

The Divine Coming

Thoughts for Christmas

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THE time of Christmas and Epiphany is one of unmixed happiness. It is one of the few seasons of the Church year which have that purely blissful note. The sorrowful sequel to the events of this time is still far ahead; we are able to put the thought of it out of our mind and to immerse ourselves in the sheer joy of this period. It is a grace, I think, to be able to feel that joy, because it is an indication that, whatever our defects may be, we are attuned to the Church and its life.

THE DIVINE COMING.

The very thought of the coming of Our Lord should have the effect of stirring us to our depths. Of all events, it is really the central one — that divine coming among us promised from the very beginning. How many years before was it that those words were uttered which promised the Redeemer: “I will set enmities between You and the Woman!” What hopes rested on that prophecy!

Those words spoken by Almighty God to the Serpent resounded down the ages and through all peoples. As the races dispersed over the world, they brought with them that promise. North, east, south or west, it went with them, and it became the heart of their religious systems. Every pagan mythology had that idea of a Redeemer who was to be born of a Virgin. In most of them it became much disfigured with the passage of time, but still we are able to trace the outline of it clearly enough.

But the theme was distinct, and remained so, in the Jewish books. In fact, as time went on and each new prophet arose, it was given greater clarity. “A Virgin shall conceive and bring forth a Son and they shall call his name Emmanuel, that is, ‘God with us’.” Then in the Book of Daniel, the very time of the Birth is foretold in terms which are obscure to us but precise to the experts. And the place in which the paramount event is to take place is foretold by the Prophet Micheas (Micah) in these words: “And you, Bethlehem, are not the least among the princes of Judah; for out of you shall come forth the captain that shall rule my people Israel.”

And now, at the time that we are commemorating the long-foretold event is about to take place. We would expect that around such a portentous happening there would be a setting that could be regarded as appropriate, something impressive. Should not that Woman and her Child of intertwined destiny appear in the heavens, clad in light, an astounding, even terrifying spectacle, overpowering the emotions of men? But as we are aware, things worked out in very different fashion. The reality strikes the opposite pole. It is not tremendous, but painfully simple; not divine-looking but abjectly human; not royal or rich, but poor — penniless. No palace, not even a habitation. Truly, God’s ways are not our ways.

BEAUTIFUL THOUGHTS AND MEMORIES.

It is not about the doctrine of this wonderful Nativity that I am going to talk, but about its picturesque side, the one that stirs us, that rejoices us at this time of beautiful thoughts and memories.

I am going to pick some little of the symbolism, the legend, the literature, and perhaps even the fable, which love has woven around that eternal event. We must not decry those things just because they do not appear in the inspired narrative. Sometimes one hears people speaking lightly about that picturesque side. What is in the New Testament is very brief, a skeleton. We have to clothe that skeleton with flesh. Bear in mind that on that skeleton there really was a tissue. We do but piously try to restore it. The Nativity had its retinue of facts and circumstances, just as every item of history is so surrounded. But more than any other, this one was linked to men's lives. It determined the fate of all generations. Everything about it had a profound meaning. Everything down to the smallest detail had the purpose of fulfilling some prophecy, teaching some lesson, or making some eloquent pointing to the future. Recall the Scripture which tells us that not a sparrow falls without the Father's will; nor is there a hair of your head that is not numbered. That is the manner in which God descends into detail. The detail is infinite. We see too little of it and not too much. Especially this is the case in regard to anything which bore on the Messiah. Everything in the Old Law was symbolic of Him and of the Woman who was to bear Him. We see but a fraction, and it will be one of the sweet occupations of heaven to see all.

Every flower and stone and living thing, the water and the air, all are for Him and tell of Him and somehow reflect Him. It is not rash but a reasonable process to try to fill in what is not told, to endeavour to glimpse the divine pattern.

Christmas is drawing nigh. The days of the expectation of the Child have arrived. Our Lady's preparations are advanced. Her sewing is done. The hearts of St. Joseph and herself are full of rapture. The long-awaited One, the Hope of Nations, the Salvation of the World, He that is Wonderful, the Counsellor, God the Mighty, Father of the World to come, the Prince of Peace, is shortly to appear to eyes. (All these are epithets from the Prophet Isaias, (Isaiah,) among others.)

THE ROAD TO BETHLEHEM.

