

Historic Commentary

(Advent 4 - Year A)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Matthew 1:18-25 from Church Fathers and John Calvin

*Compiled by the Rev. Eric Dirksen

Origen: The Word is neither seen nor described according to his Godhood but becomes, through his incarnation, subject to both sight and description.

Chrysostom: Do not speculate beyond the text. Do not require of it something more than what it simply says. Do not ask, “But precisely how was it that the Spirit accomplished this in a virgin?” For even when nature is at work, it is impossible fully to explain the manner of the formation of the person. How then, when the Spirit is accomplishing miracles, shall we be able to express their precise causes? Lest you should weary the writer or disturb him by continually probing beyond what he says, he has indicated who it was that produced the miracle. He then withdraws from further comment. “I know nothing more,” he in effect says, “but that what was done was the work of the Holy Spirit.”

Shame on those who attempt to pry into the miracle of generation from on high! For this birth can by no means be explained, yet it has witnesses beyond number and has been proclaimed from ancient times as a real birth handled with human hands. What kind of extreme madness afflicts those who busy themselves by curiously prying into the unutterable generation? For neither Gabriel nor Matthew was able to say anything more, but only that the generation was from the Spirit. But how from the Spirit? In what manner? Neither Gabriel nor Matthew has explained, nor is it possible.

Do not imagine that you have untangled the mystery merely by hearing that this is the work of the Spirit. For we remain ignorant of many things, even while learning of them. So how could the infinite One reside in a womb? How could he that contains all be carried as yet unborn by a woman? How could the Virgin bear and continue to be a virgin? Explain to me how the Spirit designed the temple of his body.

Chromatius: For blessed Matthew, after enumerating the genealogy of Christ, added the following regarding hope for our salvation: “After Mary, mother of Jesus, had been betrothed to Joseph, she was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit before they were married.” This is the heavenly mystery, this sacrament obscured and hidden by the Holy Spirit. Luke describes in greater detail the manner of the Lord’s incarnation, for he recounts how an angel came to Mary and greeted her saying, “Hail woman full of grace,” and the rest that follows. And when Mary asked him how what he had been proclaiming to

her could take place—because she had never had relations with a man—he said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. And thus what is born from you will be called the Son of God.” It was right that holy Mary, who was about to conceive the Lord of glory in her womb, be informed about the Holy Spirit and the excellence of the Most High when she received into her blessed womb the Creator of the world. Indeed, both Matthew and Luke began their narratives with the corporeal birth of the Lord. John, however, addresses the issue of Jesus’ divine birth in the preface to his Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and God was the Word. This was with God in the beginning. All things were made through him and without him nothing was made.” The Evangelists help us to recognize both the divine and corporeal birth of the Lord, which they describe as a twofold mystery and a kind of double path. Indeed, both the divine and the bodily birth of the Lord are indescribable, but that from the Father vastly exceeds every means of description and wonder. The bodily birth of Christ was in time; his divine birth was before time. The one in this age, the other before the ages. The one from a virgin mother, the other from God the Father. Angels and men stood as witnesses at the corporeal birth of the Lord, yet at his divine birth there was no witness except the Father and the Son, because nothing existed before the Father and the Son. But because the Word could not be seen as God in the glory of his own divinity, he assumed visible flesh to demonstrate his invisible divinity. He took from us what is ours in order to give generously what is his.

Chrysostom: Do you not see here a man of exceptional self-restraint, freed from that most tyrannical passion, jealousy? What an explosive thing jealousy is, of which it was rightly spoken: “For the soul of her husband is full of jealousy. He will not spare in the day of vengeance.” And “jealousy is cruel as the grave.” And we too know of many that have chosen to give up their lives rather than fall under the suspicion of jealousy. But in this case it was not a matter of simple suspicion, as the burden of Mary’s own womb entirely convicted her. Nevertheless Joseph was so free from the passion of jealousy as to be unwilling to cause distress to the Virgin, even in the slightest way. To keep Mary in his house appeared to be a transgression of the law, but to expose and bring her to trial would cause him to deliver her to die. He would do nothing of the sort. So Joseph determined to conduct himself now by a higher rule than the law. For now that grace was appearing, it would be fitting that many tokens of that exalted citizenship be expressed. It is like the sun not yet arisen, but from afar more than half the world is already illumined by its light. So did Christ, when about to rise from that womb—even before his birth—cast light upon all the world. In this way, even before her birth pains, prophets danced for joy and women foretold what was to come. And John, even before his birth, leaped in the womb.

