

# SERMONS OF ST. BERNARD

## SERMON I

ON THE ADVENT OF OUR LORD AND ITS  
SIX CIRCUMSTANCES

TO-DAY we celebrate the beginning of Advent.

The name of this great annual commemoration is sufficiently familiar to us; its meaning may not be so well known.

When the unhappy children of Eve had abandoned the pursuit of things true and salutary, they gave themselves up to the search for those that are fleeting and perishable. To whom shall we liken the men of this generation, or to what shall we compare them, seeing they are unable to tear themselves from earthly and carnal consolations, or disentangle their minds from such trammels? They resemble the shipwrecked who are in danger of being overwhelmed by the waters, and who may be seen catching eagerly at whatever they first grasp, how frail soever it may be. And if anyone strive to rescue them, they are wont to seize and drag him down with them, so that not infrequently the rescuer is involved with them in one common destruction. Thus the children of the world perish miserably while following after transitory things and neglecting those which are solid and enduring, cleaving to which, they might save their souls. Of truth, not of vanity, it is said: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

Do you, therefore, to whom as to little ones God has revealed things hidden from the wise and prudent, turn your thoughts with earnestness to those that are truly desirable, and diligently meditate on this coming of our Lord? Consider Who He is that comes, whence He comes, to whom He comes, for what end He comes, when He comes, and in what manner He comes. This is undoubtedly a most useful and praiseworthy curiosity, for the Church would not so devoutly celebrate the season of Advent if there were not some great mystery hidden therein.

Wherefore, in the first place, let us with the Apostle consider in astonishment and admiration how great He is Who comes. According to the testimony of Gabriel, He is the Son of the Most High, and consequently a coequal with Him. Nor is it lawful to think that the Son of God is other than coequal with His Father. He is coequal in majesty; He is coequal in dignity. Who will deny that the sons of princes are princes, and the sons of kings kings?

But how is it that of the Three Persons Whom we believe, and confess, and adore in the Most High Trinity, it was not the Father, nor the Holy Ghost, but the Son that became Man? I imagine this was not without cause. But who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been his cotmseller?

Not without some most deep counsel of the Blessed Trinity was it decreed that the Son should become Incarnate. If we consider the cause of our exile, we may perchance be able to comprehend in some degree how fitting it was that our deliverance should be chiefly accomplished by the Son.

Lucifer, who rose brightly as the morning star, because he attempted to usurp a similitude with the Most High, and "it was thought robbery in him to equal himself with God," an equality which was the Son's by right, was cast down from heaven and ruined; for the Father was zealous for the glory of the Son, and seemed by this act to say: "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." And instantly "I saw Satan as lightning falling from heaven."

Dust and ashes, why art thou proud? If God spared not pride in His angels, how much less will He tolerate it in thee, innate corruption? Satan had committed no overt act, he had but consented to a thought of pride, yet in a

moment, in the twinkling of an eye, he was irreparably rejected because, as the Evangelist says, "he stood not in the truth."

Fly pride, my brethren, I most earnestly beseech you.

"Pride is the beginning of all sin," and how quickly did it darken and overshadow with eternal obscurity Lucifer, the most bright and beautiful of the heavenly spirits, and, from not only an angel, but the first of angels, transform him into a hideous devil! Wherefore, envying man's happiness, he brought forth in him the evil which he had conceived in himself by persuading man that if he should eat of the forbidden tree he would become as God, having a knowledge of good and evil. Wretch! what dost thou promise, when thou knowest that the Son of God has the key of knowledge--yea, and is Himself the "key of David, that shutteth and no man openeth" that in him are hidden all the treasures of the wisdom and knowledge of God? Wouldst thou, then, wickedly steal them away to give them to men?

