

Life of the Spirit

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IN THE BEGINNING

BY

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IN the beginning was the Word . . . (St John I, 1.) Unfortunately in the world today there are a great number of words. There are so many words that you do not know how to escape them. We have however the power to choose the best—we should *not* choose the second best. They who have the Word of Christ our Lord must choose the best

WORD. Listen to his words—make them your own. How glad I should be if I could impress on you some little word, make you take it for your own and think about it. There are some people who listen to the Gospel, but they do not really hold that Jesus Christ is God. They do not take the word of Eternal Life. When you find a great deal of decay in the Church and in religious life, it is because our Lord's words have not been accepted. The words of the holy Gospels—that is TRUTH. Let us have the TRUTH. Sometimes we must face truths that are not easy to flesh and blood . . . we must listen . . . we must ask the WORD to give us the inner meaning. . . . And, oh! if for a few days we hardly hear anything else, if for a few days other things seem almost an interruption, an impertinence, blessed are we!

Oh! If we could live for a week—just with the Word. Sit at Nazareth with the Word, in that little home from which, one day—all great things will come. Oh! that we may measure spiritual greatness by material littleness, that the waste places of our soul might blossom, that the crooked ways might be made straight, that our selfishness might mean almost a sacrilege. We should then become true children of St Dominic, in anguish and in sorrow for Christ. . . . (In the Office of St Dominic there is this very simple little phrase: *Agonizans pro Christi nomine*—'anguished for the name of Christ'.) But let us go back further than the Middle Ages, the time of St Dominic and St Francis, let us go back to Jesus of Nazareth. They went back there too. Jesus who alone could save the world. . . . God grant us, during these days, to hear his Word, which will be put before us in simplicity and truth.

¹ From a Retreat on the Gospel of St John preached at St Dominic's Priory, Stone.

II

The holy Gospel according to St John: 1, 9 et sqq: *That was the true light which enlighteneth every man that cometh into this world. . . . And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. . . .*

Any words of my own will of course seem only an insult to these very perfect words of the great seer of Patmos. St John is doing through these words, something of very great importance for the Church. He is letting us see who the Son of God is . . . that we might believe, that we may not be like the world which does not know him. or like that other class, still more painful, those who know him but do not receive him. That is a terrible class! (I often wonder whether I belong to it.) Not to know him is really better than to know him and not receive him. St John tells us who he is—he is the *Son of God*.

St Matthew, when describing the beginning of things tells us of Bethlehem, in many ways beautiful. The children like to hear it—of how a little one was born and great kings came and gave him nice things. If we had only that account we might think that our dear Lord was born in great affluence. There is no mention of a stable—nothing like that. Just the birth of *One* who, of course, had royal blood in his veins. And to whom the kings came from afar, bringing gold, frankincense, myrrh. That is all very beautiful and that is the sort of Jesus, in a sense, quite easy to imitate, except that our birth is not usually welcomed by kings. That would be the sort of thing that would fit in with 'Arabian Nights' and other various beautiful books.

It had never dawned on St Matthew, of course, that people might mistake what he said. I presume they were mistaken. And St Luke is at pains to tell us, in his account, of the poverty of the Birth at Bethlehem. Such utter poverty that it is a stable that welcomes this little one. His clothing was that of an outcast, almost. That completes Matthew's account. We have now the real Christmas, the Christmas of the Crib, the Stable, the Manger, and how we love that *Babe* more than the Babe of St Matthew. This is the Babe we all love—the Babe that attracts the love and sympathy of quite little children. I remember the story of a little boy who when he first came to the Crib observed it for a few moments, then made his way inside and began to rub the little feet of the Infant. He was so cold, he said.

That is the Jesus that now begins to tear our heart with love. We want to do something for him. We want to do something to him.

Now, St John completes all that by telling us something about that Child. . . .

St John gives us some insight into who the Child is and whence he came. . . . He is the Son of God, and his birth in such a place is not accident, it is design. It is *the play*. It is an eternal idea, as it were, worked out very elaborately, therefore to be thought about very carefully. To be loved, for we too can again be born. Nicodemus put that objection to our Lord.

There is a spiritual birth that must be modelled on that of Bethlehem—St Paul has expressed it so beautifully in his lesson from prison (Phil. 2, 14): 'Each one not considering the things that are his own, but those that are other men's, for let this *mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus*'! Mind in you . . . as in Christ Jesus. That is what he was thinking. You can imagine him, as saying to our Lord: My dear Master, I am thinking what *you* are thinking. . . . 'Who being in the form of God thought it not robbery to be equal with God . . . he *emptied himself*'. . . . St Paul's soul became extraordinarily tender after they put him in prison. Anything like hardness in his character seemed at once softened, bitterness turned almost instantly into sweetness. (I do not know whether prison would improve some of us! I'm sure it would improve me! Sometimes I think it does the Church good to be put in prison—it comes out sweet.)

Now St John has told us of this emptying 'taking the form of a slave' (*doulos*) being made in the likeness of man—and in the habit found as a man. He *humbled* himself, becoming 'obedient unto death'. In the stable he is obedient unto life!

