

Born of God

In the name of him who continues to make his dwelling among us, full of grace and truth, dear friends in Christ: On this most sacred of days we join the people of God throughout the entire globe in celebrating the wondrous mystery of our Lord's incarnation. As the Evangelist John says it: the eternal Word who is both with God and is God became flesh. The Creator by whom all things were spoken into existence entered and became part of his Creation. The one who transcends all time and space located himself in and allowed himself to be confined by time and space. God, who formed man in his own image, took on the form and substance of a man. It's absolutely astounding. It's more than just hard to grasp how it could be so; no, it's enough to melt your brain if you think about it too hard.

Today's Epistle, by contrast, the reading from Hebrews, locates the Lord Jesus in heavenly glory, seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high. There it says he is upholding the universe by the power of his Word. And that we can understand. That we can envision. He is God, after all; and it's where we expect him to be, doing precisely what we expect God to be doing: upholding his creation in such a way that everything in it depends upon him. But to try to wrap your head around how it is that the newborn Christ child lying in the manger so weak, so helpless, so completely dependent upon the care of his virgin mother—that he is at the same time eternal and almighty God ... it goes far beyond human reason. And yet it is true. There in the Bethlehem stable, the Life that is the Light of men is shining in the shadows of this dark and loveless world. We can't understand it. We can't see how it could be. But by God's grace and the working of his Holy Spirit we can and we do believe it.

And, perhaps more to the point, we can also answer the question that is far more important to us than "how?" We know the answer to "why?" This is what St. John is telling us in the opening verses of his Gospel. He's not attempting to unravel the inscrutable mystery of the incarnation, *how* the Son of God became a man; he's explaining its significance for us. And he says it quite plainly: Jesus, the eternal Word becomes flesh, he is born of woman, in order that we may be born again of God. John writes, "To all who receive him, who believe on his name, he gives the right to become the children of God."

And this means that those who have not received Jesus by trusting in him, are not the children of God. A lot of people don't understand this. They think that every person who comes into this world is automatically born a child of God. They bristle with indignation when anyone suggests otherwise. But the Apostle John – together with the entire witness of Holy Scripture – says they're wrong. And we can take it all the way back to Genesis, to the very beginning. The only two humans who were actually "born of God" were our first parents, Adam and Eve. To them was given the great birthright of being God's own children – created in his image. But like Esau, who later rejected his great birthright for a single meal, they threw away their even greater birthright for a single bite of the forbidden fruit. In so doing they lost the right to be called God's children. And they certainly could not pass on to any of their children what they no longer had the right to themselves. Instead, planted in their hearts was the seed of Satan. It was his voice to which they chose to listen, with the result that in a spiritual sense they became his children. And like him, their hearts and minds were filled with darkness and evil. This is what they passed on to their descendants – and that would include all of us. We're all born with Satan as our father, and with our hearts and minds in the dark.

But the Light shines in the darkness. This is the good news. The Lord seeks to save. He seeks to restore that which is lost. And he does it by sending his Word into the world. We see this initially when he called to our first parents when they ran from his presence and hid among the trees in the Garden. They didn't want to face the Lord. They knew what his verdict would be. The Light was shining in the darkness, but people loved the darkness rather than the Light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the Light and does not come into it for fear that his deeds will be exposed. Good thing for us, the Lord is not a quitter. He kept calling. He called them into his Light. He exposed their wickedness. He condemned it. But he also promised them a Savior: the Seed of the woman who would crush for them the serpent's head. And believing that promise, by receiving that Word of God into themselves and trusting in it, they were born again the children of God.

And so it has gone throughout all human history. The Lord shines the Light of his Word into the darkness of this world. Most people flee from it like cockroaches on the kitchen floor when someone turns on the light switch. But by God's grace and the work of his Holy Spirit others do not. They stand transfixed like deer in the headlights. Staring into the perfect Light of God's Holy Law, they are convicted of the truth of their sin and evil. They tremble before the judgment they know they deserve. And in this way they are prepared to receive the promise of the Savior. And when they do, they too are reborn the children of God.

This was the mission and ministry of St. John the Baptizer. He came as a witness to the Light. He came to prepare hearts and minds to receive the Savior. How? By preaching the Law of God in such a way that he blistered the skin of those who heard him. When John spoke they could feel the flames of hell lapping at their feet. They knew exactly where they stood before the Almighty, and they were terrified. And then, when they were ready, John pointed them to the greater One who followed him, the One whom he came to reveal. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And confessing their sins, John baptized them into that One for the forgiveness of their sins. And thus they were reborn the children of God.

And so were you when you were baptized into the name of Jesus. It had nothing to do with any worthiness in you or anything good you'd done. No, it was all due to the grace of God. It was his work on you. You were born not of blood, that is, not by a natural birth; nor of the will of the flesh – not because you wanted it; nor of the will of man – not because someone else wanted it for you; but born of God. He gave you the Light of his Word. He planted it in your heart so that you know and trust the Savior; and so doing, he gave you life in him.

This is why the Word became flesh. The Son of God became a man born of a woman so that you could be born again of God. He became a man to do what you couldn't do: namely, to live a perfect life as a man. He became a man to offer his perfect life on the cross as the atoning sacrifice for your sins. He came to die so that you can live.

And he still comes to us today. Yes, he is seated in glory at the right hand of the Majesty on high, upholding all things by his powerful Word. And at the same time he comes to dwell among us. He comes in his Word and takes flesh in us by making us the members of his body. He comes in Holy Baptism by which he unites us to himself and gives us rebirth as the children of God. And he comes to us in the flesh in his Holy Supper, by which we receive his body and blood given for our salvation. In these ways we behold his glory, the glory of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. In these ways he gives us life.

And that's why on this holiest of days we join the Church on earth, the saints in heaven, and the holy angels in praising God for the gift of his Son. In closing, I'd like to share a portion of a very old meditation on the nativity:

Now in a manger lies the eternal Word:
The Word He is, yet can no speech afford;
He is the Bread of Life, yet hungry He lies;
The Living Fountain, yet for drink He cries;
He cannot help or clothe Himself at need
Who did the lilies clothe and ravens feed;
He is the Light of Lights, yet now doth shroud
His glory with our nature as with a cloud.
He came to us a Little One, that we
Like little children might not in malice be;
Little He is, and wrapped in clouts, lest He
Might strike us dead if clothed with majesty.
Christ had four beds and those not soft nor brave:
The Virgin's womb, the manger, cross, and grave.
The angels sing this day, and so will I
That have more reason to be glad than they. (Rowland Watkyns, 1662)

Christ is born. And we are reborn. Let us rejoice. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!