You see, my brethren, how true is the sentence of our Lord, "The devil is a liar and the father of lies." He was a liar in saying, "I will be like unto the Most High," and he was the father of lies when he breathed his spirit of falsity into man. "You will be as gods." And wilt thou, O man, "seeing the thief, run with him"? You have heard, my brethren, what has been read this night from Isaiah. The Prophet says to the Lord, "Thy princes are faithless, companions of thieves," or, as another version has it, "disobedient companions of thieves." In truth, Adam and Eve were disobedient companions of thieves, for, by the counsel of the serpent, or, rather, of the devil in the serpent, they tried to seize upon what belonged by birthright to the Son of God. Nor did the Father overlook the injury, for the Father loveth the Son. He immediately took revenge on that same man, and let His hand fall heavily on us all, "for in Adam all have sinned," and in his sentence of condemnation we have shared.

What, then, did the Son do, seeing His Father so zealous for His glory, and for His sake sparing none of His creatures? "Behold," He says, "on My account My Father has ruined His creatures: the first of the angels aspired to My throne of sovereignty, and had followers who believed in him; and instantly My Father's zeal was heavily revenged on him, striking him and all his adherents with an incurable plague, with a dire chastisement. Man, too, attempted to steal from Me the knowledge which belongs to Me alone, and neither doth My Father show him mercy, nor doth His eye spare him. He had made two noble orders, sharing His reason, capable of participating in His beatitude, angels and men; but behold, on My account He hath ruined a multitude of His angels and the entire race of men. Therefore, that they may know that I love My Father, He shall receive back through Me what in a certain way He seems to have lost through Me. 'It is on my account this storm has arisen; take me and cast me into the sea.' All are envious of Me; behold I come, and will exhibit Myself to them in such a guise as that whosoever shall wish may become like to Me; whatsoever I shall do they may imitate, so that their envy shall be made good and profitable to them."

The angels, we know, sinned through malice, not through ignorance and frailty; wherefore, as they were unwilling to repent, they must of necessity perish, for the love of the Father and the honour of the King demand judgement. For this cause He created men from the beginning, that they might fill those lost places, and repair the ruins of the heavenly Jerusalem. For He knew "the pride of Moab, that he is exceedingly proud,"<sup>x</sup> and that his

pride would never seek the remedy of repentance, nor, consequently, of pardon. After man's fall, however, He created no other creature in his place, thus intimating that man should yet be redeemed, and that he who had been supplanted by another's malice might still by another's charity be redeemed.

Be it so, dear Lord, I beseech Thee. Be pleased to deliver me, for I am weak. Like Joseph of old, I was stolen away from my country, and here without any fault was cast into a dungeon. Yet I am not wholly innocent, but innocent compared with him who seduced me. He deceived me with a lie: let the truth come, that falsehood may be discovered, and that I may know the truth, and that the truth may make me free. But to gain the freedom I must renounce the falsehood when discovered, and adhere to the known truth; otherwise the temptation would not be human, nor the sin a human sin, but diabolical obstinacy. To persevere in evil is the act of the devil, and those who persevere in evil after his example deservedly perish with him.

Behold, you have heard Who He is that comes; consider now whence and to whom He comes. He comes from the heart of God the Father to the womb of a virgin mother; He comes from the highest heaven to this low earth, that we whose conversation is now on earth may have Him for our most desirable companion. For where can it be well with us without Him, and where ill if He be present? "What have I in heaven, and besides Thee what do I desire upon earth? Thou art the God of my heart and the God that is my portion for ever";\* and "though I should walk in the midst of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil," if only "thou art with me."

But here I see that our Lord descends not only to earth, but even to hell; not as one bound, but as free among the dead; as light that shines in the darkness, "and the darkness did not comprehend it." Wherefore His soul was not left in hell, nor did His holy body on earth see corruption. For Christ "that descended is the same also that ascended... that he might fill all things" who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed by the devil." And elsewhere we read, He "hath exalted as a giant to run his way . . . His going forth is from the highest heavens, and his circuit even to the end thereof." Well might St. Paul cry out: "Seek the things that are above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God." In vain would the Apostle labour to raise our hearts upwards if he did not teach us that the Author of our salvation is sitting in heaven.

