

SUN 12.17

A Commentary on the Gospel by John Scotus Erigena ¹

Into the theological plan of his gospel John the evangelist draws John the Baptist; deep calls to deep at the utterance of divine mysteries. We hear the evangelist relating the story of the forerunner, the man whose gift it was to know the Word as he was in the beginning, speaking to us of the one who was commissioned to go ahead of the Word made flesh. There was, says the evangelist, not simply a messenger of God, but a man. This he said in order to distinguish the man who shared only the humanity of the one he heralded from the man who came after him, the man who united godhead and manhood in his own person. The evangelist's intention was to differentiate between the fleeting voice and the eternally unchanging Word. The one, he would suggest, was the morning star appearing at the dawning of the kingdom of heaven, while the other was the Sun of Justice coming in its wake. He distinguished the witness from the one to whom he testified, the messenger from him who sent him, the lamp burning in the night from the brilliant light that filled the whole world, the light that dispelled the darkness of death and sin from the entire human race.

So then, the Lord's forerunner was a man, not a god; whereas the Lord whom he preceded was both man and God. The forerunner was a man destined to be divinized by God's grace, whereas the one he preceded was God by nature, who, through his desire to save and redeem us, lowered himself in order to assume our human nature.

A man was sent. By whom? By the divine Word, whose forerunner he was. To go before the Lord was his mission. Lifting up his voice, this man called out: The voice of one crying in the wilderness! It was the herald preparing the way for the Lord's coming. John was his name; John to whom was given the grace to go ahead of the King of Kings, to point out to the world the Word made flesh, to baptize him with that baptism in

which the Spirit would manifest his divine sonship, to give witness through his teaching and martyrdom to the eternal light.

[1](#)Journey with the Fathers – Year B – New City Press – NY – 1999 – pg 14

MON 12.18

Advent as a time of hope; a reading from the book *Seasons of Celebration* by Thomas Merton.¹

St. Gregory the Great said that all Christians should continue the prophetic mission of John the Baptist and point out the presence of Christ in the world. This may mean many different things. John was able to point out Christ at the Jordan, in a moment of fulfillment, which gave meaning to his whole life. But John also had to witness to Christ in prison, in face of death, in failure, when even the meaning of his other glorious moment seemed to have been cancelled out.

So too, we may at times be able to show the world Christ in moments when all can clearly discern in history some confirmation of the Christian message. But the fact remains that our task is to seek and find Christ in the world as it is, and not as it might be. The fact that the world is other than it might be does not alter the truth that Christ is present in it and that His plan has been neither frustrated nor changed: indeed, all will be done according to His will. Our Advent is the celebration of this hope. What is uncertain is not the "coming" of Christ but our own reception of Him, our own response to Him, our own readiness and capacity to "go forth to meet Him." We must be willing to see Him and acclaim Him, as John did, even at the very moment when our whole life's work and all its meaning seem to collapse. Indeed, more formidable still, the Church herself may perhaps be called upon some day to point out the Victorious Redeemer and King of Ages amid the collapse of all that has been laboriously built up by the devotion of centuries and cultures that sincerely intended to be Christian.

The Advent of Christ in history is not essentially bound up with the development and progress of a Christian civilization. "Christendom" is, and has been a great thing, but it has never been an absolute and

¹ New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965, p. 90.

unqualified good or an end in itself. Christendom is not Christianity. It is not "the Kingdom" and it is not the Mystical Christ.

The reality of Christian culture certainly flows from the presence of Christ in the world, but it is not identical with that presence. Our Advent is, then, not a celebration of mere traditional cultural values, however great, however worthy of perpetuation. Advent is not a mere return, a recurrence, and a renewal of the old. It cannot be a return to childhood, whether personal or social. The coming of the Lord, which is the same as His "presence", is the coming of the new, not the renewal of the old, and Sacred History is like the Heraklitean river in which no one steps twice.

Yet, since the Kingdom is the "fullness of time" it does in some sense make the past present in its fulfillment. But the past fulfilled is not the past, it is not merely renewed, it is completely transformed into the present. Baptism is the fulfillment of the Exodus, not its commemoration. The Eucharist is the Sacrifice of the Lord made present in its eternal reality, not reenacted in a ritual drama which revives the past.

We believe that He who has come and will come is present here and now: that we are in His Kingdom. Not only that, but we are His Kingdom. And I think that explains why we are not always too happy about asking John's question, since it implies a questioning of ourselves, of our life, of our part in history, of the very meaning of Christ in His Church. The fullness of time is the time of Christ's emptiness in us. The fullness of time is the time of our emptiness, which draws Christ down into our lives so that in us and through us He may bring the fullness of His truth to the world.

