

Martin Luther, December 17, 1543

We are approaching the birthday of our Lord Jesus Christ, which ought to be celebrated and published in the church with rejoicing at all times, but especially during these days which are a most sacred and saving memorial of His Nativity, set aside by our elders to renew the memory of this highest benefit, the inexpressible mystery of the Sacrament and the incomprehensible mercy and love of the Lord, by which God Himself, Creator of heaven and earth, deigned to descend into our flesh and be made like unto all of us, sin alone excepted.

The greatness of this inestimable and highest benefit is infinite, so great that the human mind can never wholly grasp its breadth, at least in this world. And even a single drop of this inexhaustible benefit and immense divine benevolence toward us, tasted by pious hearts, fills and bathes souls with true and solid joy. These joys, which are experienced from this benefit by pious minds, are such that also in the next life they will meet us, so that in eternity we can never become glutted or satiated with them. Indeed, the angels can never get tired of these joys in all eternity; they celebrate and declare this benefit of God with continuous and continual praise; they sing along with us; they rejoice and celebrate; they wholeheartedly congratulate us, even though they lack so much that they envy us.

So, . . . for these present days let us comment on the Son of God, our Lord, i.e., on the incarnation, which is the greatest of all works and the most glorious of all miracles and such a benefit toward the human race, that we would die of joy if we could comprehend and measure the greatness of its benefit in our souls.

But in this life, in this weakness, that cannot be done. No power of eloquence can explain in words; indeed, no thought of the human mind can grasp this highest benefit and mystery, that the Son of God deigned to become man and my brother; that He so joined Himself to me, so penetrated, so united Himself, so closely and so intimately joined and attached Himself to me, that no one in this world, even with the closest bonds of most intimate friendship, nor devoted to me with the most sacred light of close friendship, nor loyal to me with greater or more intimate ties, could be more familiar or more attached; that I can and should promise myself more and greater from Him and expect more important things from Him than from any man on earth, though he be most fond of me and devoted to me; that His feeling of love toward me is infinitely more ardent than can be the love of the most excellent and most constant friend toward another friend, or than the affection of a brother for a brother whom he loves from the heart, or of a pious father for the little son he most tenderly loves.

Although, as I have said, the human mind can neither fully grasp the grandeur of this benefit, nor comprehend it fully, nor plumb the unfathomable fountain of His infinite mercy and goodness, we should still make an effort to taste at least a drop of His benefit and suck at the breasts like babies and be nourished with milk and soft food until we grow and mature “unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” Eph. 4:13.

Therefore, in meditation on the Word, it becomes us to be diligent and busy, so that these benefits may be impressed upon our ears, eyes, and heart, be taught, instilled, imprinted, and their memory be continually renewed, lest forgetfulness of them steal upon us or by lazy

listlessness we fall away from such great benefits and by our own sloth, negligence, and ingratitude lose those inestimably good things.

And therefore certain days have been ordained by the Church, in which, after we dismiss all other business and cares with which the human race is occupied since the Fall, we should consider this most wonderful of all the works of God, which was decreed in the secret counsel of the Trinity before the beginning of all things out of the most ardent love toward us wretched mortals and revealed at a certain and predetermined time, and we should among ourselves comment pleasantly about this most thoroughly consoling union of the divine and human natures of Christ, which no human voice nor indeed angelic voice, can sufficiently express. And in this way we should not only find comfort, but also be diligent to propagate this only salvation and light of all nations to posterity, following the example of the Prophet, who, exulting with joy in his soul, breaks forth in these words: *The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined* (Isaiah 9:2).

(Martin Luther, *Bethlehem and Calvary*, translated by Kenneth K Miller, 1988, pages 1-3)