But what follows? The matter here is indeed abundant in the extreme; but our limited time does not admit of a lengthened development. By considering Who He is that comes, we see His supreme and ineffable majesty, and by contemplating whence He comes, we behold the great highway clearly laid out to us, The Prophet Isaiah says: "Behold, the name of the Lord cometh from afar." By reflecting whither He comes, we see His inestimable and inconceivable condescension in His descending from highest heavens to Abide with us in this miserable prison-house. Who can doubt that there was some grand cause powerful enough to move so sovereign a Majesty to come "from afar," and condescend to enter a place so unworthy of Him as this world of ours. The cause was in truth great. It was His immense mercy, His multiplied compassion, His abundant charity.

For what end must we believe that He came? This question is the next in order to be examined; nor will the search demand much labour, for the end and purpose of His coming is proclaimed by His words and His works. To seek after the one sheep of the hundred that had strayed He hastened from the mountains. For our sake He came down from heaven, that His mercies and His wonders might be

openly proclaimed to the children of men. O wonderful condescension of God in this search! O wonderful dignity of man who is thus sought! If he should wish to glory in this dignity, it would not be imputed to him as folly. Not that he need think anything of himself, but let him rejoice that He Who made him should set so high a value on him. For all the riches and glory of the world, all that is desirable therein, is far below this glory--nay, can bear no comparison with it. "Lord, what is man that thou should magnify him? and why settest thou thy heart upon him?"

I still further desire to know why He should come to us, and not we rather go to Him, for the need was on our side, and it is not usual for the rich to go to the poor, though otherwise willing to assist them. It was indeed our place to go forward to Him, but there stood a twofold impediment in the way; for our eyes were heavy, and He "dwelt in light inaccessible." We lay as paralytics on our beds, and could not raise ourselves to the Divine elevation. Wherefore this most benign Saviour and Physician of souls descended to us from His lofty throne, and tempered His brightness to the weakness of our sight. He clothed Himself with His most glorious and spotless body as with the shade of a lantern, thus attempting to us His splendour. This is that bright and shining cloud upon which the Lord was to descend upon Egypt, as the Prophet Isaiah foretold.

It is now fitting that we should consider the time of our Lord's coming.

He came, as you know, not in the beginning, nor in the midst of time, but in the end of it. This was no unsuitable choice, but a truly wise dispensation of His infinite wisdom, that He might afford help when He saw it was most needed. Truly, "it was evening, and the day was far spent"; the sun of justice had well nigh set, and but a faint ray of his light and heat remained on earth. The light of skipping upon the hills." The mountains and hills we may consider to be the Patriarchs and the Prophets, and we may see His leaping and skipping in the book of His genealogy. "Abraham begot Isaac, Isaac begot Jacob," etc. From the mountains came forth the root of Jesse, as you will find from the Prophet Isaiah: "There shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up out of his root, and the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him." The same prophet speaks yet more plainly: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel, which is interpreted, 'God with us.'", a He Who is first styled a flower is afterwards called Emmanuel, and in the rod is named the virgin. But we must reserve for another day further consideration of this sublime mystery, as there is ample material for another sermon, especially as to-day's has been rather long.

## SERMON II

### ON THE WORDS TO ACHAZ, 'ASK THEE A SIGN,' ETC.

"And the Lord spoke again to Achaz, saying: Ask thee a sign of the Lord thy God, either unto the depth of hell, or unto the height above. And Achaz said: I will not ask, and I will not tempt the Lord."

We have heard Isaiah persuading King Achaz to ask for a sign from the Lord, either in the depth of hell, or in the height above. We have heard the King's answer, having the semblance of piety, but not its reality. On this account he deserved to be rejected by Him Who sees the heart, and to Whom the thoughts of men confess. "I will not ask," he says, "and I will not tempt the Lord." Achaz was puffed up with the pomp of the regal throne, and skilled in the cunning words of human wisdom. Isaiah has therefore heard the words: "Go, tell that fox to ask for himself a sign

