

Solemnity of Christmas (During the Day) December 25

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Isaiah 52:7-10

The period of advent is now completed and we celebrate the birth of our Lord some 2,000 years ago. Jesus, the Messiah, is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies.

During the Advent season we heard some of these prophecies and today we hear another. This one, by Isaiah, the greatest of the Old Testament prophets (greatness being measured by the volume of their writings). Isaiah was called to his vocation at the end of King Azariah of Judah's reign (around 744 B.C.). Jewish legend relays the story of his martyrdom (by being placed in a hollow log and sawn in half) in 687 B.C. under the wicked King Manasseh.

Isaiah was a gifted writer, rhetorician, and poet, and much of his popularity was gained by his talent with words. This fact caused some of his later admirers to join their own writings to his. However, nearly all of the first 39 chapters of his book are still attributed to him by modern scholars. But there are large parts of the Book of Isaiah (chapters 40 thru 55) which some say are better ascribed to Isaiah II (Deutero-Isaiah/Babylonian Isaiah) as they seem to describe the Babylonian exile (587 to 538 B.C.), and to Isaiah III (Trito-Isaiah/Isaiah of the return) who lived a century or so later (Chapters 56 thru 66).

These attributions to other, although unknown, authors are very recent (began in the late 19th century) and at the time of Jesus, all attribution was to the single author, Isaiah.

Our reading today is the prelude to the prophecy of the coming of Christ (the suffering servant) the suffering servant song itself is Isaiah 52:13 through 53:12.

⁷ How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings glad tidings, Announcing peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation, and saying to Zion, "Your God is King!"

This messenger truly brings good news! The excitement is obvious by the repetition ("bearing ... announcing ... saying"). We hear this same excitement in Isaiah 40:9.

⁸ Hark! Your watchmen raise a cry, together they shout for joy, For they see directly, before their eyes, the LORD restoring Zion.

The joyful cry is now repeated by the watchmen guarding the ruined walls of Jerusalem, and the people witness “the Lord restoring Zion.”

⁹ Break out together in song, O ruins of Jerusalem! For the LORD comforts his people, he redeems Jerusalem. ¹⁰ The LORD has bared his holy arm in the sight of all the nations; All the ends of the earth will behold the salvation of our God.

A thanksgiving hymn in response to the messenger. For similar songs of joy see Zephaniah 13:13-18; Joel 2:21.

2nd Reading - Hebrews 1:1-6

The identity of the author of Hebrews is unknown. With the exception of 1 John, it is the only New Testament epistle that begins without a greeting mentioning the writer’s name.

Its ascription to Paul goes back at least to the end of the second century in the church of Alexandria. According to Eusebius it was accepted as Paul’s work by Clement who, in this matter, followed the view of Pantaenus. Clement believed that Paul had written it in Hebrew for Hebrews and that Luke had translated it into Greek. Tertullian ascribed it to Barnabas. Today the Church does not ascribe authorship which is why we find it, with James; nestled between the epistles of Paul and the epistles of Peter. Note that the New Testament is divided by author and then in order of decreasing length of the writings.

The purpose of Hebrews is to demonstrate that the old covenant, specifically the worship of the old covenant, has been superseded by the sacrifice of Jesus, which inaugurated the new covenant.

¹ In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways

Old Testament revelation was fragmented with only hints of some things to come and it was delivered through many different ways.

to our ancestors

The ancestors (fathers) of Israel

through the prophets;

Not only those whose preaching is preserved in the Old Testament books bearing their names, but all in Israel’s history through whom God spoke (Abraham, Moses, Nathan, Elijah, etc.).

² in these last days,

The author of Hebrews, together with primitive Christianity in general, regarded the final age as inaugurated by the Christ-event, pre-eminently by Jesus' redemptive sacrifice, and he speaks of the Christians as those who have experienced "the powers of the age to come" (Hebrews 6:5).

he spoke to us through a son,

Predominantly, the Old Testament revelation was a prophetic interpretation of certain events of Israel's history as acts of God. God's speaking through His Son is primarily the revelation of His saving purpose in respect to mankind through the coming of Jesus and the "eternal redemption" achieved through His death and exaltation.

whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe,

The Son's role as redeemer and mediator of creation. His being made heir was not an event outside time, previous to the incarnation; it took place when He entered glory after His passion. However, it is clear that He existed before He appeared as man: through Him God created the universe.

