bethlehem is interpreted “house of bread” and Christ Himself said: “I am the living bread which came down from heaven.” Also by His birth in the city of David, “He put to silence the vain boasting of men who take pride in being born in great cities, where they also desire especially to receive great honor. Christ, on the contrary, willed to be born in a mean city, and to suffer reproach in a great city.”³ The birth of the Redeemer in a cave that was open to all serves to convince us that there are no exterior obstacles between Christ and us. We can all draw near to God and be united to Him in love. He who was born in the lowliest of places can be approached by king and beggar, saint and sinner alike.

Now the scene in the great drama of the Incarnation changes. We are carried in thought to a fertile plain perhaps two miles east of Bethlehem. A group of humble nomadic shepherds are watching over their flocks throughout the long night. In considering this scene we can ask ourselves three questions: Who appeared? To whom was the apparition made? Why was it made?

Who appeared? “An angel of the Lord stood by them and the brightness of God shone round them,” answers the Evangelist. The shepherds were overawed by the apparition of one of the heavenly choir and the dazzling brilliance which accompanied the celestial vision. They could ward off the attacks of wild animals and thieves

² III, q. 35, art. 6, ad 2.

³ III, q. 35, art. 7, *per tot.*

with their staves; against the brilliance from on high they could only stand open-mouthed in awe and trembling. For they were simple men—"simple and lowly" as Saint Thomas calls them. Yet they were chosen by God as those *to whom* the angel should appear. Speaking of the propriety of this the Angelic Doctor states that these shepherds, unlike the Scribes and Pharisees, were single-minded and like the patriarchs and Moses in their mode of life. They were the types of the Doctors of the Church, to whom are revealed the mysteries of Christ that were hidden from the Jews.⁴ Here we have a sterling example of the humility of Christ. For the shepherds, especially the desert shepherds, were held in utter contempt by the proud Scribes and Pharisees as belonging to the lowest class of people. He Who was the perfect expression of meekness and humility of heart willed to have His coming first known to humble men.

Why did the angel appear to the shepherds? Again Saint Luke tells us: "Fear not; for, behold, I bring you good 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." "Good tidings," could be a source of greater joy to the devout Jew who, as the ancient hymn has it, "wept in exile while waiting for the Son of God to appear!" The message announcing the birth of Christ, although short, is complete. The shepherds were told who was born and where his birth took place. The Greek word *Christos* literally rendered is "the anointed one." In the Old Covenant only kings and high priests were anointed. Jesus is the eternal high priest and the King of Kings, and hence this name is most fittingly given Him. His anointing was divine, because in the human nature that He assumed for us He was anointed by the whole Trinity in the fulness of grace.

This joy of which the angel speaks is to be "to all the people." We note here the ever recurring theme of Saint Luke's Gospel: the universality of salvation. For Christ is the Way where there had been no road on which men might travel; He is the Truth in all its fulness, where before there had been the darkness of error in men's minds; He is the Life who brought men from the spiritual death of sin. As Saint Augustine writes: "Whither would you go? I am the Way. How will you go? I am the Truth. Where would you rest? I am the Life. I am the Way for all those that seek, the Truth for those that find, the Life for those that arrive."

An overwhelming joy has replaced the original fear in the shepherds' hearts as the angel continues: "And this shall be a sign unto

⁴ III, q. 36, art. 3, ad 4.

you: You shall find the infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger." Our English word "infant" comes from the Latin *infans* which rendered literally means "one who is unable to speak." The Word who was in the beginning with God, and was God became for us a speechless nursling.

Scarcely had the echo of the angel's words died away in the quiet of the night when the host of the heavenly army descended to earth to sanctify beyond measure that night of nights. "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly army, praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest: and on earth peace to men of good will." The angelic hymn of triumph sums up perfectly the character, meaning, purpose, and advantages of the Incarnation. This, the first Christmas carol, consists of two statements in perfect parallel, the first referring to God, the second to man. The three thoughts glory, in the highest, to God are in exact parallel to peace, on earth, to men. To the Lord of Creation Who rules from the highest celestial regions, the Nativity brings glory worthy of Him. To men who dwell on earth it brings peace, which, according to the use of this word among the Hebrews, is the same as health, happiness, salvation, benediction, prosperity, undisturbed tranquility—all in a word.

Having finished the paean of praise, the heavenly choir departs as suddenly as it had appeared. They returned to the heavenly heights to continue their canticles of adoration before God the Father, Who, that very night, had suffered His Son to assume our flesh, knowing full well the ignominious fate He would suffer at the hands of men. The words of the angels however linger on long after the divine messengers have departed. They were indelibly written in the minds and hearts of the shepherds. Moved by their strong faith and meek submissiveness they said to one another: "Let us go over to Bethlehem and let us see this word that is come to pass which the Lord hath shown us." At once they begin their quest for the promised Redeemer. As the late Father Vincent McNabb, O.P., so beautifully put it: "Then leaving their ninety-nine sheep in the darkness of divine Providence, they sought out the Lamb of God, who for love of us had strayed to earth."

Soon they reached their goal—a lowly manger where the unrecognized King of Glory chose to make His repose. What an inestimable honor was theirs. For next to Mary and Joseph, theirs was the first external worship offered to the newly born Babe of Bethlehem. "They came to worship Him," says Father Faber, "and

the worship of their simplicity is joy, and the voice of joy is praise." How the Lord must love the praises of the meek and humble of heart, whose minds and hearts are ever attuned to the divine promptings. These unpretentious men paid their homage to the Messiah and returned to their humble tasks. They sought no material compensation for their adoration; they had beheld with their own eyes the "Desired of the Eternal Hills." What more could their devout hearts desire? Their names would not be known, but they would never be forgotten. They who were despised by the world about them would some day be regarded with a holy envy by all Christendom.

"But Mary kept all these words, pondering them in her heart." Amidst all these wonderful happenings Mary remained so composed and recollected that she preserved each and every occurrence in her Immaculate Heart; her own Annunciation, the birth of her Divine Son, the canticle which the angels sang, the adoration by the shepherds and the Magi—all these Mary remembered so exactly that she was able to give an accurate account of them to the Apostles. The Messianic prophecies were well known to this pious Jewish maiden and she saw them fulfilled on that most memorable of all nights. Our Blessed Lady was fully aware that it was not the will of God to manifest all these wonders at once. So she remained silent by the crib. But it is in her heart, says Père Lagrange, "where all God's plans are gathered into one, that we must seek the most faithful echo of all these words and the deepest understanding of all these events."

So ends the account written by Saint Luke, the "beloved physician," of the birth of Him who came to be the healer of all men. To the casual reader it offers majestic beauty; to the contemplative reader, ineffable sublimity. Saint Ephrem, the great Syrian Doctor of the Church, enraptured by his contemplation of the Nativity, wrote: "Blessed be that Child, that gladdened Bethlehem today! Blessed be the Babe that made manhood young again today! Blessed be the Fruit, that lowered Himself to our famished state!"

Let us also give thanks to the Lord God of Israel and join the angels in their canticle of everlasting praise:

"Glory to God in the highest:
and on earth, peace to men of good will."