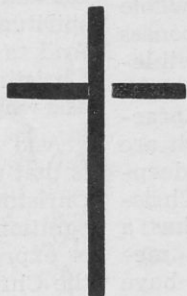


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# THE CATHOLIC HOUR



## AND THE WORD WAS MADE FLESH

BY

REV. EUGENE BURKE, C.S.P.

A talk entitled "And The Word Was Made Flesh" delivered on the Catholic Hour on December 26, 1954 by Rev. Eugene Burke, C.S.P., produced by the National Council of Catholic Men in cooperation with the National Broadcasting Company. This is the last in a series of four talks entitled "In His Likeness."

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## AND THE WORD WAS MADE FLESH

My Dear Friends:

Perhaps the warmest and loveliest expressions of the Christian tradition are to be found in the celebration of the Christmas season. Every land that has been touched at all by Christianity has given a rich setting to the incidents that surround the birth of Christ. Melodies and songs have flowed from this celebration which are capable of evoking a whole series of rich human responses to all that the Babe of Bethlehem, has come to represent. Century-old customs and practices have grown up which are expressive of some of the deepest, tenderest of all our Christian values. Each of us has a whole treasure-house of memories of this season that have served to enrich and even enable our lives. From childhood to maturity these memories bind us to those we love and those whose affection we have shared. Into it all has been interwoven the ideals of peace and good will and the oneness of the human family and not even the loss of belief or the rankest commercialism have been able to destroy these Christian realities.

And yet, at first glance, there would seem to be but little proportion and correspondence between the actual event and the enormous impact that it has had for centuries on the lives and hearts and minds of men. An

infant born in far off Judea of a simple and unknown Jewish maiden. A nativity stripped of every comfort and convenience. A stable its scene because there is no room in the inn. A tidings announced only to a few shepherds on the Judean plains. Yet these are the very incidents that in art and poetry, in song and music have captured our imagination and become the loveliest and most vital parts of our spiritual tradition and heritage. And a stranger to historical Christianity might very well ask why.

And the answer I should say is that underlying all this warm Christmas tradition is the recognition that here in the flesh is expressed the very heart of the Christian vision of man and man's purposes. The words we use, the customs we follow all spring from the fact that here at Bethlehem we believe is visible a new beginning in the history of humanity. For to the believing Christian, the birth of Christ is the great moment of man's history and he stands in awe and joy before it knowing that here is the summit of which all human loves are but a reflection — God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son to redeem it. It is this that is the tidings of great joy as the angels say "For you is born today in the town of David a Saviour who is Christ the Lord." Bethlehem is

Decidified



at once therefore the glad tidings of Christianity and the visible and striking manifestation of its central mystery. For when the believer kneels before the crib and seeks to capture its meaning he knows that he is face to face with the mystery of God made man.

That it is a tremendous mystery no believing Christian would deny. That is has been looked upon as sheer folly we have ample testimony. History is filled with the words and deeds of those who have found it a scandal and a stumbling block. But that it is central and essential to the Christian view of man and of the world and of human history is inescapable. For when we say with St. John the Evangelist that "the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us" we mean in the full literal sense of the words that the Son of God, truly God, has journeyed from eternity to time and in the scriptural phrase "has his tent among us." We affirm and believe that "God the everlasting and Almighty has become a child and lies in the manger." Folly and nonsense say many — blasphemy, arrogance, say others. But those of us who affirm the reality of this unique and tremendous historical event and kneel before it say simply "I believe" knowing that our power to say it is not of man but of God and God's grace.

We know that the living God and His infinite love is not subject to nor circumscribed by our

limitations and dictates as to how He shall appear among us. We are sure that He Who made the world and ourselves can enter into creation when and as He will. And knowing the tremendous resources of human love we are sure that the infinite depths of divine love infinitely transcend human possibilities or imagination.

More than this we know that the history of man is marked by a clear consciousness of his need of redemption. For the normal man has a real, even if at times an obscure sense of spiritual reality. He is conscious too of the evil and misery of a life that is enslaved to sensual impulse and self interest. Moreover in his real moments of insight the normal man is aware that he has contributed to the flood of human evil by self-glorification and the will to power and avarice and lust. Again, no matter how he tries he cannot escape the mystery of pain and death. How then overcome and transform these conditions of human existence so as to actualize his highest and noblest aspirations? This is the fundamental religious problem which is as much a part of the history of man as man himself. One may of course challenge this view as belonging to the past. But "the past is simply the record of the experience of humanity and if that experience testifies to a permanent human need then that need must manifest itself in the future no less than in the past."

Hence it is fitting that God Who made us but a little lower than Himself and crowned us with honor and glory and made us in His own likeness — it is fitting that He should be mindful of us and in His infinite love reach out to fill that need. And the faith of living and historical Christianity is that He did just that — as St. Paul writes to the Galatians: "So too when we were children we were enslaved under the elements of the world. But when the fullness of time came God sent His son born of a woman under the law that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because you are sons of God has sent the spirit of His son into our hearts crying Abba Father. So that he is no longer a slave, but a son and as a son an heir also through God."

It is this conviction that is the loving source of the Christmas gospel. It is the social and historical implications of this that are the very structure of living Christianity.

First of all it is this central truth of Christianity made manifest at Bethlehem that sets Jesus Christ and His teaching in an entirely different category from such thinkers and religious leaders as Socrates and Buddha. The contrast He sets before the world is not merely moral. It is not the contrast between flesh and the spirit or the sensual and the spiritual, but rather between this world and the next, between time and eternity, between the kingdom

of God and the kingdom of the world. Because the only begotten Son of God has become man then man is brought into historical and effective relationship with the world of divine purposes and values. By reason of this he can and does look beyond the world of man and his works. He is introduced into a range of reality that transcends the finite and temporal world to which the state and the economic order belong.

