

THE NATIVITY OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

(Matthew 1:1-16) (This is the genealogy).

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(Maria says:) I see Anne coming out of the garden. She is leaning on the arm of a relative, who is like her. She is obviously several months pregnant and she looks tired and her fatigue is not alleviated by the sultriness, just as this present heat is exhausting me.

Although the garden is shady, it is very hot [...]

Joachim is working around the rows of vines and olive-trees. There are two men with him, helping him. Although an elderly man he is quick and works eagerly. They are opening little channels at the end of a field to give water to the dry plants, and this water makes its way gurgling between the grass and the dry land. The flow forms circles that for one moment resemble a yellowish crystal and seconds later are only rings of wet soil, around the overloaded vine branches and the olive-trees.

Along the shady pergola, under which golden bees are buzzing, greedy for the sugar of the golden grapes, Anne moves slowly towards Joachim, who hastens towards her as soon as he sees her.

'You came so far?'

'The house is as hot as an oven.'

'And you suffer from it.'

'The only suffering of this last hour is that of a pregnant woman. The natural suffering of everybody: man and beast. Don't get too warm, Joachim.'

'The water we have been hoping for, for such a long time, and that for fully three days seemed so close, has not yet come and the country is parched. We are lucky to have a spring so near and so rich in water. I have opened the channels. It is a measure of relief for the plants which have withering leaves and are covered with dust: just enough to keep them alive. If it would only rain...' Joachim, with the eagerness of all farmers, looks at the sky, while Anne, tired, cools herself with a fan that seems to be made of the dry leaf of a palm interwoven with many-coloured threads keeping it firm.

Anne's companion interrupts: 'Over there, beyond the Great Hermon, fast clouds are arising. There is a northern wind. It will refreshen and perhaps bring rain.'

'The breeze has risen for three days and then it set's when the moon rises. It will do the same again.' Joachim is discouraged.

'Let us go back home. Even here one can hardly breathe, and in any case I think it is better to go back...' says Anne, who looks more olive-hued than usual, owing to a paleness which has come over her face.

'Are you in pain?'

'No. But I can feel the great peace that I experienced in the Temple when I was granted the grace, and which I felt once again when I knew I was pregnant. It is like an ecstasy, a sweet sleep of the body while the soul rejoices and calms itself in a peace that has no bodily parallel.

[...] "Thank the Lord for your wealth and bless the God of centuries, that He may rebuild His Tabernacle in you", I think that He Who will rebuild the Tabernacle of the true God in Jerusalem will be This One who is about to be born... And I also think that the destiny of my creature was prophesied and not the fate of the Holy City, when the song says: "You shall shine with a bright light: all the peoples of the world will prostrate themselves before you: the nations will come bringing gifts: they will worship the Lord in you and will hold your land as sacred, because within you they invoke the Great Name. You will be happy on account of your children, because they will all be blessed and they will gather near the Lord. Blessed are those who love you and rejoice in your peace..." And I am the first to rejoice, her happy mother...'

Anne changes colour, when saying these words and she lights up like something brought from the paleness of moonlight to the brightness of a great fire and vice versa. Sweet tears, of which she is unaware, run down her cheeks and she smiles in her joy. And in the meantime she moves towards the house, walking between her husband and her relative, who listen and, deeply moved, are silent.

They make haste because clouds driven by a strong wind, rush across and gather in the sky, while the plain darkens and shudders at the warning of a storm. When they reach the threshold of the dwelling, a first livid flash of lightning crosses the sky and the rumble of the first peal of thunder sounds like the roll of a huge drum that mingles with the arpeggio of the first drops on the parched leaves.

They all go in and Anne withdraws, while Joachim, standing at the door, talks with the workers, who have in the meantime joined him: the conversation is about the longed for water which is a blessing for the parched land. But their joy turns into fear because a very violent storm is approaching with lightning and clouds threatening hail. 'If the cloud bursts, it will crush the grapes and the olives like a millstone. Poor me!'

Joachim is also anxious for his wife, whose time has come to give birth to her child. His relative reassures him that Anne is not suffering at all. But he is agitated, and every time his relative or any other woman, amongst whom is Alphaeus' mother, comes out of Anne's room and goes back in again with hot water and basins and linens dried near the blazing fireplace in the large kitchen, he goes and makes enquiries, but he does not calm down despite their reassurances. Also the lack of cries from Anne worries him. He says: 'I am a man and I have never seen a child being born. But I remember hearing that the absence of throes is fatal.'

It is growing dark and the evening is preceded by a furious and very violent storm: it brings torrential rain, wind, lightning, everything, except hail, which has fallen elsewhere.

One of the workers notices the ferocity of the gale: 'It looks as if Satan has come out of Gehenna with his demons. Look at those black clouds! You can smell sulphur in the air and you can hear whistling and hisses, and wailing and cursing voices. If it is him, he is furious this evening!'

The other worker laughs and scoffs: 'A great prey must have escaped him, or Michael has struck him with a new thunderbolt from God, and he has had his horns and tail clipped and burnt.'

A woman passes by and shouts: 'Joachim! It is coming. And it is happening quickly and well!' and she disappears with a small amphora in her hands.

