

Peter Abelard's Argument on Incarnation: *Commentary on Romans 3:26*, ed. E.M. Buytaert O.F.M., CCCM 11, pp. 117-18:

For it seems to me that we are justified (*iustificati sumus*) in Christ's blood and reconciled to God in this sense, namely that through this singular grace shown to us by which his own Son accepted our nature and, showing us the way in that nature by word as well as example (*tam uerbo quam exemplo instituendo*), persisted until death, he bound us to himself more fully through love (*per amorem*), so that enflamed as we are by such a great promise of divine grace (*tanto diuinae gratiae accensi benefico*), true love (*uera caritas*) no longer fears to bear anything on his behalf. We do not doubt that this promise had inspired the ancient fathers as much as it does the people in the era of grace—expecting it as these fathers were through faith—to the highest love of God (*in summum amorem Dei*), since it is written: **“And those who went before and those who followed cried out, Hosanna to the son of David”** (Mark 11:9). After all, every one becomes more just, that is, more loving of God, after Christ's passion than before, inasmuch as a fulfilled promise inspires one to love more than a promise hoped for (*quia amplius in amorem accendit completum beneficium quam speratum*).

Therefore, our redemption lies with that highest love in us on account of Christ's passion which not only liberates us from the slavery of sin, but also acquires for us the true freedom of the sons of God, so that we may fulfill all things more out of love for him rather than out of fear (*amore eius potius timore*) who showed us such enormous grace that by his own account (*ipso attestante*) no greater can be found (*qua maior inueniri non potest*): **Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends** (John 15:13). And the same one (i.e. Christ) said about this love elsewhere: **I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled** (Luke 12:49). He declares that he came to promote the true freedom of love among men (*ueram caritatis libertatem*). And this the apostle, listening diligently, says in what follows: **because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us. Why then did Christ, etc.** (while we were still helpless, die at the right time for the ungodly?) (Rom. 5: 5-6); and again: **But God shows his love for us in that while we were etc.** (yet sinners Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). We shall expound these things more fully when we get to the actual passage (*in suo loco*).

For now let what I succinctly, that is, befitting the brevity of our exposition, argued about the mode of our redemption suffice. If its perfection lacks certain ingredients, we reserve them for our treatise on *Tropology*.

IN NATIVITATE DOMINI SERMO TERTIUS

About the Nativity of Christ and his Passion, about the Virginity of the Mother, and about her Fecundity

1. Two kinds of things I have in mind, brethren, in this birth of the Lord. They are different, not to say unlike. A boy is born, and the boy is God. Then the mother is a virgin, and the birth is painless. Darkness. Then a light, new, from the sky. An angel trumpets joy. Praises from a formation of soldiers, high above. Glory goes to God, peace to men of good will. Shepherds running up and down, and they find the word that's been said to them, and tell others. Those that hear them stop for wonder. These things, and other things like them, beloved, come from divine force. They're nothing to do with human feebleness. Golden vases, silver vases, from which, in a solemn time, at the table of the Lord, to the needy too, today, food and drink is served. Not ours to lift them, not ours this golden disk and bowl, but his, who is this food and drink. **CONSIDER DILIGENTLY**, says the wise one, **THE THINGS PUT BEFORE THEE**. And I recognize for my own the time and the place of this birth. Tender infant frame, waiting screaming child, and then the poverty and the wakefulness of those to whom the birth of the saving God is first announced, the shepherds. These things are mine. They happen for me. They are laid down before me. They are put there for me to imitate. At night time in winter time, is when Christ was born. By chance? Winter, summer, day, night, are his for the choosing. And it was by chance he was born in this unkind season, at dead of night? Other children do not choose the hour of their birth. Barely underway with life, there is no use of reason in them, no freedom of choice, no power of deliberation. Christ, brethren, if not then a man, was yet with God in the beginning, was God, had the same wisdom and power as the force and the wisdom of God had—he still has. About to be born then, God's son he'd be, and in a position to pick what time he wanted, he picked the most unkempt, all the more for a child and son of a poor mother, with hardly enough of swaddling to wrap him in, barely the crib to put him down. They were needy, very needy, but I hear no mention of soft pelts. The first Adam is decked out in fur tunics. The second is wrapped in swaddling. The judgement of the world does not run down this way. One of two things. He is

deceiving. Or the world judges wrong. But it's not possible for Wisdom to deceive. It is right both that the prudence of the flesh—death itself is a part of it—is enemy to God, and that the prudence of the generations goes by the name of foolishness. What then? Christ, who does not deceive, chooses what is rougher against the flesh. This then is the better, the more utile, and the thing to be chosen. Beware the man who tells you, with his wheedling, some other story—he'll be a seducer.

2. So, he wished to be born at night. Are there some who will still brag about themselves, and not even blush? Here's Christ choosing what he thinks will better make for salvation, and you choose what he puts behind him. Who's the prudent one? Whose judgement the sounder? Whose utterance more sane? After all, Christ lies quiet. Not a word of self-eulogy, self-aggrandizing, self-preaching. And then, look, an angel announcing him, and up there, a whole army roaring praise. You then, who follow Christ, hide this heard you've found. Love to be not known. Let praise come out of the stranger's mouth, your own mouth keep shut. In a stable though, Christ is born in a stable, lies in a crib. Saying: **FOR THE WORLD IS MINE, AND THE FULLNESS THEREOF**. Why does he choose a stable? Obviously, he's reproaching the glory of the world, damning the hollowness of generations. The tongue is not up to words yet. And everything that's in him shouts, preaches, evangelizes. The very infant limbs speak up. In everything, the judgement of the world is remonstrated with, thrown down, tangled. Who, of all men, given the choice, would not choose a robust body, an age more quick with understanding, than those of childhood? O Wisdom, hauling up from the occult. Wisdom at once truly incarnate and truly veiled. I say this, brethren, but he was promised once before through Isaiah, this little one, with his knowledge how to put away evil and take the good. The desire of the body is bad, its affliction a good. If he chooses the second, it is because the Wisdom Child, Word Child, is putting away the first. For the Word was made flesh, weak flesh, child flesh, tender flesh, impotent flesh, impatient of any accomplishment and all labour.

3. And truly, brethren, the Word has been made flesh, has lived in us. While it was in the beginning with God, it lived in a light which

is out of reach, and there was none could catch hold of it. **FOR WHO HATH SOUGHT OUT THE LORD'S MIND OR WHO HATH BEEN HIS COUNSELLOR?** The man of flesh shall not perceive the things which are of the Spirit of God. But now the man of flesh may catch fast because the Word has been made flesh. All along he has been able to hear only things in the flesh. But look now, Word has been made flesh. He may hear it, in the flesh too. Man, I am saying in the flesh Wisdom makes a showing of herself to you. Once she was occult, look now how she bears herself into the very senses in your flesh. Fleshly, if I can put it that way, is she preached to you. 'Run from pleasure, **BECAUSE DEATH HAS BEEN POSTED AT THE GATE OF PLEASURE.** Do penance, because through penance the kingdom approaches.' This the stable preaches to you, this the crib shouts, this the infant limbs speak plain, the tears and wails evangelize. Christ has his lament, yes, but not like the rest, or certainly not for the reason the rest usually have. In others it is just feeling. In Christ, affection is uppermost. The first suffer, and do not do, do not still have the use of the will. They weep from this passion. Christ weeps from compassion. They for the heavy yoke which is on all the sons of Adam: Christ for the sins of Adam's sons. And one thing is sure: for whom now he pours tears, afterwards he lets blood. Hardness of my heart. My Lord, as Word has been made flesh, let this my heart be likewise made to flesh. You promised, after all, this too, through the prophet: **I WILL BEAR AWAY FROM YOU, says he, YOUR STONY HEART, AND I WILL GIVE YOU A HEART OF FLESH.**

4. Brethren, Christ's tears bring on in me at once shame and agony. There was I playing outside in the square, while in the secrecy of the royal bedroom a sentence of death was brought against me. His Only Begotten got to hear of it. He came out. He had put down his diadem. He was wearing sackcloth, and his head was spattered with ash. He was barefoot, and weeping and wailing, because his little slave-boy had been condemned to die. Quite suddenly, I see him coming out. I am struck dumb. New thing. I am told the reason why. I listen. What am I to do? Play on, make play of his tears? If I have taken leave of my senses, if I am not of sound mind, I will not follow him, will not weep with his weeping. This is the shame I felt. Agony and fear, how did they come about? Well, I have only

to look at the remedy to get a picture of what danger I'm in. I had no idea. I thought I was sound. Then I found this: the virgin's son is sent for, Son of Highest God, and out goes the order he is to be killed, and this way my wounds are tended—with the precious balsam of his blood. See, man, how heavy the wounds for which it is necessary the Lord Christ be wounded. Were they not unto death, death for good, he'd never die, God's Son, to set them straight. The shame then, comes from this, beloved: this gay dissimulation of my passion, when before me I see standing compassion so great in such great Majesty. God's Son suffers with, and he weeps, will man then suffer and laugh? I need only see the remedy, and the agony, and the fear, build up in heaps.

5. But if I stick doggedly with what the doctor tells me to do, a consolation will come of it. I see the heavy wound, the medicine that is to be put on it, and I am led to suppose the wound is not beyond healing. Well, he's not going to apply his precious stuffs for nothing, the wise doctor, Wisdom herself I mean. They would be for nothing, yes, if the cure could be done without them, or, all the more, if even with them no cure were possible. It puts the soul in mind to repent. Once hope takes, the flame of desire leaps bolder. Another source of consolation: what was shown the shepherds in their wake, the angels' visitation and the angels' address. **BUT WOE TO YOU WHO ARE RICH, YOU HAVE YOUR CONSOLATION;** heaven's (this follows) you do not deserve. There were nobles in the flesh, there were men of power, and the wise of the world. Look at them all. Stretched on their soft mattresses in the very hour that counts, and not one of them is held fit to see the new light, to know the great joy, or hear the angels singing: **GLORIA IN EXCELSIS DEO.** It is men they recognize, those who are at their work, providing the body with its victuals—the body will have its victuals—and who are therefore signed by the angelic address, happy address. They recognize in them the human order, instituted by God: in the sweat of his face Adam will earn his bread.

6. I beg of you, beloved, consider with more care than you do how far God has gone to exhort and to save you, to stop the withering in you of a speech which was vivid and efficacious, a faithful speech deserving of hearing, and one no sooner out of the mouth

than done. What do you suppose, brethren? Would I be a little angry if I knew this word I'm speaking to you now had perished empty and useless in your hearts? And who am I? What's this speech of mine? If this small man feels sore when the feeble labour he's put into his speaking falls flat, how much more just the indignation of the Lord of Greatness if our hardness, our neglect, thinks fit to evacuate his so great work? He turns this away from his little slaves, and to save them bends down and takes the form of a slave himself, Only Begotten of God the Father, God blessed above all that is and down the generations.

3. *The scene*

Half a century before Francis of Assisi introduced the Christmas crèche into Western Christendom, thus setting the tone for what was to become one of the highlights of Christian devotion, Bernard of Clairvaux, in his third Sermon on the Nativity, had given a moving and suggestive description of the participants in the scene. Looking at it as a group-portrait frozen and reduced to art, we discern all the elements required for a proper Christmas ensemble: Joseph, Mary, the child, the shepherds in the fields, the heavenly choir of angels and, in the background, the adoration of the three kings as well as the offering in the temple. The child in his narrow manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes, starts crying, the angels sing, the shepherds listen thunderstruck, heaven flashes with lights and 'the night is turned into day'. Even the intended effect of this scene upon the minds of Bernard's audience becomes part of the *mise-en-scène*. The fellow-brothers, taking up their monastic duty, are seen to start weeping as well; kneeling down as it were in front of the holy family, they include themselves in the picture. In that humble state they adore God and 'as the eyes of the servants are in the hand of their lords, so the eyes of the heart look at their Lord'. 'O, might it be,' so Bernard adds to this Psalm-text, 'that Mary, Joseph and the child in the manger, can always be found in us.'

What is the context of this picture, the frame of this painting? The immediate setting is not the world of popular devotion, but

rather, as indicated by the inclusion of the audience, the austere space of the Cistercian monastery. It is there that the monks celebrate their nocturnal vigils. In that act they link themselves to the shepherds in the fields.

For to the vigilant shepherds, keeping the nocturnal vigils, the joy of the new light is evangelized and they are told about the birth of the Saviour. To the poor and to the labouring, not to you wealthy people, who 'already have your consolation', as well as the divine woe, during the vigils of the night, the holy day has lightened up, and the night has been as daylight; yea, it has been turned into day, according to the words of the angel: 'unto you is born the Saviour, today, not tonight.' For the night is waning and day dawns, the true day coming forth out of day, God's salvation, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is God to be praised for ever. (Nat 5 5)

Whatever the degree of visibility of the different persons in the group-portrait may be, it is the effects of this *chiaroscuro* which first and foremost catch the eye of the beholder.

The variety of images in the Christmas-scene raises the question of how they should be analyzed. Is it possible to follow the figurative hints of description in trying to assess the position of the different persons involved in the portrait without being overwhelmed by the immense power of the *nova lux* shining in the darkness? Or do those images lose their distinct features in the flash-light of the *nox illuminata sicut dies*? What exactly happens in between the *chiaro* and the *scuro* and what can be said about the organisation of profiles which is supposed to be going on between those two extremes?

There is no doubt as to the identity of the dominating figure in the Christmas-scene, although the evidence is less strong from a quantitative point of view. It is in Christ the child that heavenly power and light are concentrated. As a result, the universe is governed by the smallest figure imaginable from the most remote and dark corner of the earth. In the opening sentence of the first sermon Bernard tries at length—or rather in depth, as I intend to make clear—to mark the mystery of the heavenly presence within human bounds once and for all.