

My friends in Christ, Christmas is here at last. And during “the most wonderful time of the year” (as the song goes)...hopefully, when we are *not* preoccupied with going out to the parties and mailing out the cards...when we are *not* wrapped up in presents (get it?)...when we are *not* scarfing down every tasty treat that we can find...when we are *not* singing songs or telling tales about Santa Claus, the Polar Express, Frosty the Snowman, George Bailey, Ebenezer Scrooge, the Whos down in Who-ville, Rudolf the Soviet spy satellite known also as the red-nosed reindeer...and so on, and so on...and, of *course*: the Elf on the Shelf (so creepy!)...*hopefully*, when we are *not* bustling with all of those things, we can take just a quiet moment and remember the *true* reason for the season: the Nativity of the Lord...the Birthday of Jesus Christ. It *is* called “Christmas,” after all – as in Christ-Mass. Hopefully, we *do* keep Christ in Christmas...and the fact that we are *here*, right *now*, at Mass reveals that we are *also* keeping *Mass* in Christmas.

Now, we are *quite* familiar with the Christmas story, I presume. If a picture truly is worth a thousand words, then we need only to look upon the manger scene, and so many of the marvelous details of that “Greatest Story Ever Told” flood into our minds and our memories: the shepherds out in the field; the heavenly host in the sky; the magi from the East with the famous gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. And of *course*: the tiny, helpless Baby lying in a manger, and Mother Mary and Saint Joseph with Him on either side.

But maybe we look upon the manger scene and we say things like, “Oh, how sweet! Such a wonderful...*idea!* Such a beautiful...*fantasy!*” As if Jesus ranks right up there with all of those other cuddly critters of Christmas. Because the *Incarnation*...the Lord dwelling among us, *in the flesh*...this claim that Jesus is the *God-Made-Man?* That has *got* to be pure fantasy, *right?* So we come to church each year at Christmas to hear about this obligatory Christmas fantasy story, and then we go home.

But the *truth* is just *way* better! That God became man is *not* fantasy, *not* some random *myth*, but an actual, historical *fact*. We know *that* God became man; we know *when* God became man; we know *where* God became man; we *even* know *how* God became man. All of these questions of *what*, *when*, *where*, and *how* that prudential historical research endeavors to answer are in fact all answered with regard to the Incarnation (the *humanization*, as it were) of God. George Washington crossing

the Delaware...Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon...Almighty God crossing the expanse between the divine and the human. Historical *fact*.

And God did not will that this historical fact of the Incarnation just happen willy-nilly; God did not contrive to be made man at just *any* point in time but at a very *specific* point in time. Because have we ever wondered why God became man at *that* particular point in time, at *that* particular place in all the world? If we have ever wondered such things...then perhaps we can consider the broader historical context of the Incarnation.

The Chosen People were a wandering, nomadic race until their enslavement in Egypt and at the appointed time their liberation and the great Exodus. The Mosaic law (that is, the old covenant, enshrined popularly by the Ten Commandments) was established, and the governmental system of the Judges gave way to the united Kingdom of Judah and Israel. That Kingdom reached its zenith, as it were, under the reign of King David and his son and successor, King Solomon.

But after King Solomon, the Kingdom began to fracture, weaken, diminish; and at last, little by little over the next two centuries, the Kingdom finally collapsed altogether – first in the north, in the 8th Century before Christ, when the Assyrian Empire in present-day northern Iraq invaded from the north and utterly decimated ten of the twelve tribes of Israel that resided in the northern half of the united Kingdom...and then in the south, in the 6th Century before Christ, when the Babylonian Empire in present-day Baghdad, Iraq, invaded from the east, and the Babylonian exile thus began.

The Egyptian overlords were replaced by the larger, stronger Assyrian overlords, who were replaced by the larger, stronger Babylonian overlords. And then near the 5th Century before Christ, King Cyrus and the *Persian* Empire entered the historical fray. The larger, stronger Persians ousted the Babylonians, and the Chosen People were freed to return home from exile and resume life.