For Christ by reason of His nativity is a living bridge between the two worlds. He brings the spiritual order into the world of man and opening the door of the spiritual world to man. The word of God made flesh becomes the principle of a new order at once historical like man and eternal like God. Time and eternity, the visible and the invisible, the spiritual and the material, flesh and spirit, are united in living fashion and made capable of fulfilling the divine purpose of history. Man has the living testimony of God's own word that he is engraced with an eternal destiny — that he is the object of the visible and effective bodying forth of God's love. He knows now that he stands in a relationship with God that transcends all accidents of birth or politics or economics.

In St. Paul's ringing words: "For you are all the children of God through faith in Jesus Christ. For all you who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither

Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor freeman, there is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Jesus Christ."

Yet the full significance of the Word made flesh—of God become man is not realized simply by stating that the living God has entered into human history. It also calls for the further affirmation that by His existence in the world, by His life, teaching and death He brings actual redemption to man. It is the affirmation that so highly does God regard man that His own Son sacrificed His life that men might have the power to meet and conquer sin. In the words of St. Paul to the Phillipians: "Christ Jesus Who though He was by nature God, did not consider being equal to God a thing to be clung to but emptied himself taking the nature of a slave and being made like unto men. And appearing in the form of man He humbled Himself becoming obedient to death, even unto the death of the cross."

It is this reality of God's redemptive design that full tidings of great joy comes to us: "Today is born to you in the town of David a Saviour who is Christ the Lord." Because therefore Christ is the son of God His redemptive work has infinite and total value before God. But because He is not merely man but the man, the new Adam the head of mankind the first-born among many brethren then He is also our brother and so He mediates for

all of us the great high priest "always living to make intercession for us." Because He is our brother, because by the will of God He is the new head of humanity called to redemption then as St. Thomas says, "the passion of Christ belongs to us really as though we ourselves had suffered it."

For the Christ of history and therefore the Christianity of Christ face up frankly and without fear to the fact of sin. It recognizes sin for what it is—the only essential evil—for only sin can thwart the eternal destiny of man. Clearly and effectively Christ recognizes—as history also evidences—that when man is left to himself moral example alone does not suffice to overcome the weight of selfishness and pride and lust of hatred and cruelty that marks the torrent of human custom. Christ therefore sheds His blood unto the remission of sin and as He tells His disciples, "Fear not little flock I have overcome the world."

It is also from the standpoint of the word made flesh and His redemptive purposes that the believing Christian views the world he knows that since God Himself has entered into history that he as a Christian cannot surrender the responsibility of his earthly citizenship, for the kingdom of God is with us and in us. By reason of the Incarnation he knows that Jesus Christ became a citizen of the world without ceasing to be

God. Hence he knows that as a contemporary French writer has put it: "the world is a real work of a good God and has a real value—Man's task is not to liberate himself from time but to liberate himself through time; not to escape from the world but to accept it. Thus the world that the Christian accepts is the order and beauty and good will from the beginning and visibly expressed in Christ. What he protests is the whole mass of evil and disorder and deformity introduced by sin. The question for him is not whether the world is good or evil but whether the world is sufficient to itself and whether it suffices."

And here taught by the spiritual experience of humanity and the revelation of God through His Son become man the Christian knows that it is not. For he knows as St. Paul tells the Ephesians: "God has made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure. And this His good pleasure He purposed in Him to be dispensed in the fulness of time: to reestablish all things in Christ both in heaven and those on earth."

It is in the light of all this that Bethlehem becomes an inescapable personal challenge to the believing Christian. This tremendous truth can make no effective contribution to our lives and needs unless each of us strives with all his powers to realize it in his judgments and choices and attitudes. It is the

realization that the starkness and poverty and bareness of Bethlehem are not mere window-dressing, but the direct expression of God's word to man. God and the things of God do not come clothed in the trappings of power and glory and ambition and the values of the spirit are not dependent on things but on faith and love.

The working of the power of God unto salvation calls upon us to realize that the world does not suffice but that only through humility and poverty of spirit do our hearts and minds open to the love of God and its visible manifestation at Bethlehem. Here alone is the wisdom which is foolishness to those who do not believe and the strength which is weakness to the worldly. For Bethlehem is open only to the humble and contrite of heart and to them alone is addressed the lovely words of the Apostle John in his first epistles. "I write of what was from the beginning what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and our hands have handled: of the Word of Life. And the Life was made known and we have seen and now testify and announce to you the Life eternal which was with the Father and has appeared to us. What we have seen and have heard we announce to you in order that you may have fellowship with us and that our fellowship may be with the Father and with His

Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that you may rejoice and our joy may be full."

**The musical features for this series were presented by St. Bonaventure Chorus of Cincinnati, Ohio, under the direction of Mr. Omer Westendorf.**

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# THE CATHOLIC HOUR

1930—Twenty-fifth Year—1955

THE CATHOLIC HOUR on the air for over 24 years, has brought every phase of life, every religious and moral truth, to the American public.

The National Council of Catholic Men in cooperation with the National Broadcasting Company and its affiliated stations, inaugurated this popular program on March 2, 1930. At the beginning only 22 network stations carried these messages of truth to the people. Now, on each Sunday of the year, the CATHOLIC HOUR is heard throughout the United States and in over 10 foreign countries. The CATHOLIC HOUR has distinguished itself as one of the most popular radio programs of the times. An average of 100,000 letters from the listening audience are received each year, about 20% of which come from those of other faiths. Mail from the frozen lands of the Arctic and the jungles of Brazil gives some indication of the far-reaching value and influence of these CATHOLIC HOUR programs.

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Listeners may obtain one talk per week for a year at a cost of \$5.00.

Each series of talks in booklet form is also available at the end of the series.

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