from the Lord unto the depths of hell.” For the fox had a hole, but it was in hell, where, if he descended, he would find One Who would catch the wise in his cunning. Again: “Go,” says the Lord, “to that bird, and let him ask for a sign in the heights above,” for the bird hath his high nest; but though he ascend to heaven, he will there find Him Who resisteth the proud,” and trampleth with might on the necks of the lofty and high-minded. Achaz refused to ask a sign of that sovereign power, or that incomprehensible depth. Wherefore the Lord Himself promised to the house of David a sign of goodness and charity, that those whom the exhibition of His power could not terrify, nor the manifestations of His wisdom subdue, might be allured by His exceeding love. In the words “depth of hell” may be not unfitly portrayed the charity “greater than which no man hath,” that Christ should at death descend even unto hell “for His friends.” And in this God would teach Achaz either to dread the majesty of Him Who reigns in the highest, or to embrace the charity of Him Who descends to the lowest. Grievous, therefore, alike to God and man is he who will neither think on majesty with fear nor meditate on charity with Divine knowledge was very small, and as iniquity abounded, the fervour of charity had grown cold. No angel appeared, no prophet spoke. The angelic vision and the prophetic spirit alike had passed away, both hopelessly baffled by the exceeding obduracy and obstinacy of mankind. Then it was that the Son of God said: “Behold, I come.” And “while all things were in quiet silence, and the night was in the midst of her course, the almighty word leaped down from heaven from thy royal throne.” Of this coming the Apostle speaks: “When the fullness of time was come, God sent his Son.”<sup>a</sup> The plenitude and affluence of things temporal had brought on the oblivion and penury of things eternal. Fitly, therefore, did the Eternal God come when things of time were reigning supreme. To pass over other points, such was the temporal peace at the birth of Christ that by the edict of one man the whole world was enrolled.

You have now heard Who He is that comes, whence, whither, and to whom He comes; the cause, likewise, and the time of His coming are known to you. One point is yet to be considered--namely, the way by which He came. This must be diligently examined, that we may, as is fitting, go forth to meet Him. As He once came visibly in the body to work our salvation in the midst of the earth, so does He come daily invisibly and in spirit to work the salvation of each individual soul; as it is written: “The Spirit before our face, Christ the Lord.” And that we might know this spiritual advent to be hidden, it is said: “Under his shadow we shall live among the Gentiles.” Wherefore, if the infirm cannot go far to meet this great Physician, it is at least becoming they should endeavour to raise their heads and lift themselves a little to greet their Saviour. For this, O man, you are not required to cross the sea, to penetrate the clouds, to scale the mountain-tops. No lofty way is set before you. Turn within thyself to meet thy God, for the Word is nigh in thy mouth and in thy heart. Meet Him by compunction of heart and by confession of mouth, or, at least, go forth from the corruption of a sinful conscience, for it is not becoming that the Author of purity should enter there.

It is delightful to contemplate the manner of His visible coming, for His ways are beautiful, and all his paths are peace. “Behold,” says the Spouse of the Canticles, “he cometh leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills. You see Him coming, O beautiful one, but His revivous lying down you could not see, for you said: “Shew me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest, where thou liest. He lay feeding His angels in His endless

eternity with the vision of His glorious, unchanging beauty. But know, O beautiful one, that that vision is become wonderful to thee; it is high, and thou canst not reach it. Nevertheless, behold He hath gone forth from His holy place, and He that had lain feeding His angels hath undertaken to heal us. We shah see Him coming as our food, Whom we were not able to behold while He was feeding His angels in His repose. “Behold, he cometh leaping upon the mountains, love. “Wherefore,” the Prophet says, “the Lord himself shall give you a sign.”--a sign resplendent alike with majesty and love. “Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel, which is interpreted, ‘God with us.’” O Adam ! flee not away, for God is with us ! Fear not, O man, nor be afraid to hear His name; it is “God with us.” With us in the likeness of our nature; with us for our service and for our profit. For us He is come as one of us, passable like unto us.