TUES 12.19

O Root of Jesse

From a Letter by St Leo the Great [1](#)

To speak of our Lord, the son of the Blessed Virgin Mary, as true and perfect man is of no value to us if we do not believe that he descended from the line of ancestors set out in the Gospel. Matthew's gospel begins by setting out the genealogy of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham, and then traces his human descent by bringing his ancestral line down to his mother's husband, Joseph. On the other hand, Luke traces his parentage backward step by step to the actual father of the human race, to show that both the first and last Adam share the same nature.

No doubt the Son of God in his omnipotence could have taught and sanctified men and women by appearing to them in a semblance of human nature as he did to the patriarchs and prophets, when for instance he engaged in a wrestling contest or entered into conversation with them, or when he accepted their hospitality and even ate the food they set before him. But these appearances were only types, signs that mysteriously foretold the coming of the one who would take a true human nature from the stock of the patriarchs who had gone before him. No mere figure, then, fulfilled the mystery of our reconciliation with God, ordained from all eternity. The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon the Virgin nor had the power of the Most High overshadowed her, so that within her spotless womb Wisdom might build itself a house and the Word become flesh. The divine nature and the nature of a servant were to be united in one person so that the Creator of time might be born in time, and he through whom all things were made might be brought forth in their midst.

For if the new man, by being made in the likeness of sinful flesh, had not taken on himself our fallen nature, if he who was one in substance with the Father had not stooped to share the substance of his mother, and being alone free from sin, united our nature to his, the whole human race would still have been held captive under the dominion of Satan. The conqueror's victory would have profited us nothing if the battle had been fought outside our human condition. But through this wonderful blending the mystery of new birth shone upon us, so that through the same Spirit by whom Christ was conceived and brought forth we too might be born again by a spiritual birth; and in consequence the evangelist declares believers to have been born not of blood, nor of the desire of the flesh, nor of human will, but of God.

[1](#)A Word in Season – vol. I – Advent – St Bede's Publications – MA. -
1981 – pg 93

WEDS 12.20

The Anew thing brought forth by God from among his people; a reading from treatise by St. John Chrysostom.¹

“O Key of David”

Christ had the power to set the human race free from all evils C not only the Romans, but the Persians, and simply every race of barbarians. And he succeeded in doing this with no force of arms, nor expenditure of money, nor by starting wars of conquest, nor by inflaming men to battle. He had only eleven men to start with, men who were undistinguished, without learning, ill-informed, destitute, poorly clad, without weapons or sandals, men who had but a single tunic to wear. ...He was able to persuade so many nations of men to pursue the true doctrine, not only in what concerns the present life but also the life hereafter. He succeeded in winning over these men to drag down their ancestral laws, to tear out their ancient customs, long and deeply rooted as they were, and to plant in their place other ways, which led them from the easy-going life to his own program of austerity. And he succeeded in doing this when the whole world was waging war against him, when they jeered at him, and forced him to endure the most shameful death of the cross.

These successes are not confined to the cities. They have spread to the desert, the villages, the fields, the islands, the ship basins, and harbors. Not only simple citizens and petty rulers but even those who wear the imperial crown have shown great faith and served as subjects to him who was crucified. I shall now try to prove that all this did not simply happen but that it had been predicted long beforehand.

¹ *Demonstration Against the Pagans That Christ is God*. Trans. Paul W. Harkins, Fathers of the Church Series, vol. 73. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1985. pp. 191ff.

I do not wish you to suspect that what I say had not been foretold. Therefore, I must bring forward as evidence the books of the Jews, Y the Scriptures, over which the Jews have kept such careful guard, and set before the eyes of those who are still unbelieving the predictions and testimonies about Christ would become man and still stay God. A This is our God; no other will be compared to him. He has discovered the whole way of understanding, and has given it to Jacob, his servant, and to Israel, his well-beloved. Since then he has appeared on earth and moved among men. @

Do you see how, in a few words, the prophet made it altogether clear that Christ, still remaining God, became man, that he moved among men, and that he is, himself, the Lawgiver of the Old Testament? For the prophet said: A He has discovered the whole way of understanding and has given it to Jacob, his servant, and to Israel, his well-beloved. @ For here the prophet shows that, before his coming in the flesh, he arranged and disposed all things, that he did all things by giving the Law, by exercising his providence, and by granting to men the blessings of his care.