Chrysostom: How then did the angel assure Joseph? Hear and marvel at the wisdom of these words: “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife.” The angel instantly puts him in mind of David, from whose seed the Anointed One would spring. He did not allow him to be confused by the exalted title of his forefather or remind him that the promise was made to the whole race. Rather, he addresses him personally as “Joseph, Son of David.” ... By saying “fear not,” he indicates that Joseph had been afraid, lest he might give offense to God by retaining an adulteress under the law. If it had not been for this, he would not have even thought of casting her out. The angel came from God to bring forward and set before him clearly what he thought to do and what he felt in his mind.

The angel did not only mention her by name but also simply called her “your wife.” He

would not have called her so if she had been unfaithful. Even as espoused, he speaks of her as “your wife,” just as Scripture commonly calls betrothed husbands sons-in-law even before marriage.

But what is meant by “[Do not fear] to take Mary your wife”? It means to retain her in his house. For he was intending to put her away. It is as if the angelic voice prompted: “Retain her just as if she has been committed to you by God, not by her parents alone. God is committing her not for marriage but to dwell with you. By my voice he is committing her to you.” Just as Christ would later commit Mary to his disciple, so now he commits her to Joseph.

Chrysostom: The very thing which had made him afraid and for which he would have cast her out—this very thing, I say, was a just cause why he should take her and retain her in his house. This more than entirely did away with his distress. It is as if the angel were saying, “For she is not only free from unlawful sexual relations but her very conception is above all natural causes. So not only put away your fear but rejoice even more greatly, ‘for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.’ ”

What a strange thing he spoke of, surpassing human reasoning and all the laws of nature. How then might one be made able to believe such an announcement that would be so wholly unexpected? Only by viewing this event in relation to past disclosures in Scripture. For with this intent the angel laid open to Joseph all things that were in his mind, what he felt, what he feared, what he was resolved to do, so that he would be wholly reassured. And not only by past revelations in Scripture but also by the promise of what is yet to come does the angel win him over: “She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.”

Chrysostom: It was as if the angel were saying to Joseph, “Do not imagine that, because he is conceived of the Holy Spirit, that you have no part in the ministry of this new dispensation. In the conception you had no part. You never touched the virgin. Nevertheless I am giving you what pertains to a father. I give you the honor of giving a name to the One who is to be born. For you, Joseph, shall name him. For though the offspring is not your own, yet you are called to exhibit a father’s care toward him. So on this occasion, at this moment of giving him a name, you stand in significant relation with the one who is born.” Then lest on the other hand anyone should, out of all this, suspect him to be the father, hear what follows and with what exact care the angel states it: “She shall bring forth a Son.” He does not say “bring forth to you” but merely “she shall bring forth,” putting it indefinitely, since it was not merely to him that she brought forth, but to the whole world.

Chromatius: Joseph therefore learns from the angel about the sacrament of the heavenly mystery and happily complies with the angel’s word. Rejoicing, he abides by the divine plan. He accepts holy Mary and glories in exultant praise because he was deemed worthy to hear that the virgin mother of such great majesty was called by the angel to be his wife.

John Calvin: vs 20. And while he was considering these things We see here how seasonably, and, as we would say, at the very point, the Lord usually aids his people. Hence too we infer that, when he appears not to observe our cares and distresses, we are still under his

eye. He may, indeed, hide himself, and remain silent; but, when our patience has been subjected to the trial, he will aid us at the time which his own wisdom has selected. How slow or late soever his assistance may be thought to be, it is for our advantage that it is thus delayed.

Vs 21. And thou shalt call his name JESUS. I have already explained briefly, but as far as was necessary, the meaning of that word. At present I shall only add, that the words of the angel set aside the dream of those who derive it from the essential name of God, Jehovah; for the angel expresses the reason why the Son of God is so called, Because he shall SAVE his people; which suggests quite a different etymology from what they have contrived. It is justly and appropriately added, they tell us, that Christ will be the author of salvation, because he is the Eternal God. But in vain do they attempt to escape by this subterfuge; for the nature of the blessing which God bestows upon us is not all that is here stated. This office was conferred upon his Son from the fact, from the command which had been given to him by the Father, from the office with which he was invested when he came down to us from heaven. Besides, the two words Ἰησοῦς and יהוה, Jesus and Jehovah, agree but in two letters, and differ in all the rest; which makes it exceedingly absurd to allege any affinity whatever between them, as if they were but one name. Such mixtures I leave to the alchymists, or to those who closely resemble them, the Cabalists who contrive for us those trifling and affected refinements.

