

It's the 4th Sunday of Advent. Two-and-a-half days remain until Christmas.

And today our Gospel lesson forms a bridge between Advent and Christmas. We hear the Christmas story from Matthew's Gospel. Matthew begins with the words, "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way."¹

And then Matthew tells us that Mary was "found to be with child from the Holy Spirit."² Joseph knows that he has nothing to do with the pregnancy, so he decides to divorce her, but he chooses to do so quietly.

But then an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him that God is involved in Mary's pregnancy. And Joseph is to marry Mary, and to name and claim her child as his own. The angel says, "She will bear a son, and you (Joseph) are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."³

By naming Jesus, Joseph will be claiming legal and binding paternity for this child.

And Matthew ends this section by saying, "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus."⁴

So our reading begins in Advent with preparations for Jesus' birth. And it ends with Christmas, with the actual birth itself.

Of course, the Gospel of Luke gives us more details about Jesus' birth. A manger. Shepherds in the fields. Angels singing "Glory to God in the highest." We'll hear that reading in two-and-a-half days on Christmas Eve.

And next Sunday, we'll hear from the Gospel of John about the deeper meaning of Jesus' birth, how he was with God in the beginning, and all things were created through him. And yet he also became enfleshed, incarnate, and lived among us.

[8:00—At the 10:30 service, we will be singing a wonderful, ancient hymn that encompasses the meaning of all of this.]

[10:30—A few moments ago, we sang a wonderful, ancient hymn that encompasses the meaning of all of this.]

I would invite you to grab a hymnal and turn to Hymn 82: "Of the Father's love begotten."

¹ Mt 1:18

² Ibid.

³ Mt 1:21

⁴ Mt 1:24-25

This hymn is not as familiar as "Joy to the world" or "Hark the herald angels sing." But it is the oldest Christmas hymn in our hymnal.

If you look at the tiny print at the bottom of the page, you can see that the author of this text is Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius who lived in the 4th century. Prudentius was a Roman lawyer and later a judge, and later the governor of a Roman province in what we call northern Spain. He was a Christian who lived in the waning days of the Roman Empire.

He retired from law and politics in his 50's, and dedicated the remainder of his life to writing Christian hymns and poetry.

In fact, he was the first great Christian poet to write in Latin. His writings were popular well into the middle ages. But his ancient Latin hymns and poems fell out of use after the Renaissance. Prudentius's hymns would have probably languished in obscurity if it weren't for another man. He is also mentioned in the tiny print at the bottom of Hymn 82.

Words: Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius, Translated by John Mason Neale. Fr. Neale was a priest in our mother church, the Church of England in the 19th century.

I mentioned Fr. Neale in my sermon last week. In our secular culture he is probably best known for his original Christmas Carol, "Good King Wenceslas," as well as for translating "Good Christian men, rejoice with heart and soul and voice..."⁵

But in Christian circles he is far more important as a translator of ancient hymns. Fr. Neale took a huge number of antiquated Latin and Greek hymns that had fallen into obscurity, and updated them into 19th Century English hymns. More than 2 dozen of his translations of these ancient hymns are in our hymnal, still being sung by 20th and 21st Century Christians.

I mentioned a few of Fr. Neale's translations last week.

On Palm Sunday every year, we still sing, "All glory, laud and honor to thee, Redeemer, King!"⁶ That's a 9th century hymn translated and updated by Fr. Neale.

On Good Friday every year, we still sing his translation of the 6th century hymn, "Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle, of the mighty conflict sing..."⁷

On Easter Sunday we almost always sing one of Neale's translations of 8th century Easter hymns, either, "The day of Resurrection! Earth, tell it out abroad..."⁸ or "Come, ye faithful raise the strain of triumphant gladness."⁹

⁵ Hymnal 107

⁶ Hymnal 154

⁷ Hymnal 166

⁸ Hymnal 210

⁹ Hymnal 199

And during the regular times of the year, we still sing his translation of a 7th century hymn, "Christ is made the sure foundation, Christ the head and cornerstone..."¹⁰

In regards to Hymn 82, there were originally 9 verses in the hymn by Prudentius. Fr. Neale translated 6 of them into English. In our hymnal, verses 1, 2, and 3 are from Fr. Neale.