THURS 12.21

O Radiant Dawn:

The prophets foretold that God would be seen among humankind;

a reading from St. Irenaeus. ¹

There is one God who, through the Word and Wisdom, made everything and brought everything into harmony. It is he who is the Creator and who gave this world over to the human race. Because of his greatness he is unknown to all the beings whom he has made; for no one, either in ancient times or today, has looked upon the great eminence in which he dwells. Yet because of his love he is known at all times, thanks to him through whom he created all things. He is none other than the Word, our Lord Jesus Christ, who in these latter times became a human being among humans in order to join the end to the beginning again, humanity to God. That is why the prophets, when they had received the gift of prophecy, foretold in their preaching that he would come according to the flesh and that the uniting and communion of God and humanity would be realized according to the Father's good pleasure. From the very beginning the Word proclaimed that God would be seen by humans, that he would live and talk with them on earth and that he would take part in the work which he himself had planned. He proclaimed that he would do this to save his work, and proclaimed that he would let himself be seized by it, "to save us from the hands of all who hate us", from all spirit of transgression. He also proclaimed that he would act in such a way that "we shall serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness all the days of our life" (Lk 1.71, 74), so that, caught up by the Spirit of God, humanity might attain to the glory of the Father... The prophets, then, foretold that God would be seen among

¹ *Contra Heresies*, Book 4, 20, 4-5.

humankind, according again to what the Lord said: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Mt 5.8).

It is true that because of his greatness and inexpressible glory, “no one shall see God and live” (Ex 33.20), for the Father is unattainable. But because of his love and goodness towards humanity and of his power to do all things, he goes so far as to grant to those who love him the privilege of seeing God — just as the prophets foretold — “for what is impossible with humans is possible with God” (Lk 18.27). By their own power humans will never be able to see God; but God, if he wills it, will be seen by humans, by those whom he intends to see him, when – and how – he intends it. For God can do all things: seen of old through the intervention of the Spirit in the manner of the prophets; then seen again through the mediation of the Son in accordance with the adoption, he will be seen again in the Kingdom in accordance with the Fatherhood, the Holy Spirit preparing humanity in advance for the Son of God, the Son leading them to the Father, and the Father bestowing on them that incorruptibility and eternal life which comes to everyone from the fact of their seeing God. Just as those who see the light are themselves in the light and share in its splendor, so those who see God are in God and share in his splendor. Now, the splendor of God gives life. Those who see God will thus share in life.

FRI 12.22

"O King of All Nations":

A reading about Jesus the Lord, from a sermon by St. Gregory Nazianzen.

The very Son of God, older than the ages, the invisible, the incomprehensible, the incorporeal the beginning of beginning, the light of light, the fountain of life and immortality, the image of the archetype, the immovable seat the perfect likeness, the definition and word of the Father: he it is who comes to his own image and takes our nature for the good of our nature, and unites himself to an intelligent soul for the good of my soul to purify like by like. He takes to himself all that is human except for sin. He was conceived by the Virgin Mary, who had been first prepared in soul and body by the Spirit; his coming to birth had to be treated with honor, virginity had to receive new honor. He comes forth as God, in the human nature he has taken, one being, made of two contrary elements, flesh and spirit. Spirit gave divinity, flesh received it.

He who makes rich is made poor; he takes on the poverty of my flesh, that I may gain the riches of his divinity. He who is full is made empty; he is emptied for a brief space of his glory, that I may share in his fullness. What is this wealth of goodness? What is this mystery that surrounds me? I received the likeness of God, but failed to keep it. He takes on my flesh, to bring salvation to the likeness and immortality to the flesh. He enters a second union with us, a union far more wonderful than the first.

Holiness had to be brought to us by the humanity assumed by one who is God, so that God might overcome the tyrant and so deliver us and lead us back to himself through the mediation of his Son. The Son arranged this for the honor of the Father, to whom the Son is clearly obedient in all things. The Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for the

sheep, came in search of the straying sheep to the mountains and hills on which we used to offer sacrifice.

Christ, the light of all lights, follows John, the lamp that goes before him. The Word of God follows the voice in the wilderness; the bridegroom follows the bridegroom's friend, who prepares a worthy people for the Lord by cleansing them by water in preparation for the Spirit. We need God to take our flesh and die, that we might live. We have died with him, that we may be purified. We have risen again with him, because we have died with him. We have been glorified with him, because we have risen again with him.

SAT 12.23

O Emmanuel

Jesus as fulfillment of God's promise to David, from a sermon by St. Odilo of Cluny.

