

Reflections

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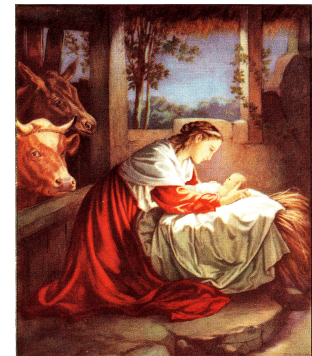
UNTO US A SAVIOR IS BORN

We soon will celebrate Christmas. There will be the buying and decorating of trees, the giving of gifts following a month-long shopping spree, the sending of a huge number of greeting cards to friends and relations, and likely a family gathering concluding with an ample dinner. Most of us – hopefully, all -- will be at Mass, singing traditional seasonal songs which praise God. Churches will be beautifully decorated with fir trees and poinsettias, an abundance of lights, both candle and electric, and a crèche with statues representing our Savior and those who were with him in Bethlehem. It is a time when, in spite of the secular influences that surround us in our daily lives, we experience the joy of God’s presence.

Christmas, however, is more than a religious “birthday party.” It marks one of the most important events in human history, the date when the Second Person of the Holy Trinity was born in his human nature. Jesus came to fulfill the old covenant that God made with the Jewish people, and to inaugurate a new covenant with all people. His birth changed our relationship with our Creator. The words we use to describe God – eternal, infinite, omniscient, omniscient – are beyond our full understanding. We have no experience with what they mean. God as a Divinity is a mystery. But when Jesus took the form of man, he gave us a proximity to God. He was a figure in human history, who was born, had friends, taught, suffered and died – occurrences which we can comprehend. As Pope Benedict XVI, in his recent book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, says: “He has brought God, and now we know his face, now we can call upon him.” Our Lord’s birth is considered so significant that history is recorded as before or after it, as BC or AD.

This coming was not an unexpected event. For hundreds of years, prophets, both Jewish and pagan, had been predicting it. Even the place of His birth was foreseen. As St. Matthew recounts in his Gospel, the prophet Micheas, about 500 years earlier, had stated: “And you, Bethlehem...from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel.” The Magi traveled to Bethlehem, not because they were told of the birth of a Messiah, but because they were familiar with the prophesies and interpreted the signs correctly.

His birth in many ways is full of, at least to us, anomalies. Although it had been foretold, and the Jewish people had been awaiting his arrival, St. John tells us that “He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him.” He was God the Son, coequal with the Father, and ruler over the earth. Yet, he chose to be born in a stable, hewn out of rock on a hillside, under the earth. He was born, as Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, in *Life of Christ*, tells us, not to live but to die. We consider death as putting an end to what we can accomplish in life. Jesus came to die on the Cross, to be crucified for our sins, to pay the debt that mankind had incurred from Adam onward. He was begotten, not made, conceived not through a physical act of love between a mother and father, but as a spiritual act of will. God through the Archangel Gabriel asked Mary to



be his Son's earthly mother; she consented with the words, "Be it done to me according to thy word," and she conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus was not created as we were, with a beginning to our existence. As God, he is eternal, existing outside of time. At the Incarnation, which we designate in time, his divine nature united to itself a human nature through Mary. In a much lesser sense we have a similar union of two aspects of our human nature, with body and soul. One is material that will return to dust, and the other spiritual that will continue forever and be rewarded or punished for our earthly behavior.

Our Lord chose to be born in Bethlehem, which means House of Bread. The imagery of bread occurs throughout his life – when the devil tempted him in the desert, in the multiplication of the loaves, in the words of the *Our Father* which he taught to his apostles, when his companions recognized him on the trip to Emmaus as he broke bread for them, when he referred to himself as the living bread and the bread of life. As one of His last acts, just hours before he died, he instituted the Eucharist, transubstantiating bread and wine into his body and blood, which provides us with a continuing source of grace.

Our recollection of this momentous birth should not be limited to December 25. Remember two events that preceded the Christmas Nativity. When the Archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary, he began with the salutation, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee." Shortly thereafter, when Mary went to visit her cousin in the hill country, Elizabeth greeted her with the words, "Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb." Every time we say the *Hail Mary*, we repeat the words of the Archangel and of Elizabeth. As we pray, we should think of when these words were first said and of the Christmas to which they led. We should be thankful for the great gift Jesus gave us, making God accessible and intimate.

Have a very Merry Christmas, and *Vivat Jesus* -- may Jesus continue to live in our hearts, our society, and in the world, as he does in heaven.