You may also have noticed one more name of another translator down at the bottom. Henry Williams Baker. Fr. Baker was also a priest of the Church of England, and a writer and translator of hymns. His best-known hymn in our hymnal is a paraphrase of the 23rd Psalm: "The King of love my shepherd is, whose goodness faileth never..."¹¹

So in our hymnal, the 4th verse of Hymn 82 is from Fr. Baker.

So, what are Governor Prudentius and Frs. Neale and Baker trying to tell us through this ancient hymn? Let's look at the verses.

Hymn 82 is listed in the section marked "Christmas." But only the 2nd verse of this hymn is explicitly about Christmas. The first verse goes much, much deeper:

*Of the Father's love begotten, ere the worlds began to be,
he is Alpha and Omega, he the source, the ending he,
of the things that are, that have been,
and that future years shall see,
evermore and evermore!*

Note where this hymn begins. Not with Mary and Joseph. Not with Bethlehem. Not with shepherds abiding in the fields or wisemen from the east.

No, it begins before all of that. It begins before creation itself. Jesus Christ is begotten. He is begotten because of the Father's love. And he is begotten before anything in the universe was created, "ere the worlds began to be."

Governor Prudentius was writing these words in a time where the statements we take for granted in the Nicene Creed were still up for debate, especially in Northern Spain. There were Christians who claimed that Jesus was just another created being, like angels and humans. Prudentius is saying, "No, he's more." He is begotten from the Father before anything else was created. In the words of the Nicene Creed:

¹⁰ Hymnal 518

¹¹ Hymnal 645

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.¹²*

And Prudentius affirms that all things were created through the Son with his hymn text: "he is Alpha and Omega, he the source, the ending he of the things that are, that have been, and that future years shall see."

How wonderfully comprehensive. He is source and ending of things that are, things that have been, and things to come. Present, past, and future. Evermore and evermore.

We'll hear this again next Sunday in our reading from John:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being."¹³

But it's not just about Christmas. It's about everything. Things that are, things that have been, things future years shall see. It's about Creation AND Christmas AND Crucifixion AND Resurrection AND Return. Everything is encompassed in this begotten Son. For ever. Evermore and evermore.

And then Prudentius tackles the next part of the Nicene Creed, the part of the Creed that we traditionally think of as referring to Christmas:

*For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.¹⁴*

In Prudentius's words and Neale's translation—verse 2:

*O that birth for ever blessèd, when the Virgin, full of grace,
by the Holy Ghost conceiving, bore the Savior of our race;
and the Babe, the world's Redeemer,
first revealed his sacred face,
evermore and evermore!*

¹² BCP p 358

¹³ Jn 1:1-3

¹⁴ BCP p 358

Yes, as Matthew tells us, Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit. Yes, as Matthew tells us, this child is the world's redeemer.¹⁵ He will save us from the power of sin and death.

And yes, as John will tell us next week, "The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son."¹⁶

What an amazing gift to us from the Father. What an amazing outpouring of the Father's love for us.

Jesus becomes one of us, so that we can become like him. Through Holy Baptism we share in his life, and death, and new resurrected life. Evermore and evermore.

The manger is not the beginning of the Christmas story. The story of the Son begins before the creation of the universe. It will continue beyond its end.

The universe is created because of God's love.
 Jesus comes to be one of us because of God's love.
 Jesus dies for us because of love.
 Jesus is raised from death, and because of God's love, we get to share in that new life.

Through our baptisms, we share in Jesus' death. And we share in his resurrected life, evermore and evermore.

So what response can we make?

Fathers Neale and Baker give us two verses of superlative praise in verses 3 and 4. Perhaps that kind of praise is the best response we can make. That's the kind of response we're called to make in two and a half days at Christmas:

*Let the heights of heaven adore him;
 angel hosts, his praises sing;
 powers, dominions, bow before him,
 and extol our God and King;
 let no tongue on earth be silent,
 every voice in concert ring,
 evermore and evermore!*

*Christ, to thee with God the Father,
 and, O Holy Ghost, to thee,
 hymn and chant and high thanksgiving,
 and unwearied praises be;
 honor, glory and dominion, and eternal victory,
 evermore and evermore!*

¹⁵ Mt 1:21

¹⁶ Jn 1:14