It is said, “He will eat butter and honey”; as if to say, He shall be a little one, fed with infant’s food. “That he may know how to reject evil and choose good.” As in the case of the forbidden tree, the tree of transgression, so now we hear of an option between good and evil. But the choice of the second Adam is better than that of the first. Choosing the good, He refused the evil; not as He Who loved cursing, and it came upon Him; and He would not have blessing, and it was far from Him. In the prophecy that He would eat butter and honey you may notice the choice of this little one. But may His grace support us, that what He grants us the power to understand He may likewise enable us to explain !

From milk we obtain two substances, butter and cheese. Butter is oily and moist; cheese, on the contrary, is hard. Our little one knew well how to choose when, eating the butter, He did not taste the cheese. Behold, therefore, how He chose the best; He assumed our nature free from all corruption of sin. Of sinners we read that their heart is curdled as milk; the purity of their nature is corrupted by the fermentation of malice and iniquity.

And now let us turn to the honey. Our bee feeds among lilies, and dwells in the flowery country of the angels. This bee flew to the city of Nazareth, which is, interpreted, a flower; He came to the sweet-smelling flower of perpetual virginity; He settled upon it, He dove to it. But bees, besides their sweet honey, have likewise their sharp sting. The Prophet that sang of the mercy and judgement of the Lord, knew that this bee had a sting as well as honey. Nevertheless, when He descended to us He brought honey only--that is, mercy, not judgement--so that to the disciples who wished to call down fire from heaven on the cities that would not receive Him, He answered: “The Son of Man is not come to judge the world, but to save it.” Our bee had no sting in His mortal life; amid the extremity of insult He showed mercy, not judgement. Christ, then, may be symbolised both as a bee and as the flower springing from the rod. And, as we know, the rod is the Virgin Mother of God.

This flower, the Son of the Virgin, is “white and ruddy, chosen out of thousands.” It is the flower on which the angels desire to look, the flower whose perfume shall revive the dead, the flower, as He Himself declares, of the field, not of the garden. This flower grew and flourished in the field independent of all human culture; unsown by the hand of man, untried by the spade, or fattened by moisture. So did the womb of Mary blossom. As a rich pasture it brought forth the flower of eternal beauty, whose freshness shall never fade nor see corruption, whose glory is to everlasting. O sublime virgin rod, that raisest thy holy head aloft, even to Him Who sitteth on the throne, even to the Lord of Majesty! And this is not wonderful, for thou hast planted thy roots deeply in the soil of humility. O truly celestial plant, than which none more precious, none more holy! O true tree of life, alone deemed worthy to bear the fruit of

salvation! Thou art caught, O wicked serpent, caught in thy own cunning; thy falsity is laid bare. Two evils thou hadst imputed to thy Creator; thou hadst defamed Him by envy and by lying, but in both imputations thou art convicted a liar. He to whom thou hadst promised that he should not die did die, "and the truth of the Lord remaineth for ever." And now answer, if thou canst, what tree God could forbid man, seeing He denied him not this chosen rod, this sublime fruit ? For "he that spared not his own Son, how hath he not with him given us all things ?"

It is now surely clear how the Virgin is the royal way by which the Saviour has drawn near to us, coming forth from her womb as a Bridegroom from His bridal chamber. Holding on, therefore, to this way,-let us endeavour to ascend to Him by her, through Whom He descended to us; let us seek His grace through her by whom He came to succour our need.

O blessed finder of grace ! Mother of life ! Mother of salvation! may we through thee have access to thy Son, that through thee we may be received by Him Who through thee was given to us. May thy integrity and purity excuse before Him the stain of our corruption; may thy humility, so pleasing to God, obtain from Him the pardon of our vanity. May thy abundant charity cover the multitude of our iniquity, and thy glorious fruitfulness supply our indigence of merits. Our Lady, our Mediatrix, our Advocate, reconcile us to thy Son, commend us to thy Son, present us to thy Son. By the grace thou hast found, by the prerogative thou didst merit, by the mercy thou didst bring forth, obtain, O blessed one, that He Who vouchsafed to become partaker of our infirmity and misery, may, through thy intercession, make us partakers of His blessedness and glory, Jesus Christ, thy Son, our Lord, Who is God blessed above all for evermore. Amen.