

First Vespers of Advent

Bulletin

Audio

"For Behold from this day, all generations will call me blessed."

"He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away."

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Blessed is the name of the Virgin Mary unto all generations; for perhaps she alone rightly deserves to be called a Theologian. In the years of her innocence, as a girl likely no older than thirteen or fourteen, by God's grace, she had discerned the character of her Lord where all others chased shadows.

What the apostles did not understand after many lectures and admonishments from the lips of Christ, what they only began to comprehend by the light of our Lord's death and crucifixion, what they saw clearly only in the radiance of the resurrection; here holy Mary saw clearly as little more than a child. And what is this that the Mother of our Lord has understood? She understood the first lesson of the Law of Moses: that in the beginning God made all things out of nothing.

You see, it was not the way of our Lord to create all things from some pre-existent matter, as a carpenter might make a table out of good wood. He would create free from any such matter, he would create by his Holy Spirit through the Word, who is the Son, in the void, in the complete and utter nothingness that yawned infinitely wide at the commencement of time.

"The world was formless and void." A painter paints only upon a blank canvas. Now God accomplishes his master piece upon the blankness before him; he creates time and space, and all that populates every corner of the universe, age upon age.

Yet this way of our God is not restricted to the creation of the universe, but extends to all things. For though all worlds and stars and light and life were founded in the stability of the eternal word of God, called into existence by God's unchanging utterance, man alone was not blessed with such immutability, such a stable nature.

Rather, *man 'was formed of the dust of the ground' made malleable, like clay, by 'the mist which rose up from the land watering the whole face of the earth.'* Man is but clay, animated by the breath of God; he alone among the creatures is changeable and malleable; a blank nature before our Lord's artistry; he alone, therefore, has been destined to *'glory upon glory,'* for he alone was made of no 'strong word' but of dust and ash.

Recall that it was from the slavish rabble of Egypt, the 'children of Abraham' that God raised up his Holy People, that through them all nations would find salvation; and it could not be otherwise; *"It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord set his love on you and is keeping the oath he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt."*

For what use has God with mighty Egypt? Let Egypt rise and fall by its own strength; but let lowly Israel, who has no strength of his own, be given all the power of God.

Countless other examples could be given from the Holy Scripture; but to one who's eyes are purified by faith from conceit, one thing is obvious: our God is in the habit of creating out of nothing; and in fact he accomplishes nothing unless nothing is first given him in which to accomplish something.

It cannot be but as it is written: *"Blessed are the poor, for they shall receive the kingdom of heaven."* *"Blessed are they who hunger and thirst, for they shall be filled."*

So Mary is greeted by an angel: *"Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"* And yet Mary is troubled by the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.' We, who are of a wicked mind, would not question this greeting. We would eagerly respond, "why, God sent me an angel! Of course! Hi!"

And yet Mary does not know who this angel is. She tries to *'discern what sort of greeting this might be.'*

The angel continues: *"Do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favor with God. And, behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High."*

But Mary still asks: *"How will this be, since I am a virgin?"* Does she doubt? No, she does not doubt at all; perhaps she alone believes in God. A spirit comes to her, promising that her son will be son of David, the king of Israel, of the everlasting house of God. But she knows her God, and she knows herself. *"How will this be, since I am but a virgin? I am nothing, and nothing of good can come from me."*

The angel answers: *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the most High will overshadow you."* Now her fear is stilled; now she knows she hears from God. *"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."* It is as if she had said, "Yes, my God, I recognize your voice now, for not by any merit of my own, nor by the power of any man will this great thing happen, but from the humility and formlessness of my being and within the void of my womb will you create my redeemer by your Holy Spirit, as you did long ago, in the beginning of all things. Create by your Word within the emptiness of my being, even as you created by your Word in the emptiness of the expanse of creation."

Now let all generations call this little girl blessed; not because of any worthiness in her, not because she was pure or sinless or particularly faithful, but because she was utterly empty, having no merit of her own, having not even faith of her own, but being empty of self-made religion, had faith conceived within her virgin soul by the word of the heavenly Gabriel. For this reason she sings: *"You have filled the hungry with good things."*

Let her name everywhere be blessed; even as in her exaltation, the name of all the proud are forever cursed. For those Sadducees who sought holiness through rites and rituals of their own careful devising are now derided, and the pride of the Pharisees who believed that by such great effort they might be made worthy of God's love are *'scattered in the imagination of their hearts.'*

Rome to this day lies decimated, and murderous Herod is a mockery. Even as the rich man lies tortured, looking across a chasm at Lazarus, consoled by the

embrace of Abraham, so now all the prideful and arrogant of the world, countless intellectuals and politicians and ethicists, look across the chasm at the lowly virgin of downcast face, consoled by the extended arms of her Son; for she was nothing, and for this very reason *"found favor with God."*

But what of us? The season of Advent is a penitential season. In the past, it was marked by fasts and agonizing vigils. And all this for the purpose of bringing people to realize that they, too, are nothing, that they are but dust before the infinity of God. A little weakness from lack of food, a little frailty from lack of sleep; now do you realize that all your pretense to wealth and success and power is meaningless? That a few missed meals and a bad night's sleep can bring you to nothing?

Do not avoid such seemingly depressing thoughts; embrace them, and know that you are nothing. Repent of your self-love, your pride. Empty yourself of conceit, that the Son of God may be conceived and born within you, and fill the emptiness of your humanity with the fullness of the divine nature, transforming you into a child of God, *"born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."* Do not praise Mary with vain words and titles as some do. Honor her by imitation.

And when you find such imitation, such self-emptying, such repentance impossible, remember the words of the angel: *"Nothing will be impossible with God."* That purification which you cannot even in grace fulfill in this life, God will fulfill through age and sickness, through weakness and death; through all those things which your pride despises, through the cross laid upon your mortal frame.

And then, when your soul sighs and groans, when it grumbles to the Lord of all, "You have indeed cast me from my throne, and scattered me in my heart, will you exalt me in my humble estate?" For *"I am a worm, and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people."* *"I am poured out like water,"* *"and my bones pierced in the night,"* *"my strength is dried up like a potsherd; you lay me in the dust of death."*

Lay on your deathbed. Suffer hooked up to so many machines in some sterile hospital room, strung along a little longer by doctors and nurses. What your effort all your life has failed to do, the cross of dying has accomplished in you. *"Do not be afraid."* Close your eyes for the last time. God will in love rebuke your words of

lament: "You say you are but dust? But ash? That your entire life is vanity? Now you see that you are less than the lowliest slave? Verily, I say unto thee:

"Thou art my son, this day have I begotten thee."

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