

My friends in Christ, today is Good Friday, and we commemorate the Passion of the Lord, which we commemorated *also* just five days ago on Sunday (Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion); as it happens, Palm Sunday was also March 25th – which *normally* is the Solemnity of the Annunciation, a day celebrating the Lord's conception in the immaculate womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Thus, we commemorated the violent *ending* of the Lord's earthly life this year on the exact same date when we normally celebrate the blessed *beginning* of the Lord's earthly life.

Historically-speaking, this coincidence is immensely significant because the next time Palm Sunday falls on March 25th is 2029, then 2040, and then not again until the 22nd Century; and as for Good Friday falling on March 25th (the *other* day of course that commemorates the Lord's Passion), *that* does not happen again until the year 2157. And so, only a few times any given century, the day when Jesus was *conceived* is also the day when He *died*; and so, once again, Divine Providence is hard at work, and we do well I think to consider, to reflect upon, this unique timing, this most profound connection between these two cornerstone mysteries of faith: the Incarnation and the Cross.

First, the Incarnation. That God became man is not some fantasy, not some random myth, but an actual, historical fact. We know *that* God became man; we know *when* God became man; we know *where* God became man; we even know *how* God became man. All of these questions of *what*, *when*, *where*, and *how* that historical research endeavors to answer are in fact all answered with regard to the Incarnation, the God-made-man. George Washington crossing the Delaware...Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon...Almighty God crossing the vast expanse between the divine and the human so as to be made man. Historical *fact*.

And God did not will that this historical fact of the Incarnation just happen willy-nilly; God did not contrive to be made man at just *any* point in time but at a very *specific* point in time. Because have we ever wondered why God became man at *that* particular point in time, at *that* particular place in all the world? If we have ever wondered such things...then perhaps we can consider the broader historical context of the Incarnation.

The Chosen People were a wandering, nomadic race until their enslavement in Egypt and at the appointed time their liberation and the great Exodus. The Mosaic law (that is, the old covenant, enshrined popularly by the Ten Commandments) was established, and the governmental system of the Judges gave way to the united Kingdom of Judah and Israel. That Kingdom reached its zenith, as it were, under the reign of King David and his son and successor, King Solomon.

But after King Solomon, the Kingdom began to fracture, weaken, diminish, and at last, little by little over the next two centuries, the Kingdom finally collapsed altogether – first in the north, in the 8th Century before Christ, when the Assyrian Empire in present-day northern Iraq invaded from the north and utterly decimated ten of the twelve tribes of Israel that resided in the northern half of the united Kingdom; and then in the south, in the 6th Century before Christ, when the Babylonian Empire in present-day Baghdad, Iraq, invaded from the east, and the Babylonian exile thus began.

The Egyptian overlords were replaced by the larger, stronger Assyrian overlords, who were replaced by the larger, stronger Babylonian overlords. And then near the 5th Century before Christ, King Cyrus and the Persian Empire entered the historical fray. The larger, stronger Persians ousted the Babylonians, and the Chosen People were freed to return home from exile and resume life.

And all of this was happening in the east; meanwhile, in the west, beginning around the turn of the 4th Century before Christ, the great philosopher Socrates was going around doing his thing in Greece. And who was his greatest, most famous student? Plato. And who was Plato's greatest, most famous student? Aristotle. And who was Aristotle's greatest, most famous student...?

Alexander the Great. And this...is *huge*. Because Socrates, Plato, Aristotle – those guys did a lot of talking, a lot of writing, a lot of teaching...but not a whole lot of *doing*. Alexander's greatest ambition, on the other hand – not so much that he wanted to conquer the known world – but that the philosophical ideal and perfection of government, politics, state, and society – all of which was *talked* about by his teacher Aristotle and *his* teachers before him – would finally, *finally*, become an actual reality. Enough talk of what a good man should be and just *be* one. Enough talk of what a

truly great *world* should be and just *make* one. And *that is precisely* what Alexander the Great, in his greatest ambition, set out to do.

And so, he did. He conquered and he conquered, people after people, city after city, nation after nation, empire after empire. But the fundamental endeavor of his whole project was not only to *conquer* their lands but to *convert* their peoples, converting them to the Greek way of life, teaching them the Greek language, indoctrinating them into Greek culture – gymnasia; naked, oiled-up man-on-man wrestling, the whole she-bang!

This systematic indoctrination of foreign peoples into the Greek culture is what we refer to as “Hellenization.”

And then in the fullness of time as it were, the east clashes with the west; Persia clashes with Greece, and the Chosen People are caught right in the middle. Greece wins, the Chosen People are now Greek people, and the Books of Maccabees in the Old Testament tell the story of the remnant few defying their Greek overlords so as to preserve the traditions of the Chosen People which God had given specifically to the Chosen People many centuries earlier when Moses led the great exodus out of Egypt. But a mingling of cultures had already set in, and as a result of being conquered again and again – empire after empire, exile after exile – the Chosen People were dispersed all throughout the known world. The Great Dispersion! Jews *everywhere*! And now, thanks to Alexander the Great and his maniacal obsession with Hellenization, not only are Jews *everywhere*, but they all speak Greek!

