

Historical Commentary

(Christmas - Year A)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Luke 2:1-14 from Church Fathers and John Calvin

Chrysostom: A feast day is about to arrive, and it is the most holy and awesome of all feasts. It would be no mistake to call it the chief and mother of all holy days. What feast is that? It is the day of Christ's birth in the flesh. It is from this day that the feasts of the theophany, the sacred Pasch [Passover], the ascension and Pentecost had their source and foundation. Had Christ not been born in the flesh, he would not have been baptized, which is the theophany or manifestation. Nor would he have been crucified, which is the Pasch. Nor would he have sent down the Spirit, which is Pentecost. Therefore, just as different rivers arise from a single source, these other feasts have their beginnings in the birth of Christ.

Cassia: When Augustus reigned alone upon earth, the many kingdoms of humankind came to end; and when you were made man of the pure Virgin, the many gods of idolatry were destroyed. The cities of the world passed under one single rule; and the nations came to believe in one sovereign Godhead. The peoples were enrolled by the decree of Caesar; and we, the faithful, were enrolled in the name of the Godhead, when you, our God, were made man. Great is your mercy: glory to you!

Cyril of Alexandria: Christ, who is the first fruits of all, the second Adam according to the Scriptures, was born of the Spirit, that he might transmit the grace (of the spiritual birth) to us also. For we too were intended no longer to bear the name of sons of men, but rather of God. We have obtained the new birth of the Spirit in Christ first, that he might be "foremost among all," as Paul declares.

Ambrose: He was a baby and a child, so that you may be a perfect human. He was wrapped in swaddling clothes, so that you may be freed from the snares of death. He was in a manger, so that you may be in the altar. He was on earth that you may be in the stars. He had no other place in the inn, so that you may have many mansions in the heavens. “He, being rich, became poor for your sakes, that through his poverty you might be rich.” Therefore his poverty is our inheritance, and the Lord’s weakness is our virtue. He chose to lack for himself, that he may abound for all. The sobs of that appalling infancy cleanse me, those tears wash away my sins.

Bede: “He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities.” It should be noted that the sign given of the Savior’s birth is not a child enfolded in Tyrian purple, but one wrapped with rough pieces of cloth. He is not to be found in an ornate golden bed, but in a manger. The meaning of this is that he did not merely take upon himself our lowly mortality, but for our sakes took upon himself the clothing of the poor. Though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich. Though he was Lord of heaven, he became a poor man on earth, to teach those who lived on earth that by poverty of spirit they might win the kingdom of heaven.

John the Monk: Rejoice, O Jerusalem, and celebrate, all who love Zion! Today the ancient bond of the condemnation of Adam is loosed. Paradise is opened to us: the serpent is laid low. Of old he deceived the woman in Paradise, but now he sees a woman become mother of the Creator. Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! The sinful vessel that brought death upon all flesh has become the first fruits of salvation through the Theotokos for all the world. For from her the all-perfect God is born a child, and by his birth he sets the seal on her virginity. Through his swaddling clothes he looses the bands of sin. And through becoming a child he heals Eve’s pangs in travail. Therefore let all creation sing and dance for joy, for Christ has come to restore it and to save our souls!

Cyril of Alexandria: He found humanity reduced to the level of the beasts. Therefore he is placed like feed in a manger, that we, having left behind our carnal desires, might rise up to that degree of intelligence which befits human nature. Whereas we were brutish in soul, by now approaching the manger, yes, his table, we find no longer feed, but the bread from heaven, which is the body of life.

Jerome: He found no room in the Holy of Holies that shone with gold, precious stones, pure silk and silver. He is not born in the midst of gold and riches, but in the midst of dung, in a stable where our sins were filthier than the dung. He is born on a dunghill in order to lift up those who come from it: “From the dunghill he lifts up the poor.”

Ambrose: He is brought forth from the womb but flashes from heaven. He lies in an earthly inn but is alive with heavenly light.