³ who is the refulgence of his glory, the very imprint of his being,

An exact representation. Wisdom is called the image of God's goodness in Wisdom 7:26.

and who sustains all things

He guides and sustains all that has been created through Him (Colossians 1:17), just as Wisdom "reaches from end to end mightily and governs all things well" (Wisdom 8:1).

by his mighty word.

Whatever God speaks, happens.

When he had accomplished purification from sins,

Attention is now turned from the cosmological role of the pre-existent Son to the redemptive work of the humiliated and glorified Jesus.

he took his seat at the right hand of the Majesty on high,

Jesus' enthronement "at the right hand" of God is seen as the fulfillment of Psalm 110:1. This text is frequently used in the New Testament to describe the glorification of Jesus (Acts 2:34-36; Romans 8:34; Colossians 3:1; 1 Peter 3:22); its use is probably based on

Jesus' reply to the high priest in Mark 14:62 "You will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven".

⁴ as far superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. ⁵ For to which of the angels did God ever say: "You are my son; this day I have begotten you"? Or again: "I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me"?

In Semitic thought, the name designated what a person was, and reception of a new name indicated a change in the person who received it. In Philippians 2:6-11 the name that indicates the new status of the exalted Jesus is "Lord"; here it is "Son". So far as His human nature is concerned, Jesus became Son of God in the fullest sense at His resurrection. In His divine nature, the title "Son" belonged to Him always (Romans 8:3 "God sent His Son ...").

⁶ And again, when he leads the first-born into the world,

The incarnation

he says: "Let all the angels of God worship him."

Deuteronomy 32:43 and Psalm 97:7 as given in the Septuagint. This is further proof of Christ's superiority; the angels are to worship Him.

Gospel - John 1:1-18

Mark and John are the two gospels which do not have a birth narrative. At first thought, it seems odd to be hearing this Gospel on the day we celebrate the birth of Jesus the Christ. However, a closer look at this reading reveals that John, faithful to Semitic tradition, begins with a genealogy. The Gospel of Matthew traces Jesus' genealogy from King David (Matthew 1:1-17); the Gospel of Luke traces Jesus' genealogy all the way back to Adam (Luke 3:23-37). John's gospel, however, gives a genealogy of divine, not human origins.

¹ In the beginning

An allusion to Genesis 1:1. John will show that Jesus is truly the creative word of God who already existed at the beginning of time.

was

Not past tense, but an imperfect tense denoting continuous, timeless existence.

the Word,

In the Old Testament the word of God is God's manifestation, the revelation of Himself,

whether in creation, in deeds of power and of grace, or in prophecy. Christ, the Incarnate Word, is the ultimate and complete revelation of God (Hebrews 1:1-4).

and the Word was with God,

A distinction in godhead. The Word existed along with God.

and the Word was God.

The Word is divine, but He is not all of divinity, for He has already been distinguished from another divine person.

² He was in the beginning with God.

For the fourth time John insists that the Word was with God at the beginning. Unlike created things, there never was a time when the Word was not.

³ All things came to be through him,

John does not call Christ the Creator, a title reserved in the New Testament for the Father (Colossians 1:15ff). The Word is the instrumental or meditative cause of creation; this does not imply subordination but logical order.

and without him nothing came to be.

This expresses the same truth in a negative fashion.

What came to be ⁴ through him was life,

All created existence has always had its origin in the life of the Word. Life is not mere existence – even inanimate things exist. Life is some kind of sharing in the being of God.

and this life was the light of the human race;

The life of which John speaks, as truly a sharing in the life of God, must be a life of ultimate understanding, the revelation of God. The rabbis spoke similarly of the Torah as light. John will later in his Gospel apply to Jesus the Word other designations they used for the Torah; such as “water” (John 4:10) and “bread” (John 6:35).

