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THE BOOKS OF HOMILIES: Book 2—XII. Of the Nativity

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For the Easter season, I am reading the Books of Homilies, using John Griffiths' 1859 edition (https://prydain.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/the_two_books_of_homilies.pdf).

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Transcript

A homily or sermon concerning the nativity and birth of our Savior Jesus Christ. Among all the creatures that God made in the beginning of the world, most excellent and wonderful in their kind, there was none as Scripture beareth witness to be compared almost in any point unto man, who as well in body and in soul, exceeded all other no less than the sun in brightness and light exceedeth every small and little star in the firmament. He was made according to the image and similitude of God.

He was endued with all kind of heavenly gifts. He had no spot of uncleanness in Him. He was sound and perfect in all parts, both outwardly and inwardly.

His reason was uncorrupt. His understanding was pure and good. His will was obedient and godly.

He was made altogether like unto God in righteousness, in holiness, in wisdom, in truth, to be short, in all kind of perfection. When He was thus created and made, almighty God in token of His great love toward Him, chose out a special place of the earth for Him,

namely Paradise, where He lived in all tranquillity and pleasure, having great abundance of worldly goods, and lacking nothing that He might justly require or desire to have. For, as it is said, God made Him Lord and Ruler over all the works of His hands, that He should have under His feet all sheep and oxen, all beasts of the field, all fowls of the air, all fishes of the sea, and use them always at His own pleasure, according as He should have need.

Was not this a mirror of perfection? Was not this a full, perfect and blessed estate? Could anything else be well added hereunto, or greater felicity desired in this world? But as the common nature of all men is in time of prosperity and wealth to forget not only themselves but also God, even so did this first man Adam, who having but one commandment at God's hand, namely that he should not eat of the fruit of the knowledge of good and ill, did notwithstanding most unmindfully, or rather most willfully, break it, in forgetting the straight charge of his Maker, and giving ear to the crafty suggestion of that wicked serpent, the devil, whereby it came to pass that, as before he was blessed, so now he was accursed, as before he was loved, so now he was abhorred, as before he was most beautiful and precious, so now he was most vile and wretched in the sight of his Lord and Maker. Instead of the image of God, he was become now the image of the devil, instead of the citizen of heaven, he was become the bond-slave of hell, having in himself no one part of his former purity and cleanness, but being altogether spotted and defiled, insomuch that now he seemed to be nothing else but a lump of sin, and therefore by the just judgment of God was condemned to everlasting death. This so great and miserable a plague, if it had only rested on Adam, who first offended, it had been so much the easier, and might the better have been born.

But it fell not only on him, but also on his posterity in children for ever, so that the whole brood of Adam's flesh should sustain the selfsame fall and punishment which their forefather by his offence most justly had deserved. Saint Paul in the fifth chapter to the Romans saith, By the offence of only Adam the fault came upon all men to condemnation, and by one man's disobedience many were made sinners. By which words we are taught, that, as in Adam all men universally sinned, so in Adam all men universally received the reward of sin, that is to say, became mortal and subject unto death, having in themselves nothing but everlasting damnation, both of body and soul.

They became, as David saith, corrupt and abominable. They went all out of the way. There was none that did good, no, not one.

Oh, what a miserable and woeful state was this, that the sin of one man should destroy and condemn all men, that nothing in all the world might be looked for but only pangs of death and pains of hell! Had it been any marvel, if mankind had been utterly driven to desperation, being thus fallen from life to death, from salvation to destruction, from heaven to hell! But behold the great goodness and tender mercy of God in this behalf, albeit man's wickedness and sinful behaviour were such that it deserved not in any part

to be forgiven. Yet, to the intent he might not be clean destitute of all hope and comfort in time to come, he ordained a new covenant, and made a sure promise thereof, namely that he would send a Messiah, or mediator, into the world, which should make intercession, and put himself as a stay between both parties, to pacify the wrath and indignation conceived against sin, and to deliver man out of the miserable curse and cursed misery, whereinto he was fallen headlong, by disobeying the will and commandment of his only Lord and Maker. This covenant and promise was first made unto Adam himself immediately after his fall, as we read in the third of Genesis, where God said to the serpent on this wise, I will put enmity between thee and the woman, between thy seed and her seed, he shall break thine head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.

Afterward the selfsame covenant was also more amply and plainly renewed unto Abraham, where God promised him that in his seed all nations and families of the earth should be blessed. Again it was continued and confirmed unto Isaac in the same form of words as it was before unto his father, and to the intent that mankind might not despair, but always live in hope, Almighty God never ceased to publish, repeat, confirm, and continue the same by diverse and sundry testimonies of his prophets, who for the better persuasion of the thing, prophesied the time, the place, the manner, and circumstance of his birth, the afflictions of his life, the kind of his death, the glory of his resurrection, the receiving of his kingdom, the deliverance of his people, with all other circumstances belonging thereunto. Esai prophesied that he should be born of a virgin and called Emmanuel.