Now that is a great fundamental fact—and divine facts are divine principles, not like the other little facts of ordinary human life that are *not* principles—little facts that make up our tittle-tattle or news—these are not principles. But a divine fact is a divine principle. You can think about it. (Take the Rosary, for instance; it is not a number of Hail Marys pell-mell one after the other. Oh no. These are fifteen great facts, principles, that you cannot exhaust in a life of fifteen hundred years, if you could live that long.) Now you have this great fundamental fact that it was the Son of God, who did not think it robbery to be equal with God, and St John tells us this is God. The Word who had made the whole world. *The Word was God*. . . . *Theos en o Logos*. Who now came into this world of human beings and—as St John says so beautifully, *dwelt among us*—I love to point out the beauty of the word which St John uses here. The original Greek is, *eskenosen en emin*, which means he pitched his tent, as it were, with us, or amongst us. This word is extraordinarily rarely used. It is practically the same word which St Peter uses at the Transfiguration when he says: 'Let us build here three taber-

nacles or tents'. In the East, of course, many people go about living in tents, setting them up here and there—a little group of tents, having no abiding city. The Chosen People began their existence as a group of dwellers in tents. In the centre of their tents was the Tabernacle where they worshipped God. In the centre of the tents was the Ark for the worship of God. Now-a-days that idea is no longer considered. No wonder the world is coming down about our ears. It is for us to restore that idea and we can only restore it by realising more and more the words read out this morning. St John represents our Lord as coming down and dwelling in a tent. When he came he overlooked all kinds of things. There were all sorts of human contrivances for doing wonderful things when Jesus was on earth. You can read about them in books. In the days of our Lord cities were wonderful, almost as wonderful as London, New York, Chicago, etc. organised most perfectly, and on all these things our blessed Lord deliberately turned his back. It really must mean something to our individual souls if we wish to reach holiness, sanctity—you can only begin at the beginning. There is no doubt where you must begin. It is hard to flesh and blood. St John says we are born *not* of the flesh, and our Lord said so strikingly: 'I did not come to bring peace but the sword'. Is there any greater peace than to welcome the sword? And on the night that you welcomed the sword you spoke of almost nothing but peace. My peace I give unto you. The peace of the accepted sword. And that is the peace which comes by following Jesus of Nazareth. ('A sword shall pierce thy soul.')

Only Jesus of Nazareth, the Jesus who out of love for us individually has gone out into something worse than the desert. . . . The desert is Paradise with him. I do not think we shall find him anywhere else than in the desert. We may seek him, as it were, in the streets and the cities; we shall not find him. But if we go out into the desert we shall find him, for there he is seeking us.

Let us dwell in one of these tents. Let us as it were see the wisdom of that cry of Peter: 'Let us build three tabernacles—one for thee'. Only in the desert shall we find him, and if we do not find him we shall not find ourselves. I am sure our blessed Lord is now yearning over the world which has, in so many ways, strayed from him. And yearning over us who make special profession to love and follow him even out into the desert places. If there ever was a time when Jesus of Nazareth was standing at the door of our heart and knocking I am sure it is today when all the world around, both men and women, seem to be casting aside all that makes them men and women. When intelligence is in revolt, when intelligence is even more than in revolt, it is teaching others to revolt. When hearts that were

made for the great purpose of self-sacrifice are only working for the selfish ends. . . . Is there anything we can learn of the world except to despise it? Can the world in any way be our teacher?

Rabboni, my Master, my Teacher—that was the cry of Magdalen, the model of all mankind, insomuch as she was a sinner and we are all sinners. . . . Rabboni, my Master! His first lesson is but a rehearsal of his last. Love of little things—little things perhaps to us, but great in the sight of God. May our Master then give us strength not to dread the sword, whatever it may be. May we not even seek peace, but only him. Whilst we are here below it is 'Jesus of Nazareth' and even 'Jesus of Golgotha' that we must seek. He is the *one* object of our love. It is he alone whom we desire, he for whom our hearts burn. For whom our eyes seek. Come, then, O Jesus of Nazareth and dwell within my heart. Set up thy tabernacle there, pitch thy tent. Make me a dwelling place for thee!

THE WORD MANIFEST

BY

S. M. ALBERT, O.P.

He that loveth me shall be loved of my Father; and I will love him and will manifest myself to him.—John 14, 21.



THE feast of the Nativity is the feast of the birth of the Word; his eternal generation in the bosom of the Father, his temporal birth; and his mystical birth in the souls of men, in which is involved their birth to divine life.

The Christmas liturgy is at different times concerned with each of these aspects of the Mystery.

Dominus dixit ad me. Filius meus es tu, ego hodie genui te, is the triumphal Introit to Midnight Mass.

Puer natus est nobis, et Filius datus est nobis, is the opening of the Third Mass, but it is Christ's mystical birth in us, and our birth in him, upon which the Church is most insistent.

Recensita nativitate, novitas natalis, nova nativitas, are phrases which recur continually, and the Postcommunion for the Third Mass, which is repeated daily as the commemoration, expresses the mystery concisely:

Grant we beseech thee, o Almighty God, that as the *new-born* Saviour of the world is the author of our *divine regeneration*, so also he himself may be the giver of immortality.