

Sacramental Meditation on the Birth of Jesus

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Translation of his Sermon on Matthew 1: 1-17 for Christmas, 1519

WA 9: 439:18 – 441:32, 442:20-33

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The book of the birth of Jesus Christ (Mat 1:1).

I intend to speak about this birth. And to begin with, I here remind you that the whole life of Christ and the history of Christ should be dealt with from two points of view, first as a sacrament and then as an example. For Christ has been badly preached to the general Christian public only as an example of grace and presented to human eyes only as an example for imitation just like the other saints, such as Peter, Paul, or John, who have been presented to us alike as examples.

Does Christ then not surpass them in anything? Of course he does! You seek an example of humility from Jesus as you do from John. But note the difference, so that you here rightly grasp the purpose of the whole gospel! You cannot hear or learn anything more holy and pleasant than this! You do not seek an example of humility from John because he himself exhibits humility, but, because you are seized with a love for that virtue, you strive to imitate the deeds of this man as much as you can. From Christ, however, you do not only seek an example of virtue, but also the virtue itself. That is, Christ does not merely present a picture of virtue for you to imitate, but also pours out that virtue itself into people. So Christ's humility now becomes our humility in our hearts. And this is so, because I speak sacramentally; that is, all the words and stories of the Gospels are sacraments of a kind, sacred signs through which God works in believers what the histories signify.

The birth of Jesus Christ. These words are sacraments of a kind through which we receive new birth if we believe. Just as baptism is the sacrament through which God restores a man and so on, just as absolution is the sacrament through which God forgives sins, so the words of Christ are sacraments through which he works our salvation. Hence the gospel is to be taken sacramentally; that is, the words of Christ need to be meditated on as symbols through which that righteousness, virtue and salvation are given which these words themselves set before us. You can now understand the difference between the gospel and human histories. The histories of Livy depict and reflect those virtues which they themselves are unable to reproduce in other people. However, the gospel truly depicts virtues, so that it may also become the instrument, by which God changes us, remakes us, and so on.

The gospel of the church is for the salvation of the person who believes all of it (Rom 1:16). Just as grace comes, without any doubt, through baptism and the forgiveness of sins through absolution, so, without any doubt, grace and salvation come through meditation on the word of Christ. But three things are necessary for this. First, it must be preached; it does not matter whether it be by some kind of meditation or by being read out aloud. Second, we must regard it as done for us and relevant to us. So, if I hear the history of Christ and do not reckon that everything is relevant to me, in as much as Christ was born, suffered and died for me, then the preaching and knowledge of the history is of no benefit to me. Lastly, as well as these, there is faith, which, though denied, is by far the most important thing of all. However

friendly and good Christ may be, he will not be known, he will not gladden us, unless I believe that he is friendly and good to me; unless I say: "Mother, that little child is mine." Let us therefore now begin at the lowest step and meditate on the infancy of Christ.

Let us then meditate on the fact that everything which we see happening to our babies really happened to him. Let no one think that Christ already then displayed some signs of his majesty. When he was a boy, he behaved just as our babies do. I do not want you to contemplate the deity of Christ; I do not want you to look up at his majesty; no, fix your thoughts on that flesh, that boy Christ. That divinity cannot be an object of terror to any man; that unheard majesty cannot terrify anybody! Christ puts on a human nature and the whole range of human emotions apart from sins, so that you will not be frightened, but, instead, begin to be embraced, comforted and strengthened by his favor and love. So Christ is set before all people as the one who came to give salvation and grace.

I say this especially to anxious, disturbed, sad consciences, so that they look deliberately at this child and through faith meditate on him who would make reparation for us. There is no doubt that much consolation will be given to the soul by this. Take the risk, and you will experience it! Consider Christ, placed in the womb and on the lap of his dear mother, and that dear girl who remains a virgin! What could be more loveable than this boy? What less threatening than this dear girl? What more gracious than this virgin? Consider too that Christ is an ignorant boy! All this has to do with him, so that, when your conscience is alarmed, you will not be afraid to come to this boy to receive solace from him. Do not doubt this playing, bouncing baby in the lap of this girl! If you embrace him, if you join in praising him, if you laugh with him, that is, if you meditate at length on this most peaceful child, then your mind will also be most tranquil. See how God woos you! He presents a boy for you to take refuge in; nobody can be at all afraid of him, since nothing could be more loveable to anybody. Are you afraid? Then do this, yes do it! Take refuge in this baby, placed in the lap of this most beautiful and gracious girl! How great then is God's goodness which wants all things for you except for you to despair! Trust in him! Trust in him! Behold this boy from whom you may expect salvation and ask for it. For me no more effective consolation has been given to the whole human race than this Christ, who is altogether man, boy, baby, playing in the lap of this girl at the breasts of this most gracious mother. Is there anyone who is not taken in and comforted by this sight? The power of sin, hell, and the scourge of a conscience is now overcome. If you wish to take refuge in this beckoning boy, then believe and consider it certain that he has come, as he has said, not to judge you but to save you! Just as baptism most certainly works God's grace, just as absolution most certainly brings about the forgiveness of sins, so meditation on this boy, this play, will undoubtedly bring joy to the burdened conscience and strength to the anxious soul. So in passing let me say: 'Do not contemplate any signs of his divine majesty, so that you will not be afraid, but set your mind on the flesh, the laughter, and charms of this little boy!'

In sum: Christ was a man. He willingly took on human things and retained them all apart from sin. I say this so that we will not be afraid of embracing the boy and seeking salvation from him. Up to now I have spoken about sacramental meditation on the gospel. We meditate properly on the gospel, when we do so sacramentally, for through faith the words produce in us what they themselves set before us. Christ was born; believe that he was born for you, and you will be born again. Christ conquered death and sin; believe that he conquered them for you, and you will conquer them. The gospel has this distinctive characteristic gift which human

histories do not give. In the gospel righteousness, virtue and salvation are revealed. The birth of Christ is the cause of our rebirth. You see the example of God's majesty laid down in despised flesh; so you too lay down your pride and so on. You see the example of his peacefulness; so you too be a servant of concord and peace. You see how Christ becomes all things for all men; so you too serve others. Yet in order that you may have the power for this, meditate on Christ sacramentally; that is, believe that he himself will give you all this.