

HOMILY - CHRISTMAS - 2004

We gather again this night for Christmas, in which we celebrate God Himself come among us as a little child, the Savior of the world, entrusting Himself to a young virgin and a carpenter. The rightful king of all the world was born in a manger in a small, almost forgotten town. He was protected and provided for not by a mighty army but by the just and pure carpenter Joseph. Not a chariot with a team of prized horses, but a humble donkey has carried the mother and child here. And, alongside the donkey, a cow, some chickens, sheep and the like, kneel before the Son of God, now come to earth. The angels of God bypassed the rich, the powerful, and the honored of the world and announced the news of salvation and kingship, of the new era of creation to tired, humble shepherds working in a field.

It would seem like a world turned upside down, but in point of fact it is an upside down world that is now being turned right-side up. For ever since the fall of man, human life has turned upside down. As the Book of Wisdom put it, people made from their hands images of gold, silver, and wood and then worshiped their own creations turning away from their creator. See Wis. 13:10-15:17. Even the Chosen People, as the psalmist says exchanged the glory of God for the image of a grass-eating animal. See Ps. 106:19-22. And later, after repeatedly rejecting the loving law of God, the people demanded to have a king like other nations, a king who would impose upon them heavy burdens and lead to disaster. See 1 Sam. 8. As the letter to St. James would say people honored the rich and powerful who oppressed them, while dishonoring the poor and humble who served them. See James 2:6. The reactions of the people in Herod's court demonstrates the mixed up world. King Herod, upon hearing about the newborn glorious king, tried to do away with him, believing that there was a threat to his kingship, not realizing that the dark king who has oppressed humanity since the fall, death itself, would claim him before the second birthday of this new king, the king who alone could deliver him from death. Meanwhile, the court scholars, upon telling King Herod where the Messiah was to be born, did not bother to carry through themselves and see whether the ancient prophesies of judgment and glory were indeed being fulfilled, evidently considering the affairs of that transient and decadent state to be more important.

But in the midst of this crazy world, the people had not forgotten goodness. There was amidst the Chosen People an eager longing for the long-awaited Savior. Even the pagans, as exemplified by the magi, sensed a goodness, a holiness absent from their lives, and looked desperately for the one who would provide it. The philosopher Plato in his book *The Republic* had set forth the challenge to demonstrate that one who is perfectly just, have never committed injustice, yet nevertheless condemned by the world and losing everything except his goodness, could nevertheless be faithful and experience a happiness not available to others. The Romans knew that there had been a past golden age, and that we were now in a lesser state. According to the tradition of Virgil "there would be a chaste woman, smiling on her infant boy, with whom the iron age would pass away." The Roman writer Cicero recounted the saying of the ancient thinkers that there would be a "King whom we must recognize to be saved. And, meanwhile, the Romans honored their goddess Hestia, or Vesta, the virtuous virgin, but still patroness of mothers and of the home, who had forgone a throne with the gods and goddesses of Olympus, saying that wherever she was needed that would be her kingdom, and the hearth would

be her throne. Somewhere deep in their hearts they knew that there was something better than the sinful state of this world, that there was a goodness somewhere, and so they searched in the darkness and made confused myths to express the longings of their heart. The Jews had the revealed truth of God through the law, the prophets and the psalms, and many such as the Essenes wrote in dramatic terms about how they believed the Son of God would break into the world in splendor and power.

Then, on that first Christmas, the prophesies were fulfilled, the fantastic myths of the pagans were trumped by an even more fantastic fact of God had become man, the light shone on in the darkness, and the divine come into the world, establishing that new reign of grace and joyfulness. But in fulfilling the world's longings, the Almighty God shattered its expectations. He beat the world at its own game, for He trumped the world's folly in rejecting Him with what the world would consider the greatest of all folly, even a divine sense of humor, making the salvation of the world hinge on the words of a humble young woman, and the birth of a newborn child in a stable. This woman and this child were ignored or feared by the kings, pushed aside by society, but honored by the least of people and the humblest of animals, protected and provided for by a quiet carpenter who did not say a single word recorded in Scriptures.

But unlike human folly, this divine upsetting of the order of the world makes imminent sense to those, like the magi are willing to seek it, and those like St. Joseph and the shepherds are humble and quiet enough to hear the voice of heaven. For it was only fitting that a race expelled in our infancy from our home in Eden into a fallen world should be saved by one expelled in His infancy from a fallen world into a manger to which all the world would come. It was fitting that as humanity fell away from God through a woman who listened to a fallen angel and her husband who stood by in silent agreement, so God should descend from heaven to a woman who listened to a true angel and a quiet husband who courageously stood by her. It was fitting that as the devil took the form of a clever serpent to manage to manage the fall of man, so the humblest, most hard working of animals, the donkey, should arrange for the reconciliation, and that the ox, whom the Chosen People had thirteen centuries earlier worshiped as a god, should now, as Archbishop Fulton Sheen put it, "return to make his innocent reparation." It was fitting that, as no armies but rather sin expelled humanity from the grace of God, so too no armies but perfect virtue and prayer should welcome the God-man to earth. It was fitting that our true and greatest shepherd should be welcomed into the world true shepherds who watched over their flock, and that the king who would bring humanity again close to the triune God should be welcomed by three kings who came close to God from a land far-away. It is fitting that the world should be turned upside-down in order to be turned right-side up. It is fitting, as the English writer G. K. Chesterton put it,

There fared a mother driven forth
Out of an inn to roam;
In the place where she was homeless
All men are at home.
The crazy stable close at hand
With shaking timber and shifting sand,
Grew a stronger thing to abide and stand

Than the square stones of Rome.

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To an open house in the evening
Home shall all men come,
To an older place than Eden,
To a taller house than Rome
To the end of the way of the wandering star
To the things that cannot be and are
To the place where God was homeless
And all men are at home.