

ADVENT IV 20th December 2015

“Rorate caeli desuper: Drop down dew, ye heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain the just: let the earth be opened, and bud forth a saviour.”

– Isaiah 45:8.



These words from the Prophet Isaiah, which form the entrance chant of today’s Mass, are repeated every day of Advent in the Divine Office, and as is customary we also sing them as a prose during the Offertory of the Mass. You might say, then, that this verse sums up the whole mystery of Advent. And indeed this is the case. Poetically using the image of dewfall from heaven and a flower growing up from the earth, Isaiah hints at the true nature of this Messiah for whom the Chosen People yearned so ardently. “Drop down dew, YE HEAVENS, from above.” On the one hand this Messiah comes to us from heaven. “Let THE EARTH be opened, and bud forth a saviour.” And, yet, on the other hand, this Messiah comes to us from earth, just like the first man from whom we are all descended: “And the Lord God formed man of the slime of the earth” (Genesis 2:7).

The answer to this paradox is the Incarnation. It is so easy to forget, in a world where shopping replaces the observance of Advent and “season’s greetings” has replaced “happy Christmas,” what it is we are actually preparing for. Let your hearts therefore be still for a moment and listen to St. John’s teaching, which echoes to us across the centuries: “Every spirit which confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh, is of God: And every spirit that dissolveth Jesus, is not of God” (I John 4:2:3). To “dissolve,” or to divide, Christ means to take him on our terms and not on his. It is to see only the cute baby in the crib, and to forget that the tiny infant whose hands cannot even reach up to touch the nose of the ox whose breath keeps him warm is in fact the eternal Son of God, who holds in his hands the destinies of the nations. “Yet one little while, and I will move the heaven and the earth ... and the Desired of all nations shall come” (Aggeus 2:7-8).

And so today, a few days from Christmas, we pause. We peer into the still empty Crib and we think for a moment about this Messiah who is to come: born of God from all eternity, he comes to us like dew from heaven; born of Mary in time, he comes to us like a long awaited flower from the earth. It is of the eternal birth of God the Son that the prophet asks, “who shall declare his generation?” (Isaiah 53:8). It is of the birth according to the flesh of this same Son that St. Luke and St. Matthew give us the human genealogy, so eager they are to show that God truly has taken on flesh and entered our human family.

When today's Gospel announces to us the very date when St. John the Baptist began his public ministry, it is to remind us that God's bring his plan to fulfilment. This is one of the points which can be most reassuring as we consider the unique divinity of the Christian faith. The whole long series of prophecies reminds us that the coming of Jesus Christ is the central point of human history, the only fact which gives it its full meaning. The 483-year wait predicted by the Prophet Daniel had reached its end. For us now, the coming of Christ is not simply a past event for us to commemorate: heaven and earth have been moved. For us, the presence of Christ continues concretely in his Church and through the sacraments.

To understand how Jesus continues to be present among us today, therefore, we need to ask for the grace of understanding as much as we can the great mystery of the Incarnation – the mystery of “God with us” (*cf.* Isaiah 7:14; Luke 1:31). The Incarnation is the taking on of a visible human nature by the eternal Son of God. Since human beings are composed of body and soul – a union of matter and spirit – Our Lord chose to respect human nature when redeeming us, by coming among us as a true man, like us in all things but sin. It is in this sense that the sacraments are like the continuation of the Incarnation. God – who is an eternal, invisible spirit – chooses to save us through visible means, since we ourselves are a union of matter and spirit, body and soul. Catholicism is the religion of the Incarnation, the religion founded by the God-made-man, Jesus Christ.

When we say that “the Word was made flesh” (John 1:14), this does not, of course, mean that God *turned into* a man, in such a way that he would somehow have *stopped* being God: that is naturally impossible. The Incarnation means that Jesus Christ – who is true God *from all eternity*, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit – also became man *at a given moment in time* when, in the womb of the Virgin Mary, he assumed a human nature. He united this human nature to his divine nature, while remaining of course one person, the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, God the Son. This central mystery of our faith is beautifully summed up in one of the Christmas liturgy: “*Deus homo factus est*, God is made man. That which he was, he remains; and that which he was not, he takes up” (January 1st, office of Lauds).

It should be clear that, in the designs of God's providence, the Incarnation, the founding of the Church and the institution of the sacraments are all parts of one, unified plan for the salvation of the human race. We must never separate Jesus Christ, the Church or the sacraments from each other. During his earthly life, Jesus Christ instituted each of the seven sacraments and entrusted them to his Church so that throughout the ages we would be able to receive his grace. Through the sacraments we continue to be in vital contact with Jesus Christ, just like the people of Galilee two thousand years ago, though in a different

and more mysterious way. Just as the humanity of Jesus Christ serves as the “instrument,” or tangible cause, by which his divinity carried out its work among men, so too the sacraments are like the “instruments” by which Jesus Christ, invisible head of the Church, continues to give us his grace. It is important for us to understand that the sacraments are far from being a distracting intermediary in our relationship with Jesus Christ: on the contrary, they are the privileged *means* by which Jesus Christ exercises his role of mediator between us and the Father. The best way for us to prepare for Christmas – the best way for us to give concrete form to our faith in the Incarnation – is for us to go meet Christ in the sacraments. The ministry of St. John the Baptist in today’s Gospel reminds us of the necessity of “penance for the remission of sins.” Hence the importance of a good confession before we receive communion.

In Hebrew, the word *Bethlehem* means literally “the house of bread.” Every Catholic church is a new and heavenly Bethlehem, for in our tabernacles under the outward form of bread dwells Christ himself. The same eternal Son who built the starry skies, the same divine child cradled in the manger, the same glorious Saviour who was born so that he could die for us, who broke the fetters of hell when he rose in glory from the dead: that same Jesus – not just a reminder, not just a symbol, but God-made-man himself – is with us today. In promising the Eucharist, Christ told us, “I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever; and the bread that I will give, is my flesh, for the life of the world” (John 6:51-52).
Come let us adore him!