But at this point, something asserts itself, something which appears to be purely human but which was foreseen by the prophets seven hundred years before. The merciless power of Rome steps in and takes a hand in the game. The Emperor Augustus decreed a census of his Empire. Of that dominion, the Holy Land had become part; because the sceptre, that is sovereignty, had departed from Judea, (from Judah). This was one of the signs specified by the prophets of the coming of the time of Our Lord: that Judea would have ceased to be independent.

The imperial decree proclaimed that all must register without exception and that each one should do so in the city of his tribe. Mary and Joseph were of the tribe of David. The central city of the tribe was that place, the name of which is now so wonderful, Bethlehem. And so to Bethlehem they prepared to go.

The distance to Bethlehem is 86 miles from Nazareth. The road goes through Jerusalem, and Jerusalem is six miles from Bethlehem. It was winter time. Contrary to what we might imagine, winter there is cold and that cold could be severe. Probably there will be snow, and tradition clothes Bethlehem with snow on that great night. Here I remind you of the foretelling by Our Lord of the destruction of Jerusalem when He said: "Pray that your flight may not be in the winter time." But

He reserved that very fate for His most beloved, His Mother. He did not spare her. Her destiny was part of His; it came out of His just as His Body came out of hers.

That journey could have dangers as well as discomforts. The Bible is full of references to lions in Palestine. Leopards and bears and wolves lurked at that time in the caves and in the forests, particularly in the Valley of the Jordan. Night, of course, was their prowling time and the Holy Family would probably not then be abroad. In addition to the savage wild animals, there was a greater danger from the savage wild men, the brigands who then abounded.

While the Holy Family was not then unduly exposed to those kinds of dangers, especially as there were crowds journeying by reason of the census, I point forward to the Flight into Egypt when they will have to face those perils in their grimdest form. Then they will be by themselves, moving by night, keeping away from the tracks that other travellers would follow. Because they will be flying from the pursuing power of Herod.

THE SEARCH FOR ROOM.

It is reckoned that on the fourth or fifth day from Nazareth they would reach Jerusalem. Then they would of course hurry on to Bethlehem, which is the final short leg of the journey. They were days of immense fatigue, because Our Lady was not fit to travel. One old painting shows the scene. The little donkey bears that beloved woman. She is drooping. One arm is round St. Joseph's neck as he walks beside her, supporting her. An angel is holding the bridle of the donkey and steering it on its way. The saddle is just a folded cloth. Contrary to the common custom of portraying him as older, St. Joseph would probably have been about thirty years old [or perhaps younger].

One old legend said Our Lord was born a little prematurely, so anxious was Our Lady to see His face. This might have a bearing upon the seeming catastrophe of the refusal of Bethlehem to accommodate the wayfarers. More than other women do, Mary knew when her Babe should be born. She would not have deliberately placed that event in Bethlehem at the moment of great crowding. So it could be that Our Lord arrived a little sooner than expected.

We can imagine the anguished search through Bethlehem for accommodation. The position at the moment was that every member of the House of David was concentrated on that comparatively small town. Though they did not realise it, they were the playthings of a divine manoeuvre, in being thus brought together. They were fulfilling their significant part in redemption. They were being assembled to be present at the birth of their greatest Child. The crowding of course was extreme. Imagine, for instance, what Cork would be like if every Cork man and woman had to return there for a day! We can see, too, that the exodus from the countryside, which we are so much deplored today, was a feature then as it is now. As Solomon declared, there is nothing new under the sun.

Bethlehem was — and I think continues to be — a place of about three thousand persons. [Demographers maintain that Bethlehem's population was around a consistent 3,000 until about 1930 when it slowly began to rise. It was 8,000 in 1945, and in 2007, it was 25,000.] Bethlehem consisted of an amphitheatre in a valley surrounded by hills, the town nestling into the bosom of those hills. It is an extraordinary thing that although Bethlehem had innumerable advantages of a type that we would call tactical or strategic for warfare, it possesses no title to fame other than the fact that it brought forth King David who was born there, and later, Him of Whom King David was the progenitor, the Prophet and the type, that is, Our Lord. One thing, which all travellers talk about and have talked about since that day, has been the beauty of the women of Bethlehem. Some of the

writers have not hesitated, probably with reason, to ascribe this to the blessing imparted to the place by her who was the most beautiful of them all.