When the Son of God came to us clothed in flesh, he received from the Father a name which plainly told for what purpose he came, what was his power, and what we had a right to expect from him. for the name Jesus is derived from the Hebrew verb, in the Hiphil conjugation, הושיע, which signifies to save. In Hebrew it is pronounced differently, Jehoshua; but the Evangelists, who wrote in Greek, followed the customary mode of pronunciation; for in the writings of Moses, and in the other books of the Old Testament, the Hebrew word יהושע, Jehoshua, or Joshua, is rendered by the Greek translators Ἰησοῦς, Jesus. But I must mention another instance of the ignorance of those who derive – or, I would rather say, who forcibly tear – the name Jesus from Jehovah. They hold it to be in the highest degree improper that any mortal man should share this name in common with the Son of God, and make a strange outcry that Christ would never allow his name to be so profaned. As if the reply were not at hand, that the name Jesus was quite as commonly used in those days as the name Joshua. Now, as it is sufficiently clear that the name Jesus presents to us the Son of God as the Author of salvation, let us examine more closely the words of the angel.

He shall save his people from their sins. The first truth taught us by these words is, that those whom Christ is sent to save are in themselves lost. But he is expressly called the Savior of the Church. If those whom God admits to fellowship with himself were sunk in death and ruin till they were restored to life by Christ, what shall we say of “strangers” (Ephesians 2:12) who have never been illuminated by the hope of life? When salvation is declared to be shut up in Christ, it clearly implies that the whole human race is devoted to destruction. The cause of this destruction ought also to be observed; for it is not unjustly, or without good reason, that the Heavenly Judge pronounces us to be accursed. The angel declares that we have perished, and are overwhelmed by an awful condemnation, because we stand excluded from life by our sins. Thus we obtain a view of our corruption and depravity; for if any man lived a perfectly holy life, he might do without Christ as a

Redeemer. But all to a man need his grace; and, therefore, it follows that they are the slaves of sin, and are destitute of true righteousness.

Hence, too, we learn in what way or manner Christ saves; he delivers us from sins. This deliverance consists of two parts. Having made a complete atonement, he brings us a free pardon, which delivers us from condemnation to death, and reconciles us to God. Again, by the sanctifying influences of his Spirit, he frees us from the tyranny of Satan, that we may live “unto righteousness,” (1 Peter 2:24.) Christ is not truly acknowledged as a Savior, till, on the one hand, we learn to receive a free pardon of our sins, and know that we are accounted righteous before God, because we are free from guilt; and till, on the other hand, we ask from him the Spirit of righteousness and holiness, having no confidence whatever in our own works or power. By Christ’s people the angel unquestionably means the Jews, to whom he was appointed as Head and King; but as the Gentiles were shortly afterwards to be ingrafted into the stock of Abraham, (Romans 11:17,) this promise of salvation is extended indiscriminately to all who are incorporated by faith in the “one body” (1 Corinthians 12:20) of the Church.

Vs 23. His name Immanuel The phrase, God is with us, is no doubt frequently employed in Scripture to denote, that he is present with us by his assistance and grace, and displays the power of his hand in our defense. But here we are instructed as to the manner in which God communicates with men. For out of Christ we are alienated from him; but through Christ we are not only received into his favor, but are made one with him. When Paul says, that the Jews under the law were nigh to God, (Ephesians 2:17,) and that a deadly enmity (Ephesians 2:15) subsisted between him and the Gentiles, he means only that, by shadows and figures, God then gave to the people whom he had adopted the tokens of his presence. That promise was still in force, “The Lord thy God is among you,” (Deuteronomy 7:21,) and, “This is my rest for ever,” (Psalm 132:14.) But while the familiar intercourse between God and the people depended on a Mediator, what had not yet fully taken place was shadowed out by symbols. His seat and residence is placed “between the Cherubim,” (Psalm 80:1,) because the ark was the figure and visible pledge of his glory.

But in Christ the actual presence of God with his people, and not, as before, his shadowy presence, has been exhibited.¹¹¹ This is the reason, why Paul says, that “in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily,” (Colossians 2:9.) And certainly he would not be a properly qualified Mediator, if he did not unite both natures in his person, and thus bring men into an alliance with God. Nor is there any force in the objection, about which the Jews make a good deal of noise, that the name of God is frequently applied to those memorials, by which he testified that he was present with believers.

For it cannot be denied, that this name, Immanuel, contains an implied contrast between the presence of God, as exhibited in Christ, with every other kind of presence, which was manifested to the ancient people before his coming. If the reason of this name began to be actually true, when Christ appeared in the flesh, it follows that it was not completely, but only in part, that God was formerly united with the Fathers.