Michael prophesied that he should be born in Bethlehem, a place of Jewry. Ezekiel prophesied that he should come of the stock and lineage of David. Daniel prophesied that all nations and languages should serve him.

Zachary prophesied that he should come in poverty, riding upon an ass. Malachi prophesied that he should send Elias before him, which was John the Baptist. Jeremy prophesied that he should be sold for thirty pieces of silver, etc.

And all this was done that the promise and covenant of God, made unto Abraham and his posterity concerning the redemption of the world, might be credited and fully believed. Now as the apostle Paul saith, when the fullness of time was come, that is, the perfection and course of years appointed from the beginning, then God, according to his former covenant and promise, sent a Messiah, otherwise called a Mediator, into the world. Not such a one as Moses was, not such a one as Adjustua, Saul or David was, but such a one as should deliver mankind from the bitter curse of the law, and make perfect satisfaction by his death for the sins of all people.

Namely, he sent his dear and only Son, Jesus Christ, made as the Apostle, saith, of a woman, and made under the law, that he might redeem them that were in bondage of

the law, and make them the children of God by adoption. Was not this a wonderful great love towards us that were his professed and open enemies, towards us that were by nature the children of wrath and firebrands of hellfire? In this, saith St. John, appeared the great love of God that he sent his only begotten Son into the world to save us, when we were his extreme enemies. Herein is love, not that we loved him, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be a reconciliation for our sins.

St. Paul also saith, Christ, when we were yet of no strength, died for us being ungodly. Doubtless a man will scarce die for a righteous man. Peradventure, someone durst die for him of whom he hath received good.

But God setteth out his love towards us, in that he sent Christ to die for us, when we were yet void of all goodness. This and such other comparisons doth the Apostle use, to amplify and set forth the tender mercy and great goodness of God, declared towards mankind, in sending down a Saviour from heaven, even Christ the Lord. Which one benefit among all other is so great and wonderful, that neither tongue can well express it, neither heart think it, much less give sufficient thanks to God for it.

But here is a great controversy between us and the Jews, whether the same Jesus, which was born of the Virgin Mary, be the true Messiah and true Saviour of the world, so long promised and prophesied of before. They as they are, and have been always, proud and stiff-necked, would never acknowledge him until this day, but have looked and gaped for another to come. They have this fond imagination in their heads, that Messiah shall come, not as Christ did, like a poor pilgrim and simple soul riding upon an ass, but like a valiant and mighty king, in great royalty and honour, not as Christ did, with a few fishermen and men of a small estimation in the world, but with a great army of strong men, with a great train of wise and noble men, as knights, lords, earls, dukes, princes and so forth.

Neither do they think that their Messiah shall slanderously suffer death, as Christ did, but that he shall stoutly conquer and manfully subdue all his enemies, and finally obtain such a kingdom on earth as never was seen from the beginning. While they feign unto themselves after this sort of a Messiah of their own brain, they deceive themselves, and account Christ as an abject and fool of the world. Therefore Christ crucified as St. Paul saith, is unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and to the Gentiles foolishness, because they think it an absurd thing, and contrary to all reason, that a Redeemer and Saviour of the whole world should be handled after such sort as He was, namely scorned, reviled, scourged, condemned, and last of all cruelly hanged.

This, I say, seemed in their eyes strange and most absurd, and therefore neither they would at that time, neither will they as yet, acknowledge Christ to be their Messiah and Saviour. But we, dearly beloved, that hope and look to be saved, must both steadfastly believe, and also boldly confess, that the same Jesus which was born of the Virgin Mary,

was the true Messiah and mediator between God and man, promised and prophesied of so long before. For as the apostle writeth, with the heart man believeth unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

Again in the same place, whosoever believeth in him, shall never be ashamed nor confounded. Whereto agreeth also the testimony of St. John, written in the fourth chapter of his first general epistle, on this wise, whosoever confesseth that Jesus is the Son of God, he dwelleth in God, and God in him. There is no doubt, but in this point all Christian men are fully and perfectly persuaded.

Yet shall it not be a lost labour to instruct and furnish you with a few places concerning this matter, that ye may be able to stop the blasphemous mouths of all them that most Jewishly or rather devilishly shall at any time go about to teach or maintain the contrary. First, ye have the witness and testimony of the angel Gabriel, declared as well to Zachary the high priest as also to the blessed Virgin. Secondly, ye have the witness and testimony of John the Baptist, pointing unto Christ and saying, Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world.

