

What Child is This?

The Nativity of Our Lord—Christmas Day

John 1:1-18

Ancient historians have names that sound strange to our modern ears – names like Cornelius Tacitus, Gaius Suetonius Tranquillas, Flavius Josephus, and so forth. None of these individuals were Christians. But if you were to study their works, you would find a tremendous amount of proof that there really was a man named Jesus of Nazareth. You would learn that this Jesus was a rabbi who was very popular in Galilee, but was hated by the ruling class in Jerusalem. You would learn that the ruling class eventually used their political clout to get this man executed on a Roman cross by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate. Any scholar of ancient history in the Middle East will readily admit that the evidence is pretty overwhelming that there really was a man who fits the Biblical description of Jesus. The evidence concerning the man, Jesus of Nazareth, is overwhelming. But believing in Jesus as a man is not enough. There's more.

In the Hallelujah verse that we sang before the reading of the Gospel this morning, we sang part of the theme verse of the Gospel of John. The entire theme goes like this: [John 20:30-31] 30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. Many people in John's day and today are quite ready to accept the human Jesus, but they also need to know that Jesus was not just a man, but that He is God – God in flesh and blood. Trusting in Jesus as both God and man is part of the foundation of the faith that brings eternal life.

Today's Gospel from John makes it very clear that the Baby who lies in the manger is no ordinary child. This baby is both God and man.

John's Gospel begins with the same words that begin the first book of Moses: "In the beginning ...". With these words John's Gospel takes us back before time. He takes us back into eternity before the creation of time or space. He takes us to an existence of God and nothing else.

In the beginning was the Word ... Back in the beginning, God is there and the Word is there. If only God is there, then the Word must be God and that is exactly what our Gospel reading says. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. This little sentence says something that we can't completely understand. It is something that we can know only by faith. In eternity, when God is all there is, the Word is there because the Word is God.

As strange and wonderful as that opening sentence is, today's Gospel goes on to show us another way that this Word is God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. These words teach us that the Word was active in God's work of creation, but they do more than that. If all things were created through the Word, then the Word cannot be one of the created things. If the Word is not created, then the Word must be God for only God exists without being created.

The Gospel then continues: In him was life, and the life was the light of men. This verse tells us that every living thing receives its life from the Word. This Word is the source of life. More than life, this Word is the source of light. Later on, our Gospel tells us that this light is the light that enlightens everyone. This light is the light of reason and intellect – the light by which we understand things and develop art and other skills. We receive all of this from the Word.

So today's Gospel introduces us to this Word. The Word is God in eternity. He is God in creation. He is God of life. He is God of thought. Our Gospel really wants us to understand that this Word is God. So, Who is this Word?

Today's Gospel tells us that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. Here we learn that the Word came to live with us and that John and his companions saw the Word in all His glory. This Word is the only Son from the Father. The whole rest of the Gospel of John is about the Word. By the time we read the whole Gospel according to John, we discover that the Word is Jesus.

The Holy Spirit inspired John to make it very clear to us that Jesus really is God. It is not enough for us to say that Jesus is born and that Mary laid Him in a manger. The Gospel of John wants us to understand that this baby is not just a man-child. The Gospel of John wants us to understand that this baby is God. When we look into the manger, we are looking at God. This baby is our creator and Lord.

It is important that we understand that Jesus is not just a baby lying in a manger. Christmas is not just an excuse to decorate our houses and spend lots of money. Christmas is about a warrior stepping onto the battle field. This is about God taking on human flesh in order to battle the devil and save us from our sins.

This warrior, who defeats sin, death, and the devil, begins the battle with His perfect life. Since God considers life to begin at conception, that means the warrior's life must be perfect from conception to the grave. The Holy Spirit inspired King David to write: [Psalm 51:5] Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. We are already sinners even in our mother's womb. A mere human baby is already lost and condemned at birth. Only a baby who is both God and man can live a perfect life from conception to the grave. This is one reason the warrior who rescues us must be God.

After the warrior lives a perfect life, He must offer up that life for the sins of the world. The Holy Spirit inspired the Psalmist to write: [Psalm 49:7–9] 7 Truly no MAN can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life, 8 for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice, 9 that he should live on forever and never see the pit. From this verse we learn that even if a man could live a perfect life, the only person he would save would be himself. He could not ransom even one other person. Only a warrior who is both God and man can ransom another. The warrior must be man in order to offer His life and He must be God in order for that life to be a sufficient ransom for all people.

Jesus, whose birth we celebrate on this day, is the only one who can be the warrior who saves us from sin. Jesus is God. He is the Word who was with God the Father in the beginning. Jesus is man, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. Only Jesus is both God and man. Only Jesus is our Savior.

On this day, we remember the manger. We remember that God came to this earth as one of us in order to do battle with sin, death, and the devil. We remember that that baby in the manger, the one who looks so helpless, is already at war. That baby is preparing a perfect life that He will give to us with His suffering and death on the cross. That baby is the one who will rise from death to prepare a way to heaven for us.

The great comfort of Christmas flows from the great mystery of a helpless baby lying in a manger who is at the same time the Lord and Master of all things. For in that mystery lies God's plan to rescue us from the devil, the world, and our own sinful nature. Jesus is the Eternal Word who dwells with us in flesh and blood. He is the Word incarnate. Those who trust in the Eternal Word made flesh will lose their guilt and gain everlasting life. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen