

St. John Chrysostom, Bishop and Doctor Christmas Morning Sermon



I behold a new and wondrous mystery. My ears resound to the Shepherd's song, piping no soft melody, but chanting full forth a heavenly hymn. The Angels sing. The Archangels blend their voice in harmony. The Cherubim hymn their joyful praise. The Seraphim exalt His glory. All join to praise this holy feast, beholding the Godhead here on earth, and man in heaven. He Who is above, now for our redemption dwells here below; and he that was lowly is by divine mercy raised.

Bethlehem this day resembles heaven; hearing from the stars the singing of angelic voices; and in place of the sun, enfolds within itself on every side, the Sun of justice. And ask not how: for where God wills, the order of nature yields. For He willed, He had the power, He descended, He redeemed; all things yielded in obedience to God. This day He Who is, is Born; and He Who is, becomes what He was not. For when He was God, He became man; yet not departing from the Godhead that is His. Nor yet by any loss of divinity became He man, nor through increase became He God from man; but being the Word He became flesh, His nature, because of impassability, remaining unchanged.

When He was born the Jews denied His extraordinary birth; the Pharisees began to interpret falsely the Sacred Writings; the Scribes spoke in contradiction of that which they read. Herod sought Him out Who was born, not that he might adore, but to put Him to death. Today all things proclaim the opposite. *For they have not been*, that I may speak with the psalmist, *hidden from their children, in another generation* (Ps. lxxvii. 4). And so the kings have come, and they have seen the heavenly King that has come upon the earth, not bringing with Him Angels, nor Archangels, nor Thrones, nor Dominations, nor Powers, nor Principalities, but, treading a new and solitary path, He has come forth from a spotless womb. And so the kings have come, and they have seen the heavenly King that has come upon the earth, not bringing with Him Angels, nor Archangels, nor Thrones, nor Dominations, nor Powers, nor Principalities, but, treading a new and solitary path, He has come forth from a spotless womb.

Yet He has not forsaken His angels, nor left them deprived of His care, nor because of His Incarnation has he departed from the Godhead. And behold kings have come, that they might adore the heavenly King of glory; soldiers, they might serve the Leader of the Hosts of Heaven; women, that they might adore Him Who was born of a woman so that He might change the pains of childbirth into joy; virgins, to the Son of the Virgin, beholding with joy, that He Who is the Giver of milk, Who has decreed that the fountains of the breast pour forth in ready streams, receives from a Virgin Mother the food of infancy; infants, that they may adore Him Who became a little child, so that *out of the mouth of infants and of sucklings*, He might perfect praise; children, to the Child Who raised up martyrs through the rage of Herod; men, to Him Who became man, that He might heal the miseries of His servants; shepherds, to the Good Shepherd Who has laid down His life for His sheep; priests, to Him Who has become a High Priest according to the order of Melchisedech; servants, to Him *Who took upon Himself the form of a servant* that He might bless our servitude with the reward of freedom (Phil. ii. 7); fishermen, to Him Who from amongst fishermen chose catchers of men; publicans, to Him Who from amongst them named a chosen Evangelist; sinful women, to Him Who exposed His Feet to the tears of the repentant; and that I may embrace them all together, all sinners have come, that they may look upon the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world. Since therefore all rejoice, I too desire to rejoice. I too wish to share the choral dance, to celebrate the festival. But I take my part, not plucking the harp, not shaking the Thyrsian staff, not with the music of the pipes, nor holding a torch, but holding in my arms the cradle of Christ. For this is all my hope, this my life, this my salvation, this my pipe, my harp. And bearing it I come, and having from its power received the gift of speech, I too, with the angels, sing: *Glory to God in the Highest; and with the shepherds, and on earth peace to men of good will.*

This day He Who was ineffably begotten of the Father, was for me born of the Virgin, in a way no tongue can tell. Begotten according to His nature before all ages from the Father: in what manner He knows Who has begotten Him; born again this day from the Virgin, above the order of nature, in what manner knoweth the power of the Holy Spirit. And His heavenly generation is true, and His generation here on earth is true. As God He is truly begotten of God; so also as man is He truly born from the Virgin. In heaven He alone is the Only Begotten of the One God; on earth He alone is the Only-Begotten of the unique Virgin.

And as in the heavenly generation, to imply a mother is heretical, so in this earthly generation, to speak of a father is blasphemy. The Father begot in the spirit (*Pater absque defluxu genuit*), and the Virgin brought forth without defilement. The Father begot without the limitations of flesh, since He begot as became the Godhead; so neither did the Virgin endure corruption in her childbearing, since she brought forth miraculously. Hence, since this heavenly birth cannot be described, neither does His coming amongst us in these days permit of too curious scrutiny. Though I know that a Virgin this day gave birth, and I believe that God was begotten before all time, yet the manner of this generation I have learned to venerate in silence, and I accept that this is not to be probed too curiously with wordy speech. For with God we look not for the order of nature, but rest our faith in the power of Him who works.

It is indeed the way of nature that a woman in wedlock brings forth; when an unwed virgin, after she has born a child, is still a virgin, then nature is here surpassed. Of that which happens in accord with nature we may enquire; what passes above it we honour in silence; not as something to be avoided, passed over, but as that which we venerate in silence, as something sublime, beyond all telling.

But give me now your indulgence, I beg you, that I may bring this exordium to a close. But since I fear to pursue the scrutiny of this sublime theme, I know not on what ground, at what part of this discourse, to make the separation.

What shall I say to you; what shall I tell you? I behold a Mother who has brought forth; I see a Child come to this light by birth. The manner of His conception I cannot comprehend. Nature here is overcome, the boundaries of the established order set aside, where God so wills. For not according to nature has this thing come to pass. Nature here rested, while the Will of God laboured. O ineffable grace! The Only Begotten, Who is before all ages, Who cannot be touched or be perceived, Who is simple, without body, has now put on my body, that is visible and liable to corruption. For what reason? That coming amongst us he may teach us, and teaching, lead us by the hand to the things that men cannot see. For since men believe that the eyes are more trustworthy than the ears, they doubt of that which they do not see, and so He has deigned to show Himself in bodily presence, that He may remove all doubt.

And He was born from a Virgin, who knew not His purpose; neither had she laboured with Him to bring it to pass, nor contributed to that which He had done, but was the simple instrument of His Hidden Power. That alone she knew which she had learned by her question to Gabriel: *How shall this be done, because I know not man?* Then said he; do you wish to hear his words? *The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee.*

And in what manner was the Almighty with her, Who in a little while came forth from her? He was as the craftsman, who coming on some suitable material, fashions to himself a beautiful vessel; so Christ, finding the holy body and soul of the Virgin, builds for Himself a living temple, and as He had willed, formed there a man from the Virgin; and, putting Him on, this day came forth; unashamed of the lowliness of our nature. For it was to Him no lowering to put on what He Himself had made. Let that handiwork be forever glorified, which became the cloak of its own Creator. For as in the first creation of flesh, man could not be made before the clay had come into His hand, so neither could this corruptible body be glorified, until it had first become the garment of its Maker.

What shall I say! And how shall I describe this Birth to you? For this wonder fills me with astonishment. The Ancient of days has become an infant. He Who sits upon the sublime and heavenly Throne, now lies in a manger. And He Who cannot be touched, Who is simple, without complexity, and incorporeal, now lies subject to the hands of men. He Who has broken the bonds of sinners, is now bound by an infants' bands. But He has decreed that

ignominy shall become honour, infamy be clothed with glory, and total humiliation the measure of His Goodness. For this He assumed my body, that I may become capable of His Word; taking my flesh, He gives me His Spirit; and so He bestowing and I receiving, He prepares for me the treasure of Life. He takes my flesh, to sanctify me; He gives me His Spirit, that He may save me.

But what can I say? And of what shall my feeble tongue speak? *Behold a Virgin shall conceive* (Is. vii. 14). This is no longer said of something that is to be, but received as something fulfilled. And it was fulfilled among the Jews, to whom it was foretold; it is believed by us, to whom it was not at any time announced. *Behold a Virgin shall conceive*. The Deed was given to the Synagogue, but to the Church was given possession. The one found a document, the other a pearl of great price. The one was clothed in wool, the other in a royal robe. Judah brings Him forth, the whole world acclaims Him. The Synagogue nourished and instructed Him, the Church seized Him and holds Him fast. The Synagogue has the vinebranch, I have the Fruit of Truth. Israel garnered the grapes, the Gentiles drink the mystical wine. The one sowed the seed wheat in Judea, and the Gentiles have reaped the harvest with the sickle of faith. The Gentiles have reverently plucked the rose, and to the Jews remain the thorn of hard-heartedness. The nestling has taken wing, but the foolish still wait by the empty nest. Israel still ponders the leaves of the Book, while the Gentiles enjoy the fruit of the Spirit.

Behold a virgin shall conceive. Tell, o Judea, Whom has she brought forth? Confide it to me as you did to Herod. But you confide not in men. I know the reason. Because of treachery. You spoke to Herod, but that Herod might destroy Him. To me you are silent, lest I adore Him.

Whom has she brought forth? Whom? The Lord of nature For though thou art silent, nature cries out. For She has brought forth as He Who was born decreed to be born. Not as nature decreed, but He as nature's Lord has made for Himself a new and unheard of birth, that He may show Himself as man; but not brought forth as men are born, but born as God. For from a Virgin He came forth this day, He Who hath set nature aside, and risen above the ways of nuptials.

It was fitting that the Giver of all holiness should enter this world by a pure and holy birth. For He it is that of old formed Adam from the virgin earth, and from Adam without help of woman formed woman. For us without woman Adam produced woman, so did the Virgin without man this day bring forth a man. *For it is a man*, saith the Lord, *and who shall know him* (Jcr. xvii. 9. (LXX)). For since the race of women owed to men a debt, as from Adam without woman woman came, therefore without man the Virgin this day brought forth, and on behalf of Eve repaid the debt to man.

That Adam might not take pride, that he without woman had engendered woman, a Woman without man has begotten man; so that by the similarity of the mystery is proved the similarity in nature. For as before the Almighty took a rib from Adam, and by that Adam was not made less; so in the Virgin He formed a living temple, and the holy virginity remained unchanged. Sound and unharmed Adam remained even after the deprivation of a rib; unstained the Virgin though a Child was born of her.

Not elsewhere did He form for Himself a living temple; nor other body did He take than this, so that men should not remain branded with dishonour. For man being deceived became the devil's slave. So him that was thus supplanted, He took as His own living temple, that being joined to his Maker, man might then be wrested from this bond, and from subjection to the devil.

Yet in becoming man He was born, not as man is born, but as God. If He had been born from an ordinary union, as I was, He would have been reckoned a fraud. And for this cause He is now born of a Virgin, but in being born He preserves undefiled this womb, and protects that spotless virginity; so that this unheard of manner of bringing forth is for me a pledge of its sublime truthfulness.

So should Gentile or Jew ask me, did Christ Who is God by nature, become man in a manner above nature, I answer: "that is so," and call as witness the unstained seal of virginity. It is God alone Who can so rise above nature;

for He is the Maker of the womb, the Author of virginity, Who has thus without stain preserved the manner of His own Birth, and in a mysterious way has formed there, according to His will, a temple unto Himself.

Tell me, o Judea, Has a virgin brought forth, or has she not? If she has, then acknowledge this wondrous birth. If she has not, why did you lead Herod astray? Why didst thou, to his urgent inquiry as to where the Christ is to be born, make answer: *In Bethlehem of Juda*. Did I know the village, or the place? How have I learned of the dignity of His lineage? Was it not Isaias that spake of it, as being of God Himself? *Behold a Virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and His name shall be called Emmanuel* (Is. vii. 14).

Is it not you, O wicked enemies, that have brought forth the truth? Have you not, Scribes and Pharisees, diligent custodians of the Law, taught us these things? Did we know the Hebrew tongue?

Was it not you who interpreted the Scriptures? After the Virgin brought forth, and before She brought forth, lest these words be interpreted in praise of God, did you not, when questioned by Herod, bring forward the witness of the prophet Micheas, that he might confirm your words? *And thou Bethlehem the land of Juda, are not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come forth the captain that shall rule my people Israel* (Mt. ii. 6; Micheas. v. 2).

Rightly did the prophet say, *out of thee*. He has gone out from thee, and gone into the whole world. He Who is, has gone forth. He who is not, is created, or becomes. And of Himself He was, and before was, and always was: but always as God, governing the world. This day He comes forth; as Man He rules the people, as God He saves all men.

O Kindly Enemies! o Modest and Gentle Accusers! Who, without knowing it, proclaimed that God was born in Bethlehem; who made known that He was laid in a manger; who, unwittingly, pointed out the cave where He lay hidden, and, against their own will, laid on us a debt of gratitude. For they made known that which they strove to keep hidden. Behold them! The Foolish Teachers! That which they teach, they themselves know not; consumed with hunger, they feed others; thirsting, they give to drink; needy, they yet enrich.

Come, then, let us observe the Feast. Come, and we shall commemorate the solemn festival. It is a strange manner of celebrating a festival; but truly wondrous is the whole chronicle of the Nativity. For this day the ancient slavery is ended, the devil confounded, the demons take to flight, the power of death is broken, paradise is unlocked, the curse is taken away, sin is removed from us, error driven out, truth has been brought back, the speech of kindness diffused, and spreads on every side, a heavenly way of life has been implanted on the earth, angels communicate with men without fear, and men now hold speech with angels.