Thirdly, ye have the witness and testimony of God the Father, who thundered from heaven and said, This is my dearly beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, hear him. Fourthly, ye have the witness and testimony of the Holy Ghost, which came down from heaven in manner of a white dove, alighted upon him in time of his baptism. To these might be added a great number more, namely the witness and testimony of the wise men that came to Herod, the witness and testimony of Simeon and Anna, the witness and testimony of Andrew and Philip, Nathaniel and Peter, Nicodemus and Martha, with diverse others.

But it were too long to repeat all, and a few places are sufficient in so plain a matter, specially among them that are already persuaded. Therefore if the privy imps of Antichrist and crafty instruments of the devil shall attempt to go about to withdraw you from this true messiahs, and persuade you to look for another that is not yet come, let them not in any case seduce you, but confirm yourselves with these and such other testimonies of Holy Scripture, which are so sure and certain, that all the devils in hell shall never be able to withstand them. For as truly as God liveth, so truly was Jesus Christ the true Messiah and Saviour of the world, even the same Jesus which, as this day, was born of the Virgin Mary, without all help of man, only by the power and operation of the Holy Ghost, concerning whose nature and substance, because diverse and sundry heresies are risen in these our days through the motion and suggestion of Satan, therefore it shall be needful and profitable for your instruction to speak a word or two also of this part.

We are evidently taught in the Scripture that our Lord and Saviour Christ consisteth of two several natures, of his manhood being thereby perfect man, and of his Godhood

being thereby perfect God. It is written, The Word, that is to say the second person in Trinity, became flesh, God sending his own Son in the similitude of sinful flesh, fulfilled those things which the law could not. Christ being in form of God, took on him the form of a servant, and was made like unto man, being found in shape as a man.

God was showed in flesh, justified in spirit, seen of angels, preached to the Gentiles, believed on in the world, and received up in glory. Also in another place, there is one God and one mediator between God and man, even the man Jesus Christ. These be plain places for the proof and declaration of both natures united and knit together in one Christ.

Let us diligently consider and weigh the works that he did, whilst he lived on earth, and we shall thereby also perceive the selfsame thing to be most true, in that he did hunger and thirst, eat and drink, sleep and wake, in that he preached his gospel to the people, in that he wept and sorrowed for Jerusalem, in that he paid tribute for himself and Peter, in that he died and suffered death, what other thing did he else declare but only this, that he was perfect man as we are? For which cause he is called in holy scripture sometime the son of David, sometime the son of man, sometime the son of Mary, sometime the son of Joseph, and so forth? Now in that he forgave sins, in that he wrought miracles, in that he did cast out devils, in that he healed men with his only word, in that he knew the thoughts of men's hearts, in that he had the seas at his commandment, in that he walked on the water, in that he rose from death to life, in that he ascended into heaven, and so forth? What other thing did he show therein but only that he was perfect God, co-equal with his Father as touching his deity? Therefore, he saith, the Father and I are all one, which is to be understood of his Godhead, for as touching his manhood, he saith, the Father is greater than I am. Where are now those Marcionites that deny Christ to have been born in flesh, or to have been perfect man? Where are now those Arians which deny Christ to have been perfect God, of equal substance with the Father? If there be any such, ye may easily reprove them with these testimonies of God's word, and such other, whereunto I am most sure they shall never be able to answer. For the necessity of our salvation did require such a mediator and saviour, as under one person should be a partaker of both natures.

It was requisite he should be man, it was also requisite he should be God, for as the transgression came by man, so it was meet the satisfaction should be made by man. And because death, according to St. Paul, is the just stipend and reward of sin, therefore to appease the wrath of God and to satisfy his justice, it was expedient that our mediator should be such a one as might take upon him the sins of mankind, and sustain the due punishment thereof, namely death. Moreover he came in flesh, and in the selfsame flesh ascended into heaven, to declare and testify unto us, that all faithful people which steadfastly believe in him, shall likewise come unto the same mansion place whereunto he, being our chief captain, has gone before.

Last of all he became man, that we thereby might receive the greater comfort, as well in our prayers, as also in our adversity, considering with ourselves that we have a mediator that is true man as we are, who also is touched with our infirmities, and was tempted even in like sort as we are. For these and sundry other causes it was most needful he should come as he did in the flesh. But because no creature, in that he is only a creature, hath or may have power to destroy death and give life, to overcome hell and purchase heaven, to remit sins and give righteousness, therefore it was needful that our Messiah, whose proper duty and office that was, should be not only full and perfect man, but also full and perfect God, to the intent he might more fully and perfectly make satisfaction for mankind.

God saith, This is my well-beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. By which place we learn that Christ appeased and quenched the wrath of his Father, not in that he was only the Son of Man, but much more in that he was the Son of God. Thus ye have heard declared out of the Scriptures, that Jesus Christ was the true Messiah and Saviour of the world, that he was by nature and substance perfect God and perfect man, and for what causes it was expedient he should be so.

