

ST AUGUSTINE: A CHRISTMAS SERMON¹

Translated by EDMUND HILL, O.P.

THIS day has been made holy for us by the day who made all days; the day about whom there is a song in the psalm, 'Sing to the Lord a new song, sing to the Lord all the earth. Sing to the Lord and bless his name, rightly declare day from day his salvation' (Ps. xcv, 1). Who can this day from day be, if not the Son from the Father, light from light? But that day who begot the day that would be born of the virgin this day, that day has no dawning, has no dusk. The day I mean is God the Father. Jesus after all would not be day from day, unless the Father were also day. What is day anyhow? Simply light; but now not material light for material eyes, which is shared by men and beasts, but light which shines on angels, light which our hearts are now being scrubbed and polished for a sight of. This night is soon over which we are now living in, in which the lamps of scripture have been lit for us, and soon what another psalm sings of will be here, 'In the morning I will stand before you and gaze upon you' (Ps. v, 5).

And so that day which is the Word of God, who shines on the angels, who shines in that mother country we are exiles from, that day clothed himself in flesh and was born of the virgin Mary. He was born in a marvellous way. What could be more marvellous than a virgin giving birth? She conceived, and she is a virgin; she gives birth, and she is a virgin. He was created of her who had been created by him, and he came to make her fruitful, not to mar her flawlessness. Where did Mary come from? From Adam. And where did Adam come from? From the earth. So if Adam is from the earth, and Mary is from Adam, then Mary too is earth. And so Mary being earth, we can recognize the meaning of what we sing, 'Truth is sprung from the earth' (Ps. lxxxiv, 12), And what good has that done us? 'Truth is sprung from the earth, and justice has looked out from heaven.' The Jews, as St Paul says, 'not knowing the justice of God, and wanting to establish their own, are not subject to the

¹ Frangipane, IV.

justice of God' (Rom. x, 3). How can a man become just? By himself? Well, can a penniless man give himself a meal? Or a man in rags cover himself unless he is given clothes? Justice we had none—all there was here was sins. Where does justice come from? What justice can there be without faith? 'For the just man lives by faith' (Rom. i, 17). Whoever calls himself just without faith is a liar. He must be a liar, if there is no faith in him. If he wants to speak the truth, let him turn to the truth.—Oh, but it was so far away.—'Truth is sprung from the earth'; you were asleep, he came to you, you were snoring, he woke you up; he made you a road to the truth through himself, in order not to lose you. So truth is sprung from the earth, our Lord Jesus Christ is born of the virgin; justice has looked out from heaven, so that men could have justice, not their own but God's.

What a tremendous courtesy! And what displeasure has preceded it! We were all under sentence of death, weighed down by sin, staggering under our punishment. Everyone begins life wretchedly, as soon as he is born. You don't need to look it up in scripture, ask a child at its birth, look at it crying. Such is God's displeasure on earth, and then suddenly this astonishing courtesy, truth springs from the earth. He created all things, and he is created among them all. He made the day, and he came one day. He was before all time, and he set his seal on time. The Lord Christ is everlastingly without beginning with the Father. And yet ask what today is, and the answer is a birthday. Whose? The Lord's. Has he got a birthday? He has. The Word who was in the beginning, God of God, has he really got a birthday? He has. Unless he had a human birth, we would never reach divine rebirth; he was born so that we might be reborn. Let no one hesitate to be reborn, now that Christ is born.² He was born without need of rebirth. We need rebirth, because we were born condemned. May our hearts then be full of his mercy. His mother carried him in her womb; let us carry him in our hearts. The virgin was big with Christ incarnate; may our bosoms be big with Christ in faith. She brought forth the Saviour; let us bring forth praise. Don't let us be barren; may our souls bear fruit to God.

Christ was born of the Father without mother, he was born

² These and the following words are probably aimed at the unbaptized catechumens, exhorting them not to defer their baptism indefinitely.

of his mother without father. The first birth is eternal, the second is temporal, and both are wonderful. When was he born of the Father?—What do you mean, when? Are you asking for a when where you won't find any time? Don't ask there for a when; ask for a when here. When was he born of his mother, is a good question. When was he born of his Father is not a good question. That birth of his has no time. He was born eternal, of the eternal, co-eternal. Why the astonishment? He's God. And when we say he was born of a virgin, it is a big thing to say, you are astonished. But he's God, don't be astonished. Off with astonishment, on with praise. Let faith come in; believe that it happened. If you don't believe, it still happened, and you remain an unbeliever. He was good enough to become man; what more do you want? Hasn't God humbled himself enough for you? He who was God has become man. The inn was too small, he was wrapped in swaddling bands and put in a manger. You heard it read in the gospel. It would amaze anybody. He who furnished the world found no room in an inn, he was placed in a feeding-trough, he became our food. Let the two animals, two peoples, approach the manger. 'For the ox has recognized his owner, and the ass his master's manger' (Isa. i, 3). Stand there at the manger, don't be ashamed to be the Lord's hack. You will be carrying Christ; you won't go astray walking along the road—you have got the road sitting on your back. Do you remember that ass's colt that was brought to our Lord? (Mark xi, 2). Don't be ashamed, any of you, but that's us. May our Lord sit on us and summon us where he likes. We are his hack, we are going to Jerusalem. With him sitting on us we are not pressed down but raised up. With him to guide us we won't go wrong; it's to him we are going and it's through him we are going, so it's not to ruin we are going.³

3 He ends with a pun that really defies translation: *ad illum imus, per illum imus, non per imus.*