

12/24/19

The Nativity of our Lord

John 1: 1-4, 14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God.

All things were made by Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.

In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men....

And the Word became Flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the Gospel of St. Luke, that evangelist presents the account of our Savior's birth which has become so familiar and dear to Christ's people of faith. Luke tells us that, in order to compose his record of Jesus' life, he interviewed those who were eye-witnesses—those who were there in Galilee and in Judea and had seen Him and heard His preaching. It is apparent from his nativity-account that one of those eye-witnesses to whom Luke spoke was Mary—she who was blessed to be the virgin-mother of our Savior. Only Mary herself could have informed Luke about how she kept the words of the shepherds in her heart and pondered them. The cattle-manger that served as His cradle, the swaddling clothes in which He was wrapped—they are the sort of detail which show her motherly care.

St. Matthew also tells us about the birth of Jesus, and he does so from the standpoint of our Savior's step-father Joseph. From Matthew's account we learn how Joseph was at first troubled that his young bride-to-be was already with Child before their wedding-day, and how the angel of the Lord came to him in a dream to reassure him, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit." His concern about Mary's pregnancy, his worry for his family when he heard of Herod's murderous intentions, his obedience to the command of the angel that he should take Mary and the Baby to Egypt for safety—these are details of the story of Christ's nativity which reflect the viewpoint of a protective father.

The prophet Isaiah, whom the angel quoted when he first spoke to Joseph, has summarized what St. Luke and St. Matthew have written in this most beautiful commentary on the miracle in Bethlehem on that first

Christmas Eve, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel (God with us).”

Our text is from the opening verses of St. John’s Gospel. John does not give us the kind of historical account of Jesus’ birth that Luke and Matthew give us. Instead, John provides in the first chapter of his Gospel a kind of dogmatic summary of the Incarnation in all its reason-transcending mystery. “In the beginning was the Word,” John writes, “and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” And in these brief sentences is contained all that Luke and Matthew and Isaiah have told us about the birth of our Savior.

I

“In the beginning was the Word,” John says, “and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The mystery of the inner life of our triune Creator-and-Savior God is reflected in John’s opening words which serve as his introduction to what he has to say about the Person and work of Christ Jesus. From all eternity, the Father—as the Source of all being—speaks His generative Word which is recorded for us by the Psalmist, “You are My Son. This day—in the eternal “today” of My Being—I have begotten You. I love You.” And thus, from all eternity He begets His Son and shares with Him all of His divine nature—all His infinite power and knowledge and presence, all that He is. Both “with” God the Father and Himself God—that is what John tells us of the second Person of the great Three-in-One. And, to underline His full divinity and His oneness with the Father, John ascribes to this eternal Word—to the Son—special agency in the divine act of creation. “All things were made by Him,” John tells us, “and without Him nothing was made that was made.” In our sin-darkened world, filled as it is with death and dying, it is the eternal Word—the Son of God Himself—of whom John says, “In Him was life, and the Life was the Light (for all human beings).” Into our world so dark with selfishness and hate, there beams from Him the light of His pure and self-giving love.

And then John speaks of the divine miracle—the mystery—which took place in the womb of the holy Virgin, “And the word became flesh and dwelt among us.” We treasure all the details in the Gospel accounts of His birth that illustrate this life-giving truth which so far surpasses our understanding.

He “became flesh and dwelt among us”—as one of us. That is why Luke tells us that the “days were accomplished” for Mary to give birth. The Child who had been conceived in her needed to develop in her womb for nine months, growing within her, protected within her, drawing all His nourishment from her just as all of us did from our mothers. He was born

there in that stable—in all the labor and the pain of childbirth, just as you and I were born. He needed to be wrapped up snugly against the chill of the night; He needed to be laid in the softest bed available; He needed to nurse at His mother’s breast; and He needed the protection of a watchful father—just like every other baby who has ever been born. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” John says. The eternal Son of God is truly our Brother.

II

Luke’s and Matthew’s nativity-accounts also reflect the truth that the One who became flesh for us and was born for us there in Bethlehem is the eternal Word—He who in the beginning “was with God and (who Himself is) God.” He is conceived by the Holy Spirit in the virgin’s womb. It is a heavenly messenger who explains that truth to Joseph in a dream. His birth is announced by an angel from heaven, and a whole choir of angels sings in His honor. “Incarnation,” “the God-Man,” “Immanuel” meaning ‘God with us’—we use terms such as these to express this event which we cannot fully plumb with our reason or understanding, this event which transforms our existence and gives us hope and light and life. The Baby in the manger—so weak, so tender, so dependent on His parents—is none other than the Son of God. His birth makes everything new for us.

For the greatest mystery of Christmas is the divine love of the Father who has given us this gift. It is the love of the Holy Spirit who has conceived this Child in the womb of the Virgin. It is the love of the Son of God who has come to give Himself for us.

It is that mystery of divine love that we see in the humble circumstances of His birth. His cradle is not a luxurious bed for royalty. It is a food-trough for cattle. His mother wraps Him not in fine silks as befits a prince, but in “swaddling clothes”—whatever scraps of cloth that she could find and bring along. It is not courtiers or nobles or princesses but lowly shepherds who come to pay him homage. The eternal Word has come in humility, in self-chosen lowliness and weakness—to “dwelt with us,” to live our life as One of us and to be holy and loving to a degree of perfection that you and I cannot attain.

And He has come to give Himself into death—our death. The cross of Calvary on which He will be crucified like a criminal—that cross is already in our minds as we stand with the shepherds at the side of His manger. The sufferings and death which He will finally endure—they belong to the saving purpose for which He has been born. And to that saving purpose belongs also His resurrection victory. He has come to smash the power of sin and the grave, not for His own sake but for ours. He has come out of His

pure, saving love, St. John tells us, in order to bring His light and His life to such as you and me.

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” That is the holy mystery of the Incarnation which makes this day so joyful for us.

May the Holy Spirit fill our hearts with that joy for Jesus’ sake. Amen