⁵ the light shines in the darkness,

Darkness is that which is in opposition to God. Light and dark are opposites; dark cannot exist where there is light. The world bound over to sin is in darkness.

and the darkness has not overcome it.

Man is in darkness, but he is not darkness itself. Throughout history God's revealed word has been present for the enlightenment (brought into the light) of man – he did not need to succumb to the darkness, although he invariably did.

6 A man named John was sent from God.

As were the prophets and Jesus sent from God; quite an introduction for John the Baptist.

7 He came for testimony,

Witness is one of John's fundamental ideas.

to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.

Faith is the opposite of unbelief; light as opposed to darkness.

8 He was not the light,

John the Baptist is a witness to the light, not the light itself. This declaration may have been motivated by the fact that the Baptist's position had been misinterpreted by some who had not understood that he was the forerunner and not the inaugurator of God's kingdom (see Acts 19:1-7).

but came to testify to the light. 9 The true light,

In Hebraic usage, "true" denotes the divine order.

which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

The world of men and their affairs; a world subject to sin and darkness

10 He was in the world, and the world came to be through him, but the world did not know him.

These words are not to be restricted to the rejection of Christ by His own people. We must also think of the failure of the world to acknowledge the truth that God, through His creative word, has been made known in creation. To "know" in John does not mean simply to perceive, be aware of, but has the full Semitic sense attached to knowledge in which personal involvement is always supposed as well.

11 He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him.

The statement of the preceding verse is repeated in other terms – aimed specifically at the people of Israel.

12 But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name,

In Semitic usage, “name” is equivalent to “person”. Faith is not merely the acceptance of a proposition, but a total commitment to a person.

13 who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man’s decision but of God.

Believers in Jesus became children of God not through any of the three natural causes mentioned here but through God who is the immediate cause of this new spiritual life. The rejection of the Word was never complete. Both in the Old Testament phase of the history of salvation, as in the fulfillment in Christ, faith in the Word has been the principle of immortality (see Romans 4:1-17) whereby through the acceptance of God’s grace men might become children of God. This is a special gift of God.

14 And the Word became flesh

Flesh is not evil, but it is transitory, mortal, imperfect. At first glance, this is incompatible with God. This is the mystery of the incarnation, by which the Eternal Word took on our exact human nature, becoming one with us in everything but sin (Hebrews 4:15); in everything, that is, except what was incompatible with divinity.

and made his dwelling among us,

Literally, “pitched his tent among us”. The Word dwelled for a time in the midst of man as God once dwelled with the Israelites in the tent of meeting (Exodus 25:5; Numbers 35:34).

and we saw his glory,

Though the Word concealed His glory in becoming flesh, the Gospel is witness to its having been perceived by men.

the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.

John has reached the climax of his introduction in speaking of the Word become flesh, he never again calls Him the Word: the gospel is testimony not to the Eternal Word but the Word become flesh, Jesus the Christ, Son of God.

15 John testified to him and cried out, saying, “This was he of whom I said, ‘The one who is coming after me ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.’”

Now that John has spoken explicitly of the incarnation of the Word, he now presents the Baptist as the first in a series of witnesses who testify on behalf of the Christ-event.

16 From his fullness we have all received, grace in place of grace,

“We”, the Church, have received what was promised in the covenant with Israel has come superabundantly in the revelation of the Son of God.

17 because while the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

This is the thought of Hebrews 1:1-4 (our 2nd reading). It constitutes a final break of John’s thought with that of Judaism. The revelation of the Old Covenant was but a foreshadowing of what was to be fully revealed in the New through Christ.

18 No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father’s side, has revealed him.

The Jewish belief was firm; God was an invisible God and could not be seen by man. John may be thinking of Exodus 33:20-23, according to which Moses was not permitted to see the Glory of God, since no one may see God and live, but was allowed to see His back. But in the Incarnate Word God has been revealed completely (Colossians 1:15); only the Son sees the Father, and it is through Him that we, too, see God with eyes of faith.

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