Bede: He who sits at the right hand of the Father goes without shelter from the inn, that he may for us get ready many mansions in the house of his heavenly Father. Hence we have “because there was no room for him in the inn.” He was born not in the house of his parents but at the inn, by the wayside, because through the mystery of the incarnation he is become the Way by which he guides us to our home, where we shall also enjoy the Truth and the Life.

Gregory of Nazianzus: He was wrapped in swaddling bands, but at the resurrection he released the swaddling bands of the grave. He was laid in a manger but was praised by angels, disclosed by a star and adored by magi.

John the Monk: Heaven and earth are united today, for Christ is born! Today God has come upon earth, and humankind gone up to heaven. Today, for the sake of humankind, the invisible one is seen in the flesh. Therefore let us glorify him and cry aloud: glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace bestowed by your coming, Savior: glory to you! Today in Bethlehem, I hear the angels: glory to God in the highest! Glory to him whose good pleasure it was that there be peace on earth! The Virgin is now more spacious than the heavens. Light has shone on those in darkness, exalting the lowly who sing like the angels: Glory to God in the highest!

John Calvin: When he was thrown into a stable, and placed in a manger, and a lodging refused him among men, it was that heaven might be opened to us, not as a temporary lodging, but as our eternal country and inheritance, and that angels might receive us into their abode.

Fear not The design of this exhortation is to alleviate their fear. For, though it is profitable for the minds of men to be struck with awe, that they may learn to “give unto the Lord the glory due unto his name,” (Psalm 29:2;) yet they have need, at the same time, of consolation, that they may not be altogether overwhelmed. For the majesty of God could not but swallow up the whole world, if there were not some mildness to mitigate the terror which it brings. And so the reprobate fall down lifeless at the sight of God, because he appears to them in no other character than that of a judge. But to revive the minds of the shepherds, the angel declares that he was sent to them for a different purpose, to announce to them the mercy of God. When men hear this single word, that God is reconciled to them, it not only raises up those who are fallen down, but restores those who were ruined, and recalls them from death to life.

By calling it great joy, he shows us, not only that we ought, above all things, to rejoice in the salvation brought us by Christ, but that this blessing is so great and boundless, as fully to compensate for all the pains, distresses, and anxieties of the present life. Let us learn to be so delighted with Christ alone, that the perception of his grace may overcome, and at length remove from us, all the distresses of the flesh.

Vs 12. And this shall be a sign to you The angel meets the prejudice which might naturally hinder the faith of the shepherds; for what a mockery is it, that he, whom God has sent to be the King, and the only Savior, is seen lying in a manger! That the mean and despicable condition in which Christ was might not deter the shepherds from believing in Christ, the angel tells them beforehand what they would see. This method of proceeding, which might appear, to the view of men, absurd and almost ridiculous, the Lord pursues toward us every day. Sending down to us from heaven the word of the Gospel, he enjoins us to embrace Christ crucified, and holds out to us signs in earthly and fading elements, which raise us to the glory of a blessed immortality. Having promised to us spiritual righteousness, he places before our eyes a little water: by a small portion of bread and wine, he seals, the eternal life of the soul. But if the stable gave no offense whatever to the shepherds, so as to prevent them from going to Christ to obtain salvation, or from yielding to his authority, while he was yet a child; no sign, however mean in itself, ought to hide his glory from our view, or prevent us from offering to him lowly adoration, now that he has ascended to heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father.

What then would be our obstinacy, if we refused to join with the choir of angels, in singing the praises of our salvation, which is in Christ?

Vs 14. Glory to God in the highest The angels begin with thanksgiving, or with the praises of God; for Scripture, too, everywhere reminds us, that we were redeemed from death for this purpose, that we might testify with the tongue, as well as by the actions of the life, our gratitude to God. Let us remember, then, the final cause, why God reconciled us to himself through his Only Begotten Son. It was that he might glorify his name, by revealing the riches of his grace, and of his boundless mercy.