The storm drops suddenly, after one last thunderbolt that is so violent that it throws the three men against the side wall; and in front of the house, in the garden, a black smoky cavity remains as its memory! Meanwhile a cry, one resembling the tiny plea of a little turtle-dove that for the very first time no longer peeps but cooes, is heard from beyond Anne's door. And at the same time a huge rainbow stretches its semicircle across the sky. It rises, or seems to rise, from the top of Hermon, which kissed by the sun, looks like a most delicate pinkish alabaster: it rises up in the clear September sky and through an atmosphere cleaned of all impurities, it crosses over the hills of Galilee and the plain to the South, and over another mountain, and seems to rest the other end on the distant horizon, where it drops from view behind a chain of high mountains.

'We have never seen anything like this!'

'Look, look!'

'It seems to enclose in a circle the whole of the land of Israel. And look! there is already a star in the sky while the sun has not yet set. What a star! It is shining like a huge diamond!...'

'And the moon, over there, is a full moon, three days early. But look how she is shining!'

The women arrive jubilant with a plump little baby wrapped in plain linens.

It is Mary, the Mother. A very tiny Mary, who could sleep in the arms of a child, a Mary as long, at most, as an arm, with a little head of ivory dyed pale pink. Her tiny carmine lips no longer cry but are set in the instinctive act of sucking: they are so small that one cannot understand how they will be able to take a teat. Her pretty little nose is between two tiny round cheeks, and when they get Her to open Her eyes, by teasing Her, they see two small parts of the sky, two innocent blue points that look but cannot see, between thin fair eyelashes. Also Her hair on Her little round head is a pinkish blond, like the colour of certain honeys which are almost white.

Her ears are two small shells, transparent, perfect. Her tiny hands... what are those two little things groping in the air and ending up in Her mouth? Closed, as they are now, they are two rose buds that split the green of their sepals and show their silk within. When they are open,

as now, they are two ivory jewels, made of pink ivory and alabaster with five pale garnets as nails. How will those two tiny hands be able to dry so many tears?

And Her little feet? Where are they? For the time being they are just kicking, hidden in the linens. But now the relative sits down and uncovers Her... Oh, the little feet! They are about four centimetres long. Each sole is a coral shell, with a snow white top veined in blue. Her toes are masterpieces of Lilliputian sculpture: they, too, are crowned with small scales of pale garnet. But where will they find small sandals, when those little feet of a doll will take their first steps, sandals small enough to fit such tiny feet? And how will those little feet be able to go such a long way and bear so much pain under the cross?

But that for the time being is not known, and the onlookers smile and laugh at her kicking, at Her well shaped legs, at Her minute plumpish thighs that form dimples and rings, at Her little tummy, a cup turned upside-down, at Her tiny perfect chest. Under the skin of Her breast, as soft as fine silk, the movement of Her breathing can be seen and the beating of Her little heart can be heard, if, as Her happy father is doing now, one lays one's lips there for a kiss... This is the most beautiful little heart the world will ever know: the only immaculate heart of a human being.

And Her back? They are now turning Her over and they can see the curve of Her kidneys and then the plump shoulders and the pink nape of Her neck, which is so strong that the little head lifts itself up on the arch of the minute vertebrae. It looks like the little head of a bird that scans the new world that it views. She, the Pure and Chaste One, protests with a little cry at being thus exposed to the eyes of so many, She, Entirely Virgin, the Holy and Immaculate, Whom no man will ever see nude again, protests.

Cover, do cover this bud of a lily which will never be opened on earth and which, still remaining a bud, will bear its Flower, even more beautiful than Herself. Only in Heaven the Lily of the Trine Lord will open all its petals. Because up there, there is no particle of fault that may unwillingly profane its spotlessness. Because up there the Trine God is to be received, in the presence of the whole Empyrean, the Trine God that within a few years, hidden in a faultless heart, will be in Her: Father, Son, Spouse.

Here She is again, in Her linens, in the arms of Her earthly father, whom She resembles. Not at the moment. Now She is just a little human baby. I mean that She will be like him when She has grown into a woman. She has nothing of Her mother. She has Her father's colour of complexion and eyes and certainly also his hair. His hair is now white, but when he was young it was certainly fair, as one can tell from his eyebrows. She has Her father's features, made more perfect and gentle, being a woman, but that special Woman. She has also the smile, the glance, the way of moving and height of Her father. Thinking of Jesus, as I see Him, I find Anne has given her height to her Grandson and her deep ivory colour to His skin. Mary, instead, has not the stateliness of Her mother: a tall and supple palm-tree, but She has the kindness of Her father.

Also the women are speaking of the storm and the unusual state of the moon, of the presence of the star and the rainbow. Along with Joachim they enter the happy mother's room and give her her baby.

Anne smiles at one of her thoughts: 'She is the Star' she says. 'Her sign is in Heaven. Mary, arch of peace! Mary, my Star! Mary, pure moon! Mary, our pearl!'

'Are you calling Her Mary?'

'Yes. Mary, star and pearl and light and peace...'

'But it means also bitterness... Are you not afraid of bringing Her misfortune?'

'God is with Her. She belongs to Him before She existed. He will lead Her along His ways and all bitterness will turn into heavenly honey. Now be of Your mummy... for a little longer, before being all of God...'

And the vision ends on the first sleep of Anne, a mother, and Mary, an infant.