

INTRODUCTION

"With this ambiguous earth his dealings have been told us. These abide: The signal to a maid, the human birth, the lesson, and the young Man crucified." (Alice Meynell) The human birth of the Only-begotten of the Father is the theme of this lovely volume.

It is difficult (I once said to a friend of mine) to preach a Christmas sermon, because everything has been said. Yes, she answered with a woman's wisdom; everything has been said, and nothing has been said. I could not but agree. The human birth of the Eternal Son has evoked great streams of human utterance, in prose and verse. Much of the best is collected in this volume. But in the end all utterance must fail, as the human mind, the source of human utterance, itself fails before the reality, knowing that it has said nothing, because it has understood nothing. The event is mystery. And all human words about it can have no higher purpose than to summon the human spirit to wonder, in silence, at the *mirabilia Dei*, the wonderful deeds of God. Among the long line of them the human birth of Christ takes cardinal place; for at it God Himself, who had been heard before with the hearing of the ear, became most wonderfully visible, tangible, subject to the gaze of men and to the touch of their hands.

But before the wonder came the words. And the first thing that has to be said is what the old song says: "Christ *was* born on Christmas Day." His human birth was an event; it happened. It is not myth—that which never happened but is always true. Myths may embody human understanding, under the form of fancied fact. But there is no salvation for man in myths, since they are simply the creation of man's own mind. Man cannot be saved by a God whom man himself might make to enter his-

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tory. Man is saved by the Son of God who did enter history, sent by the Father in time, to a place, there to be born of a woman whose name we laud, who first *saw* our salvation. This is the first theme of the volume—the Nativity as historical fact.

The first appearance of Christ was, so to speak, divinely staged. And most simply staged. He stole, as it were, upon a sleeping world, without a sound save the silvery peal of some angels' singing. Not as he rose, with an earthquake that shook a city. Or as his Spirit later came, in a great rush of wind that filled the city's streets. The Nativity was the quietest of the *mirabilia Dei*. But the joy of it, as it reached the hearts of man, has needed to be shouted from man to man, in greeting and song, in all the languages of earth. And the scene of the human birth, which had its historical setting in Judea, has had to be restaged in every land, with each land adding of its own to the *mise-en-scène*. This is the second theme of the volume—Celebration. Beneath all the noise of celebration the silent spirit of wonder must abide. "The child wonders at the Christmas tree: let him continue in the spirit of wonder at the feast as an event, not accepted as pretext" (T. S. Eliot).

The *mirabilia Dei* that marked the Exodus of the Chosen People—so Moses told the people many years after the events—took place "today." That is the recurrent word in Deuteronomy, bespeaking the profoundest truth about God's wonderful deeds. They all take place "today." They do not belong to the buried past of human history but to the living present of human need. The God who acts to save must act "today," because it is today that man needs salvation. Almost desperately so in this present day of ours. So the Nativity is an event of "today." This is the third theme—Reflection. There is much reflection today on "the times in which we live." All of it seems to end in bewilderment, and some of it in despair. Even the Christian cannot fail to feel the

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bewilderment, as the impetuous pace of history today makes him uncertain whether at his next step—or his nation's—his foot will fall on solid ground. But the Christian does not despair. Amid the "turmoil of the nations," in which the turmoil of the human heart finds echo, there takes place, trans-temporally, the birth of Christ. And if Christ is born today—so may Paul be paraphrased—how do some of you say that there is no rebirth for man—no rebirth of freedom, no deliverance from guilt, no rescue from mortality? The hope of new beginnings is present today, inherent in the birth of Christ "today." This is forever the Christian reflection on the times.

Then follows the Meditation. The Christian makes it in the spirit of wonder, shot through with gratitude that fills the Preface of the Christmas Mass. The mystery of the Incarnate Word—so runs the thought of the Preface—has taken place, is "today" taking place. A new light has broken upon the eyes of the mind—the light that is the divine "clarity" itself, shining out of the Son, born humanly. And the Word of the Almighty Father does not fail to effect. By his coming the Holy Spirit, who is Love, is breathed upon the world. Sent by the Son, he is to catch us up to love of the invisible things of God. By his Christmas meditation on the Word made flesh the Christian draws in, so to speak, a new Breath, the Holy Spirit, the Energy of the Father and Son, by whom he is, with Christ, born again today. No wonder there is wonder in his spirit.

Under these four themes—an admirable organic structure indeed—the editor has gathered the thoughts of men about the mystery of the Nativity. Exquisite care has gone into the selection. And the gathering has been guided always by the spirit of wonder resident in the editor herself. I do not doubt that wonder will rise in the spirit of the reader, as he reads, reflects, meditates.

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