"Glory to God in the highest."

Isaiah xl,1-11

Psalm lll

New Book of Worship, Psalm lll, p.77

In our celebration of the nativity there are always certain incidents and figures which stand out prominently in our minds: the shepherds abiding in the fields, the angel messenger and the multitude of the heavenly host, the wise men from the east, and the star.

The Incarnation was an historic fact, and these incidents connected with the birth of our Lord help us to become more certain of it as an historic fact. The picture stays in the mind and grows in meaning for us.

It is hard for the natural minded men of this day to believe in the coming of the Lord upon earth to save men from spiritual death. "He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not." From a finite and merely natural point of view the coming of God into the world in our flesh is incredible. Today multitudes do not believe it, and those who do accept it in tradition evade the full force of it in thought and act. There are few who believe that it was Jehovah, the I AM, the only Divine Being, who came into the world, who stood side by side with men, and associated with publicans and sinners.

Yet this is the essential principle of the New Church and of all true religion. It is the vital doctrine of Christianity. The angel announced that God in person would visit men: "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." It was not some messenger who had come from God. The angel himself was such a messenger. It was not some secondary Divine person. It was the promised Messiah, whom Isaiah had called "The everlasting Father."

Men had lost true knowledge of God and His nature. They thought of Him in various ways. He had even been regarded as Man's most terrible enemy. Now He was coming into the world to subdue man's enemies and rescue him from their power. and to show that He is man's infinite and unchanging Friend. He had been regarded as remote, inaccessible, tyrannical. Now He was coming to show that He is meek and lowly of heart, gentle, kind, merciful, and helpful. God Himself, the unapproachable, the supreme Creator of the universe, the king of angels and men, was coming to dwell with men. This was the announcement.

If we lose sight of this, we lose sight of the essential truth of the Incarnation. He was not an angel. He was not a son born from eternity. He was not a man filled with a larger than usual measure of Divine love and wisdom. He was God, the only God. He was Jehovah, the I AM. He was coming to be God with man, Immanuel "God with us." Now we know how to think about God. Our thoughts do not
wander off into empty space. God is a Divine Man—the only perfect Man.

We are told that He created man in His own image and likeness. This makes it possible for God and man to dwell together. There can be communication of thought and feeling. God can be with us, giving us life, and we can be with Him in receiving it. "I am come," He says, "that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." To affect this inward conjunction the Lord came into the world to be with men in their natural outward life. He took on our form and entered into all human relations, that He might be with us in them all. He came as an infant and grew to manhood, increasing in wisdom, stature, and grace. This does not mean that God was an infant and grew up, but that in His incarnation He was present in all states of human life from infancy to maturity.

The Christmas season brings to mind more particularly the beginnings of the Lord's ministry not only in the world, but in the soul. At the first this truth has to be taken care of. Potentially it can—and in the end it will—take care of us. It will or should become so firmly established that it can say, "All power is given unto me in heaven and on earth." It will or should become so trusted that we shall welcome its invitation, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." But at first it comes with no such words or marks.

Our belief in Christ, like the Christ of history, begins its wonderful career in apparent feebleness, as a little child. The Christ story is true literally and spiritually. We do not understand it at first; we hardly feel its power. That must come from experience. It is only a little child at first. We simply know that it is there, learn its name, and hear wonderful things about it. And we have to be careful lest we lose our first reverence for the Christ. We shall hear our belief sneered at, and the Child's name used in jests and oaths. To destroy this belief in the mind of a child is like Herod trying to kill the Child of Bethlehem.

We need to take care of the birth of the Lord in us. It involves both our hearts and our minds. The heart is Mary, the intelligence is Joseph. Joseph is the husband of Mary but not the father of Christ. The truth of Christ as a Savior is no product of our intelligence. We did not conceive it, we had nothing to do with its origin. Joseph can be the guardian, but he cannot be the father of Christ. The intelligence of no man has originated this truth of truths.

This truth, while it is of Divine origin, whilst our intelligence does nothing to beget it, is born of Mary. The heart first received it, cherishes it, and broods over it.
We first love without understanding. The child loves his parents without understanding them. He knows not at first if they be rich or poor, educated or ignorant. He loves them before he knows what fatherhood and motherhood are. He loves them even before he knows their names. That is why a little child may love evil parents. We begin our life under this law. One loves first without understanding. We love light before we can understand light. We love music before we can understand music. It is of the Divine mercy that many a precious truth is born to us not through our understanding but because it has quietly come into our hearts. This is the way it gets started. It is born of Mary. If the law were that we must first understand, infancy and childhood would be a blank.

But we are not to continue to love without understanding. There is that other figure - Joseph - the intelligence, perplexed, baffled, wondering whether he should put Mary away. How true a picture of many today who have a love for the Christ life but who do not understand Him and so are distressed. Should they trust what they cannot understand? This is an experience known to us all. We wonder, "How can this be? I do not understand it?" Then comes the impulse to put it out of the mind as something on which one must not rely. The intelligence will have nothing to do with this truth, does not believe in its heavenly origin, and will not recognize it. So the truth is often lost, discredited, renounced.

But that is not the true way. You may not at first be able to understand the truth, yet your intelligence must help to protect it. The Lord warned Joseph in a dream not to put Mary away. And the lesson for us is, "Don't give up this truth. Protect it. Watch over it, and see what comes."

A second time the angel appeared to Joseph, again in a dream, this time to warn him against Herod and bid him take the young child and his mother and flee into Egypt. Even if we pass safely through the first danger of mental perplexity, we may come upon a greater danger. Herod fears that he may lose his power. Joseph thought merely to put Mary away, but Herod aims at nothing less than to "seek the young child to destroy him." Our self-love, being threatened, works against our belief. The Child was taken into Egypt. For a time perhaps our knowledge must be held in the memory until our self-love dies. Then the Child was brought back from Egypt to Nazareth and 'increased in wisdom and stature.'

May we not stop with the Christmas story, but may it lead each of us ever on to fuller and fuller understanding of the Lord as our Redeemer and Savior.

Amen