There was no room for them in the inn at Bethlehem! Awful words, showing a shocking situation! "He came unto His own and His own received Him not." First, they were seeking for ordinary accommodation, and in a little while, they were seeking for any accommodation. Then they had to strike out further afield, and finally the celebrated stable was their sanctuary.

THE STABLE.

Let us beware of thinking that this stable was a wooden structure of the crib type. It was a dugout or cave. It was a shelter for sheep or oxen in bad weather. In that least of places, which Papini in his well-known Life of Our Lord refers to as the dirtiest spot on earth, was born the Lord of the World. This series of frustrations and humiliations looks fantastic, but it is not quite as bad as we are inclined to think it. There is no question whatever, I would say, of Our Lady being just ruthlessly turned away from doors.

Living was a simpler matter in those days. The traveller brought along a rug or blanket; found a little spot between two other people in any shelter or under some sort of roof; squeezed in and slept. It is most certain that Our Lady could have been provided for in that manner. But in her case, privacy was necessary, and Bethlehem was like a tin of sardines that night.

But the amazing, the providential fact is that alone in all that land were the Holy Family unable to find a corner. Even on that night of over-crowding not one other person was relegated to that stable. However, they had in it the privacy that they needed, a privacy of the selectest character, reserved to themselves alone.

It was not the picturesque haven shown by the cribs, with fragrant straw and nice cradle-like manger. The reality was very different. It is described by St. Jerome as being little better than a hole in the ground, and he should know because he lived in it for thirty years when he was translating the Bible into Latin. The place was the refuge of animals. We can imagine the rest. It was piercingly cold that night and miserably dark. How did they give themselves a light? We must assume that St. Joseph had a lantern.

One author tells us something that we would not have thought out for ourselves but which must have been the case. It is that in that abode were swarms of vermin and that these would at once rush to welcome anything warm and offering nourishment. Thus, the new-born Child was destined to shed His blood the moment He was born. Contemplate the distress of the mother, helpless to save Him from this terrible affliction! Thus, did Mary bring forth her Son and by the instruction of Gabriel call His name "Jesus", because He would save the people from their sins.

SYMBOLISM AND LEGEND.

This happening is brimful of symbolism. As we have said, we cannot see too much symbolism in it. In fact, we are only just scraping at the surface of it. The very name of Bethlehem is full of symbolism. It means "the House of Bread," and its older name was "Ephrata," which means "the House of Flesh." Here are two overwhelming prophetic pointings. Truly was Our Lord the House of Flesh in which the Divinity dwelt. Likewise, you will recall that quotation in the Hand-book of the Legion of Mary, which points to the fact that Our Lord was laid in a manger because He was destined to be the Food of the world, and on straw, which typified that He was the Divine Wheat later to be made into the Eucharistic Bread.

Present with the supreme personages in the cave were members of the animal order. They were there in a representative capacity. They were the faithful ass and an ox which was sheltering there. The ass was a biblical symbol of the Israelites, the chosen people, and the ox was a biblical symbol of the Gentiles. Here you have again this meaningful pointing to the mission of Our Lord to the chosen people and then to the whole wide world.

The legends go on to say that the cave was the ruin, or part of the ruins of an old palace of King David himself, who had been born there. Imagine if this should be true: that the excluding of Jesus from Bethlehem itself should bring about His being born in the palace of King David whose great Successor He would be.

Yet what meets the eye is degradation and rejection. Not only that, but one really could say, having regard to the defects of that habitation, that it was not a habitation at all; that He was born publicly.

Then the thought jumps to mind that He was likewise destined to die publicly. At that moment, He will be even more deprived. Instead of the straw-filled manger, He will lie on the bare wood of the Cross. Instead of the rocky roof, He will only have the canopy of heaven. Instead of His Mother's soft fingers, the cruel nails will hold Him. As He was born publicly and rejected, He would die in the same way.

SHEPHERDS WORSHIP THE LAMB.

But on neither occasion would He be absolutely rejected. There would be a faithful few around the Cross, as there were around the manger. Scripture in its beautiful accents says to us: "There were in the same country (actually it refers to the poor place called Beit-Sahur some little distance off) shepherds watching and keeping the night-watches over their flock. And behold an angel of the Lord stood by them, and the brightness of God shone round about them, and they feared with a great fear. And the angel said to them: 'Fear not; for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, that shall be to all people. For this day is born to you a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David. And this shall be a sign unto you. You shall find the Infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger'. 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 goodwill'." (Saint Luke 2:8-14.)