And all of this was happening in the east; *meanwhile*, in the *west*, beginning around the turn of the 4th Century before Christ, the great philosopher Socrates was going around doing his thing over there in Greece. And then *who* was his greatest, most famous student? Plato. And who was *Plato's* greatest, most famous student? Aristotle. And who was *Aristotle's* greatest, most famous student?

Alexander the Great. And this...is *huge*. Because Socrates, Plato, Aristotle – those guys did a lot of talking, a lot of writing, a lot of teaching...but not a whole lot of *doing*. Alexander's greatest ambition, on the other hand – not so much that he wanted to conquer the known world – but that the philosophical ideal and perfection of government, politics, state, and society – all of which was *talked* about by his teacher Aristotle and *his* teachers before him – would finally, *finally*, become an actual reality. Enough talk of what a good man should be and just *be* one. Enough talk of what a truly great *world* should be and just *make* one. And *that* is *precisely* what Alexander the Great, in his greatest ambition, set out to do.

And so, he did. He conquered and he conquered, people after people, city after city, nation after nation, empire after empire. But the fundamental endeavor of his whole project was not only to *conquer* their lands but to *convert* their peoples, converting them to the Greek way of life, teaching them the Greek language, indoctrinating them into Greek culture – gymnasia; naked, oiled-up man-on-man wrestling; the whole she-bang!

This systematic indoctrination of foreign peoples into the Greek culture is what we refer to as “Hellenization.”

And then in the fullness of time as it were, the east clashes with the west; Persia clashes with Greece, and the Chosen People are caught right in the middle. Greece wins, the Chosen People are now Greek people, and the Books of Maccabees in the Old Testament tell the story of the remnant few defying their Greek overlords so as to preserve the traditions of the Chosen People which God had given specifically to the Chosen People many centuries earlier when Moses led the great exodus out of Egypt. But a mingling of cultures had already set in, and as a result of being conquered again and again – empire after empire, exile after exile – the Chosen People were dispersed all throughout the known world. The Great Dispersion! Jews *everywhere*! And now, thanks to Alexander the Great and his maniacal obsession with Hellenization, not only are Jews *everywhere*, but they all speak Greek!

Pause.... We have a Greek Empire, a Greek-speaking world, Jews everywhere, and the Jews want to retain their heritage. Fewer and fewer of them, especially those *not* living in Jerusalem, were native Hebrew-speakers; they were Greek-speakers. And so, Greek-speaking Jewish scholars found

the need to translate the Hebrew scriptures into Greek. There was a major Greek-speaking city and cultural/intellectual center of higher learning and scholarship located in present-day Egypt (what we might refer to as a “university town”) called Alexandria. It was named after Alexander the Great of course. It had a world-famous library, back in the days when a library was a pretty big deal because not many people could even read, printing was expensive, and paper was rare.

Anyway, it was in Alexandria where a fairly large community of ancient Jewish scholars had made their home after the *Diaspora*, the Great Dispersion of the Chosen People. And legend has it that, unbeknownst to any of them that anyone *else* was doing this, seventy Jewish scripture scholars independently took on the task of translating the Hebrew scriptures into Greek. When all of them had completed this ambitious work, it became known to them that *all* of them were doing this, and they got together to compare notes. And all seventy translations were exactly the same! This is the Old Testament translation known as the Septuagint (from the Greek word meaning “seventy”); and until Martin Luther in the 16th Century, it was the *only* Old Testament in Christianity. Any reference to the Old Testament found anywhere in the New Testament – such as when Saint Matthew quotes the Prophet Isaiah whenever Jesus fulfills some ancient prophecy – is a reference to the Septuagint.

This also is *huge*. Because Greek is a much *much* larger language than Hebrew with regard to the sheer quantity of vocabulary. I have often lamented the failings of the English language – as we well know – about how English has only *one* word for “love” whereas Greek has *four*. And if Greek is *that* superior to English with regard to vocabulary (and English is a darn big language), how much more superior is Greek to Hebrew? Greek can describe things which Hebrew cannot even begin to describe – including things pertaining to the spiritual realm, the supernatural reality...which, keep in mind, will be an important note to remember in just a moment.