Now that we may be the more mindful and thankful unto God in this behalf, let us briefly consider and call to mind the manifold and great benefits that we have received by the nativity and birth of this our Messiah and Saviour. Before Christ's coming into the world, all men universally were nothing else but a wicked and crooked generation, rotten and corrupt trees, stony ground full of brambles and briars, lost sheep, prodigal sons, naughty and unprofitable servants, unrighteous stewards, workers of iniquity, the brood of adders, blind guides, sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death, to be short, nothing else but children of perdition and inheritors of hellfire. To this doth St. Paul bear witness in diverse places of his epistles, and Christ also himself in sundry places of his gospel.

But after he was once come down from heaven, and had taken our frail nature upon him, he made all them that would receive him truly and believe his word, good trees and good ground, fruitful and pleasant branches, children of light, citizens of heaven, sheep of his fold, members of his body, heirs of his kingdom, his true friends and brethren, sweet and lively bread, the elect and chosen people of God. For as St. Peter saith in his first epistle and second chapter, he bare our sins in his body upon the cross, he healed us and made us whole by his stripes, and whereas before we were sheep going astray, he by his coming brought us home again to the true shepherd and bishop of our souls, making us a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people of God, in that he died for our offences and rose again for our justification. St. Paul to Timothy, the third chapter, we were, saith he, in times past, unwise, disobedient, deceived, serving diverse lusts and pleasures, living in hatred, envy, maliciousness, and so forth.

But after the loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared towards mankind, not according to the righteousness that we had done, but according to his great mercy, he saved us by the fountain of the new birth and by the renewing of the Holy Ghost, which he poured upon us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, that we, being once justified by his grace, should be heirs of eternal life through hope and faith in his blood. In these and such other places as set out before our eyes, as it were in a glass, the abundant grace of God received in Christ Jesus, which is so much the more wonderful, because it came not of any desert of ours, but of his mere and tender mercy, even then when we were his extreme enemies. But for the better understanding and consideration of this thing, let us behold the end of his coming, so shall we perceive what great commodity and profit his nativity hath brought unto us miserable and sinful creatures.

The end of his coming was to save and deliver his people, to fulfil the law for us, to bear witness unto the truth, to teach and preach the words of his Father, to give light unto the world, to call sinners to repentance, to refresh them that labour and be heavy laden, to cast out the prince of this world, to reconcile us in the body of his flesh, to dissolve the works of the devil, last of all, to become a propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. These were the chief ends wherefore Christ became man, not for any profit that should come to himself thereby, but only for our sakes, that we might understand the will of God, be partakers of his heavenly light, be delivered out of the devil's claws, released from the burden of sin, justified through faith in his blood, and finally received up into everlasting glory, there to reign with him for ever. Was not this a great and singular love of Christ towards mankind, that being the express and lively image of God, he would notwithstanding humble himself and take upon him the form of a servant, and that only to save and redeem us? O how much are we bound to the goodness of God in this behalf! How many thanks and praises do we owe unto him for this our salvation, wrought by his dear and only Son Christ, who became a pilgrim in earth, to make us citizens in heaven, who became the Son of Man, to make us the sons of God, who became obedient to the law, to deliver us from the curse of the law, who became poor to make us rich, vile to make us precious, subject to death, to make us live for ever! What greater love could we seely creatures desire or wish to have at God's hands! Therefore, dearly beloved, let us not forget this exceeding love of our Lord and Saviour.

Let us not show ourselves unmindful or unthankful towards him, but let us love him, fear him, obey him and serve him. Let us confess him with our mouths, praise him with our tongues, believe on him with our hearts and glorify him with our good works. Christ is the light, let us receive the light.

Christ is the truth, let us believe the truth. Christ is the way, let us follow the way. And because he is our only Master, our only Teacher, our only Shepherd and Chief Captain, therefore let us become his servants, his scholars, his sheep and his soldiers.

As for sin, the flesh, the world and the devil, whose servants and bond-slaves we were before Christ's coming, let us utterly cast them off and defy them as the chief and only enemies of our soul. And seeing we are once delivered from their cruel tyranny by Christ, let us never fall into their hands again, lest by chance to be in worse case than ever we were before. Happy are they, saith scripture, that continue to the end.

Be faithful, saith God, until death, and I will give thee a crown of life. Again he saith in another place, He that putteth his hand unto the plough and looketh back is not meet for the kingdom of God. Therefore let us be strong, steadfast and unmovable, abounding always in the works of the Lord.

Let us receive Christ, not for a time, but for ever. Let us believe his word, not for a time, but for ever. Let us become his servants, not for a time, but for ever.

In consideration that he hath redeemed and saved us, not for a time, but for ever, and will receive us into his heavenly kingdom, to reign with him, not for a time, but for ever. To him, therefore, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, be all honour, praise and glory, for ever and ever. Amen.