Tradition says that there were three shepherds. I wonder what proportion of the cribs give effect to that tradition? The shepherds hastened and found Mary and Joseph and the Infant lying in the manger, and they paid homage. This was of an importance that they did not remotely glimpse. Unconsciously they were the representatives of the chosen people: and very appropriately, shepherds — for the Jews had been a pastoral race throughout their earliest history. Again the note of significant imagery is struck. Is it not shepherds who fittingly should be the first to honour the Lamb of God? The breathtaking detail of the whole thing!

And there is more. We are told that the Lord came to those who were least. Into that category entered the shepherds of Judea. These were a despised and rejected caste. The Courts of Justice were forbidden to receive their testimony and they were placed almost on the same level as the heathen. Yet, out of all mankind, it is to those that the Babe stretches out His arms first, and it is they of all mankind who yield the first tribute of homage to Him who has been the expectation of all nations. Members of the Legion of Mary should pay special notice. This is a fortifying thought to us Legionaries whose attention turns so instinctively towards the lesser elements in the population.

Still afar at that moment, but journeying ever nearer and nearer led by their star, were the Magi, the representatives of the Gentile races. They too were coming to salute the new-born King, second in time to the chosen people, but discharging their role better, more worthily, nobly, and meriting for the Gentiles the higher destiny which would descend upon them later.

HIS MOTHER.

Jesus in His birth did his young Mother no hurt, no harm. In most other ways, He implicated her in His own desperate fate. It was not His plan to spare her in any way, as was evident from the subsequent course of her life. His life was a privilege and in that privilege, she was to share most fully.

But on this occasion, He did spare her for some reason deeply connected with His plan, and when those eager shepherds came they found a radiant young woman in no way exhausted, but blissfully happy in possession of her Treasure, which she offered for their inspection and adoration. But she did not speak to them, because she was at the height of the time of ritual uncleanness prescribed by the Old Law. She was unclean according to the Law and she must not speak.

May we not suppose that she gave the shepherds the first Benediction ever given before they departed praising and glorifying God! St. Francis of Sales says that Mary and Joseph did not hear the angelic chanting that the shepherds had heard, but were left to the operation of pure faith.

Why did the shepherds' story, when they went forth proclaiming those things, not cause a greater excitement than apparently was the case? People seem not to have bothered. The Holy Family was not besieged, and later they went to Jerusalem for the Presentation without any fuss or even interest. It was left to a couple of people who were animated from within by the Holy Spirit to notice the Child and to take an interest in Him. Herod did not then take any action. Some of the old accounts say that rumours did circulate and that investigators were sent to Bethlehem to see what they could pick up. Noting the simplicity of the persons and the commonness of the whole business, they went away in absolute contempt. And that, no doubt, would represent the general attitude. Also, remember what I have said on the subject of the alleged unreliability of the shepherds. When they talked, probably people believed that it was not the Divine Spirit, but a very much more ordinary type of spirit which was moving them. We must also take count of the normal human incredulity. It is difficult to make mankind believe anything that is supernaturally marvellous. Witness our own coldness towards the Eucharist and the scoffing attitude of the remainder of the world.

The apocryphal Gospels place on St. Joseph's lips a statement that at the birth, time itself stopped short for a moment: that everything in nature went into suspended animation; even the birds remained stationary in the air! That is one of the details which is more than an exaggeration and which we need not accept.

In the same line of thought is the captivating theme, dear to the poets, that on this unique day peace brooded over the world; no war-trumpet profaned the air; no sound was heard of clashing arms: no bloody streamlets stained the clay.

We are told pointedly by the Gospel that Mary kept all those things, pondering them in her heart. Why is this so significantly stated? Obviously, in everything that was happening she was seeing, to a depth that we cannot probe, the realisation of every prophecy and every symbol, and the total fulfilment of the Old Law. In particular, she was remembering for St. Luke, because she was the main human source of the happenings concerning the Annunciation, the Birth, and all those earlier

details of Our Lord's life that St. Luke sets down. It was from Mary, the Mother of God, that St. Luke learned all those things.

May we, in our turn, ponder all these things in our hearts!