Unpause. Back to history. Following Alexander the Great and the *one* Greek Empire, there was a fractured, *four*-part Greek Empire; meanwhile in the *further* west, we have Rome. Rome in the beginning was just a city and then a city-state; but it really was not until Julius Caesar decided to *stop* being a military general and *start* being a tyrant that things got serious. So he conquered the Roman Senate, then the Italian peninsula, then more and more, and before too long, what once was Greek

was now Roman. But just when things started looking pretty darn good for good ol' Julius, he got stabbed seventeen times in the back (*E tu, Brute?*), and after a *very* brief war with Mark Antony and his Egyptian-queen girlfriend Cleopatra, Julius' nephew Octavian Augustus took over.

And now, we have the *Pax Romana*, the “peace of Rome.” War was done, all enemies were conquered, and Caesar Augustus could focus his efforts on building up the infrastructure of Rome and the Empire: aqueducts; quality roads; cities and centers of higher learning; trade; and so forth.

This all happened in the 1st Century before Christ. And right at the height of *Pax Romana*, when the world was at peace, when international commerce and even tourism were at previously-unknown levels of prosperity, when the vast, vast, *vast* vocabulary of the Greek language was the spoken language of all peoples of all the world – a language that, we remember, was abundantly capable of describing things pertaining to the spiritual realm and the supernatural reality...who should happen to be born in the midst of this perfect, pre-planned setting...? Jesus Christ.

It seems that God waited until this *precise* moment in time, so that, at this *precise* location in the world, the divine could be made human – God could be made man. God, it seems, needed to wait until there was world-wide peace. Because world-wide peace would in turn encourage world-wide travel, commerce, and tourism – all of which made for a perfect conduit for word-of-mouth news to travel fast in a world where literacy was almost totally non-existent, and history and news were told via the oral tradition. God wanted just such a world. God *also* wanted a large language, one firmly rooted in the cultures of the world, so that the mysteries of the spiritual realms and the supernatural could more accurately be described and thus more easily communicated. How could the Incarnation – the *virgin* birth – be described in a language, such as Hebrew, that does not even have a word for “virgin?” God wanted Greek to come along and replace Hebrew, because Greek *does* have a word for “virgin.” How could the Eucharist, the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the Sacred Body and Precious Blood of Jesus, be described in a language, a philosophy, other than Greek – which not only has the *words* but also the *thought*, the *reasoning*, the *philosophy* that even *can* describe such a mystery?

And so, *hopefully* we can at least begin to see, via this brief narrative of the historical context, maybe *why* God chose this specific *what, when, where, and how* to be made man and thus dwell among us – the great mystery of the Incarnation which we celebrate on Christmas each year.

And what is the *moral* of the story? In other words, how should we *respond*? The *why* of this story is very crucial here: *why* God became one of us was simply *this*: love. Out of pure love for us, God *created* us and *then* sent the Son, Jesus Christ, thus to *redeem* us...*save* us. “For God so loved the world” (so loves *us*) “that He gave His only Son...that everyone who believes in Him...might have eternal life.” God’s love for *us* is *amazing*...something truly *miraculous*...*certainly*, therefore, *the* cause for great rejoicing...because God *is* love.... And the fundamental nature of love (what love *truly* is: to will the good of the other) is such that it cannot help it but *want* to create *and* be in communion; therefore, God (Who *is* love) created the world, created *us*, and created us in *such* a way that we are empowered by the very *fact* of our human nature to love in return. We are *created by God* solely as a pure act of love on God’s part. God *loves* us and so *created* us; God *created* us in order to *love* us.

And love is *so* dynamic and *so* expansive in its sublime vitality and life that in making it the choice and the act of the divine will to love *us*, God wants and wills to *be* loved in return. And so, again: creation...*and* communion.... And so, to love God in return for God’s love for us: *that* is how we *should* respond to the Greatest Story Ever Told.... May it be, therefore, that in our joyful celebration of Christmas, each of us would make it *our* choice and the act of *our* will freely to love God – and to do so with all our heart and soul and mind and strength.... For *God* so loves *us* that we are *given* the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ; may it be, then, that *we* will love *God* in return by *receiving* this most precious Gift.