

THE THREEFOLD BIRTH OF THE SON

Isaiah 9. 2-7

Hebrews 1. 1-4

John 1. 1-14

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Happy Christmas, everyone! It is a great joy for me to be with you on this holy day as we celebrate the Incarnation of our Lord and his coming to earth in the form of a small, new-born baby.

You may have been surprised a moment ago to hear that there were no references to a small, new-born baby in our gospel reading. Our text from St John's gospel is very different. John does not adopt the approach of St Luke, who tells the Christmas story from the Virgin Mary's (or the Blessed Mother's) perspective. Nor does John give an account like St Matthew, who tells the same story from Joseph's, or the father's and guardian's perspective. No, St John the Evangelist, the Beloved Disciple (who by the way was most likely a maternal cousin¹ and the closest of all the twelve apostles to Jesus) paradoxically tells the story from the perspective of the God of all eternity.

John summarises it all in one profound, sweeping phrase: 'And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.' The Word, that Divine Word that spoke creation into being, that Divine Power which created and sustains the order of the world, came to

¹ If the evidence of all four gospels is taken and connected, certain classic commentaries (William Temple, *Readings in St John's Gospel*, p. 367; B.F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St John*, pp. 275-276; F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel and Epistles of John*, pp. 370-372), upholding ancient tradition, say that the sister of Mary the mother of Jesus is Salome, mother of James and John the sons of Zebedee. This explains why at the cross Jesus entrusted his mother to the Beloved Disciple's care (Jn 19. 26-27). By this traditional reckoning the brothers and sisters of Christ were either step-siblings on Joseph's side from earlier marriage (the tradition that Joseph was older) or cousins, 'brothers and sisters' in the broader sense frequently referenced in Scripture. And these brothers and sisters apparently did not become our Lord's disciples until after his death and resurrection; whereas John was with Mary at the cross.

earth as a small, new-born baby. The Word made flesh was born in a stable in Bethlehem. In the incarnation, the only-begotten Son of God, who came from the heart of the Trinity, revealed himself in the person of Christ. Our Lord reveals to us, and enables us to see the human face of God.

Jesus taught us to call God Father. ‘Abba, Father’ is his distinguishing teaching about God. In the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament, an enormous library of texts spanning two thousand years before Christ, you can count on the fingers of your hands the number of times God is called (and mostly likened to) a father. Yet in the New Testament, which is a small epilogue to the Old Testament, written in the second fifty years of the first century, there are well over one hundred direct references to God as Father, especially on the lips of his Son in the four gospels.

There is so much else that our Lord revealed, but there is not enough time this evening to talk about it, except to say that he was born to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; which means that after he died on the Cross, God confirmed Jesus’s mission by raising him from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion. Christ’s resurrection is the reason that we know him today and celebrate his birth.

And if we think about it for a moment, compressed into John’s confession that our Lord is the Word made flesh, God incarnate, born in Bethlehem, are two *other births* of the Son of God.

Firstly, there is a birth beyond time. Language is, of course, inadequate to explain this mystery, but our gospel text says that in the beginning, before time or creation, the Mind of God perfectly and eternally expressed itself in the Word which was with God and which was God. God does not change; God always was (and is) Mind, Word, and Spirit. Or to put it another way, using Jesus’s words, God has always

been a Father because he has always had a Son and they are bound together by the Holy Spirit, whom Christ has sent down to his people. The Father eternally begets his co-equal and co-eternal Son, and the Holy Spirit eternally proceeds from them. This is Good News: God is eternally self-giving; God is one in Three Persons, a Holy Trinity.

Secondly, there is also the birth of Christ in the hearts of his people. As our gospel text tells us, ‘But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become the children of God.’ You and I are here this happy evening because we believe in his name. We have been added to the family of our Lord’s followers and made members of his Body the Church, not by blood, not by fleshly descent, not even by human will, but by God’s gift. You and I are here because we have been touched by God, and invited by him.

Jesus told Nicodemus, a religious leader, that ‘no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’² How can a person be born again, born from above, after he or she is old? We cannot climb back into the womb a second time. Something else has to happen: and Christ told Nicodemus that it means being ‘born of the Spirit’.³ Being born of the Spirit is like the sail catching the wind and moving the boat. It is like falling in love. It is like suddenly knowing who you are and what you are supposed to be and do, and hopping to it. We didn’t imagine, invent, produce or come up with being born of the Spirit. It is beyond nature and nurture. It surpasses our willing and understanding. But there it is.

When we receive our Lord, we are not mutated by magic. By his Spirit, we are transformed by grace. We are transformed by the renewal of our minds to become, in Jesus, the people we were created to be: loving, self-giving, generous; self-forgetful, sacrificial; faithful, courageous, true; full of hope and joy. Miracles do

² Cf. Jn 3. 3.

³ Cf. Jn 3. 6.

happen: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk; lepers are cleansed and the dead are raised; and the poor receive good news. But the physical miracles are the sign of something deeper and more lasting, which has already occurred in the heart: the beginning of the journey out of death into life, our adoption as the children of our Father through the only-begotten Son.

We all came here tonight to celebrate the birth of Christ. But I imagine that each one of us has brought some other things as well. What did we bring? Dreams? Hopes? Fears? Worries? Burdens? Let me reassure you: whatever we have brought with us tonight, the Word made flesh has the perfect word to meet us in those dreams, hopes, fears, worries and burdens.

The Word made flesh, who is Emmanuel-God with us, also desires to show us that he is truly with us in our situations. So let us, we who have been born of the Spirit, walk by the Spirit as our Lord leads us into the kingdom of heaven.

To end where we began: there are not one, but three births set before us in today's great Christmas gospel, the Prologue of St John the Evangelist. Jesus Christ, Love Almighty, came down and was born at Christmas to save us; Jesus Christ, Love Almighty, was born beyond time and exists from all eternity; and Jesus Christ, Love Almighty, offers each one of us his personal welcome home, as he is born into our hearts.

Amen.