Why is this? Because God is now on earth, and man in heaven; on every side all things commingle. He has come on earth, while being Whole in heaven; and while complete in heaven, He is without diminution on earth. Though He was God, He became Man; not denying Himself to be God. Though being the impassable Word, He became flesh; that He might dwell amongst us, He became Flesh. He did not become God. He was God. Wherefore He became flesh, so that He Whom heaven did not contain, a manger would this day receive. He was placed in a manger, so that He, by whom all things are nourished, may receive an infant's food from His Virgin Mother. So, the Father of all ages, as an infant at the breast, nestles in the virginal arms, that the Magi may more easily see Him. Since this day the Magi too have come, and made a beginning of withstanding tyranny; and the heavens give glory, as the Lord is revealed by a star.

And sitting upon the swift cloud of His Body the Lord flies into Egypt; to escape the treachery of Herod without doubt, but also that the words of Isaias may be fulfilled (Is. xix. 24, 25) : *In that day shall Israel be third to the Egyptian and the Assyrian, and blessed be my people of Egypt, and the work of my hands to the Assyrian*. What dost thou say, O Judea, who was first and has become third? The Egyptians and Assyrians are placed before thee, and Israel, the first born, is last?

Rightly shall the Assyrians be first, since they through the Magi first adored Him. The Egyptians after the Assyrians, since it was they received Him flying from the treachery of Herod. Israel is numbered in the third place, as only after His ascent from the Jordan was He acknowledged by His Apostles. He entered Egypt, deliberately causing the idols of Egypt to tremble, and after He had closed the porches of Egypt by the destruction of her firstborn (Is.xix. i).

And so as Firstborn He enters Egypt this day, that He may end the mourning over her ancient grief. Luke has testified that Christ shall be called a firstborn: *And she brought forth her firstborn son*. He enters therefore that He may dissolve the ancient sorrow, and instead of plagues bring joy. In place of night and darkness, He brings the Light of salvation. The stream of young life was stained by the slaughter of the Innocents. He has therefore entered the land of Egypt, Who of old made her rivers red. Now He grants the flowing river the power to give salvation; and cleanses their stains and afflictions with the power of His Holy Spirit. The Egyptians had been punished, and turning with fury they had denied God. He went therefore into Egypt, and filled religious souls with the knowledge of God, and disposed that the river should nourish martyrs more numerous than its reeds.

But because of shortness of time I must make an end of speaking. What remains I shall keep till the following day. I shall end today when I have explained how it is, since the Word is impassible, that the Word became flesh, Its nature remaining unchanged.

But what shall I say? What shall I utter? *Behold an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger*. Mary is present, who is both Virgin and Mother. Joseph is present, who is called father. He is called husband, she is called wife. The names indeed are lawful, but there is no other bond. We speak here of words, not of things. He was espoused to her, but the Most High overshadowed her. Hence, Joseph, doubting, knew not what to call the Infant. He would not dare to say that It was conceived in adultery; he could not speak harshly against the Virgin; he shrank from calling the Child his own. He knew well that here was something unknown to him; how or whence was this Child born? And being anxious because of this, there came to him a message, by the voice of an angel, which said: *Fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife for that which is conceived in her, is of the Holy Ghost*.

The Holy Ghost overshadowed the Virgin. Wherefore was He born of a virgin, and wherefore was her virginity preserved? Because the devil had deceived the virgin Eve; accordingly, to Mary, who was a virgin, Gabriel bore a message of joy. As Eve, being deceived, uttered a word that was the cause of death, so Mary, receiving good tidings, brought forth in the flesh a Word that gave us eternal Life. The word of Eve led to the tree, because of which Adam was driven from Paradise; the Word which the Virgin brought forth, led to the Cross, because of which the Thief, standing in the place of Adam, was led into Paradise.

As neither the Gentiles, nor the Jews, nor heretics, believed that God begot as men, accordingly, coming forth this day from a passible body, the Impassible preserved inviolate the passible body, that He might show, that just as He was born of a virgin, while She remained a virgin, so likewise God, His Sacred Substance remaining unchanged, as God, and, as befitted God, begot God.

Seeing that men, abandoning Him, fashioned for themselves statues, to which, offending God, they gave adoration, for which cause, on this day, the Word of God, being truly God, appeared in the form of man, that He might set aright this falsehood; and in a veiled manner, has turned all adoration unto Himself. To Him, then, Who out of confusion has wrought a clear path, to Christ, to the Father, and to the Holy Ghost, we offer all praise, now and for ever. Amen.

St. John Chrysostom (349-407), Archbishop of Constantinople, is one of the great Eastern Doctors of the Catholic Church. St. John was given the name Chrysostom (golden-mouthed) due to his highly regarded eloquence as a preacher and writer.