The testimony of the ancient prophets to Christ's eternal being and his boundless divine presence is indeed trustworthy and true, and is confirmed by the resounding call of that inspired heavenly trumpet: Jesus Christ, yesterday and today, the same for ever. Our Savior himself tells the Jews in the gospel: Before Abraham ever existed, I am. With God the Father from all eternity, before Abraham existed (more accurately, before anything existed,) he had his eternal being; and yet he chose to be born in time from the stock of Abraham — Abraham who was told by God the Father: In your posterity all the peoples of the earth will be blessed.

The blessed patriarch David was also granted the sublime privilege of a similar promise. Revealing to him the hidden secrets of his wisdom, God the Father told him: The fruits of your body I will set upon your throne.

These two received the promise of the Savior's coming more plainly than any of our other forebears, and so they deserved to be given the first and most important place in the records of our Lord's ancestry according to the evangelist, Matthew, the opening words of whose gospel are: The genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. With these sacred words of the evangelist both the prophetic oracles and the apostolic preaching are in accord. It is evident that when the prophet Isaiah said in the person of God the Father: And so, Israel my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend in whom I took possession of you, his message was that the mediator

between God and humankind would be born according to the flesh from the stock of Abraham.

The man in the Gospel who was freed from the darkness of ignorance and enlightened by faith addressed God's Son as Son of David. Not only did he receive spiritual insight, but he also deserved to have his bodily sight restored. Christ the Lord desires to be called by this name, knowing that there is no other name by which the world can be saved. And if we ourselves wish to be saved by him who is the one and only Savior, each of us must also say to him: Lord, son of David, have mercy on me.

Holy Night, by Karl Rahner¹

SUN 12.24

CHRISTMAS EVE READING BY KARL RAHNER

Why do we call the feast we are keeping tonight a "sacred night"? Night because a beginning, holy night because a blessed and unconquerable beginning; of such a beginning we would have to say: holy night, sacred night. And so the church sings "Silent night, holy night." Everywhere in the world these words are sung for this feast. With a sacred right. For this hour is the holy and sacred night. Faith tells the Christians: that was the beginning. There God himself came gently forth from the terrifying radiance in which he dwells as God and Lord, and came to us; he quietly entered the poor dwelling of our earthly existence and was found as a man; he began where we begin, quite poor, vulnerable, quite childlike and gentle, quite helpless. He who is infinite, distant future which of ourselves we never reach because it seems to retreat farther and farther away as we hurry towards it on the hard roads of life, he himself has approached us, arrived among us, because otherwise we should never have found our way to him. He has accompanied us on our way to him so that this may find a blessed end, because the very end itself has become our beginning. God is near; his eternal word of mercy is where we are; it is a pilgrim on our paths, experiences our joy and our distress, lives our life and dies our death. He has brought his eternal life quietly and gently into this world and its death. He has redeemed us, for he shared our lot. He made our beginning his own, followed the path of our destiny and so opened it up into the infinite expanses of God. And because he accepted us irrevocably, because God's Word will never cease to be human, this beginning which is ours and his is a beginning of indestructible promises, and his silent beginning by night is a holy

and sacred night. It is a holy night. The eternal future has entered our time. Its radiance still dazzles us, so that we think it is night. But at all events it is a blessed night, a night in which there is already warmth and light, which is beautiful, welcoming and secure by reason of the eternal day which it bears hidden within it. It is a silent, holy night for us, however, only if we admit the holy silence of this night into our inner selves, only if our heart too keeps watch in solitude. It can do so easily. For such solitude and quiet is not hard. For of course we are solitary. There exists in our heart an interior land where we are alone, to which no one finds his way but God. This innermost, unfrequented chamber of our heart is really there-the only question is whether we ourselves avoid it foolishly out of guilty fear, because no one and no familiar things of this earth can accompany us if we enter it. The silent and solitary soul sings here to the God of the heart its quietest and most ardent song. And it can have confidence that he hears it. For this song no longer has to seek a beloved God beyond the stars in that inaccessible light in which he dwells and which makes him invisible to all. Because of Christmas, because the Word was made flesh, God is near and the quietest word in the stillest room of the heart, the word of love, comes to his ear and his heart. And those who have entered into themselves even when it is night, hear in this nocturnal quiet in the depth of the heart God's gentle word of love. One must be calm, not afraid of the night, hold one's peace. Otherwise we hear nothing. Let us enter quietly and shut the door behind us. Let us listen to the unutterable melody which sounds in the silence of that night. For the ultimate is only spoken in the silence of the night, now that in our night of life, through the gracious coming of the Word, there has come to be Christmas, holy night, silent night.

[1](#)Every Day Faith, Karl Rahner. Herder and Herder, 1968, pp. 32 ff.