Pause.... We have a Greek Empire, a Greek-speaking world, Jews everywhere, and the Jews want to retain their heritage. Fewer and fewer of them, especially those *not* living in Jerusalem, were native Hebrew-speakers; they were Greek-speakers. And so, Greek-speaking Jewish scholars found the need to translate the Hebrew scriptures into Greek. There was a major Greek-speaking city and cultural/intellectual center of higher learning and scholarship located in present-day Egypt (what we might refer to as a “university town”) called Alexandria. It was named after Alexander the Great of

course. It had a world-famous library, back in the days when a library was a pretty big deal because not many people could even read, printing was expensive, and paper was rare.

Anyway, it was in Alexandria where a fairly large community of ancient Jewish scholars had made their home after the *Diaspora*, the Great Dispersion of the Chosen People. And legend has it that unbeknownst to any of them that anyone else was doing this, seventy Jewish scripture scholars independently took on the task of translating the Hebrew scriptures into Greek. When all of them had completed this ambitious work, it became known to them that *all* of them were doing this, and they got together to compare notes. And all seventy translations were exactly the same! This is the Old Testament translation known as the Septuagint (from the Greek word meaning “seventy”); and until Martin Luther in the 15th Century, it was the *only* Old Testament in Christianity. Any reference to the Old Testament found anywhere in the New Testament – such as when Saint Matthew quotes the Prophet Isaiah whenever Jesus fulfills some ancient prophecy – is a reference to the Septuagint.

This also is *huge*. Because Greek is a much *much* larger language than Hebrew with regard to the sheer quantity of vocabulary. I often lament the failings of the English language – how English, for example, has only *one* word for “love,” whereas the Greeks have *four*. And if Greek really is that superior to English with regard to sheer quantity of words (and English itself, come to think of it, is a darn big language), how much more superior is Greek to Hebrew? Greek can describe things that Hebrew cannot even *begin* to describe – including that which pertains to the supernatural reality and the spiritual realm (which, keep in mind, will be important to remember in just a moment).

Unpause. Back to history. Following Alexander the Great and the *one* Greek Empire, there was a fractured, *four*-part Greek Empire; meanwhile in the *further* west, we have Rome. Rome in the beginning was just a city and then a city-state; but it really was not until Julius Caesar decided to *stop* being a military general and *start* being a tyrant that things got serious. So he conquered the Roman Senate, then the Italian peninsula, then more and more, and before too long, what once was Greek was now Roman. But just when things started looking pretty darn good for good ol’ Julius, he got

stabbed seventeen times in the back (*E tu, Brute?*), and after a brief war with Mark Antony and that sultry temptress Cleopatra, Julius' nephew Octavian Augustus took over.

And now, we have the *Pax Romana*, the “peace of Rome.” War was done, all enemies were conquered, and Caesar Augustus could focus his efforts on building up the infrastructure of Rome and the Empire: aqueducts; quality roads; cities and centers of higher learning; trade; and so forth.

This all happened in the 1st Century before Christ. And right at the height of *Pax Romana*, when the world was at peace, when international commerce and even tourism were at previously-unknown levels of prosperity, when the vast, vast, *vast* vocabulary of the Greek language was the spoken language of all peoples of all the world – a language that, we remember, was abundantly capable of describing things pertaining to the supernatural reality and the spiritual realm ...who should happen to be born in the midst of this perfect, pre-planned setting...? Jesus Christ.

It seems that God waited until this *precise* moment in time, so that, at this *precise* location in the world, the divine could be made human – God could be made man. God, it seems, needed to wait until there was world-wide peace. Because world-wide peace would in turn encourage world-wide travel, commerce, and tourism – all of which made for a perfect conduit for word-of-mouth news to travel fast in a world where literacy was almost totally non-existent, and history and news were told via the oral tradition. God needed just such a world. God also needed a large language, one firmly rooted in the cultures of the world, so that the mysteries of the spiritual realms and the supernatural could more accurately be described and thus more easily communicated. How could the Incarnation – the *virgin* birth – be described in a language, such as Hebrew, that does not even have a word for “virgin?” God needed Greek to come along and replace Hebrew, because Greek *does* have a word for “virgin.” How could the Eucharist, the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the Sacred Body and Precious Blood of Jesus, be described in a language, a philosophy, other than Greek – which not only has the *words* but also the *thought*, the *reasoning*, the *philosophy* that even *can* describe such a mystery?

And so, *hopefully* we can at least begin to see, via this brief narrative of the historical context, maybe *why* God chose this specific *what, when, where, and how* to be made man and thus dwell among us – the great mystery of the Incarnation which *normally* we celebrate on March 25th – the Solemnity of the Annunciation in almost every other year.

As for the mysterious connection between the Incarnation and the Cross, the Annunciation and the Passion: this year, as I say, March 25th fell on Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion – and the Passion, of course, we commemorate also *today*. It is the day when Christ was conceived – and also when He died. And His death is our salvation; and our salvation is the whole reason why Jesus was conceived at all, why He came down to Earth in the first place! God did not will it to be made man for something different to do! God became man – Jesus Christ was conceived, was born, was made to suffer and was killed – for our salvation...that we might live, *not* die...that we might be saved, *not* condemned...and that we might have life – *eternal* life – and that in abundance, *everlasting* abundance.

My friends in Christ, our salvation was begun when Christ was conceived in the immaculate womb of the Blessed Virgin some two thousand years ago...and it was fully achieved – *consummated*, as it were – when Christ died on the Cross.... And all of *that*...for *us*...for *you*...for *me*.... We have just reflected upon a crash-course summary the Incarnation – the “*what, when, where, and how*” which is the historical context of the birth of the God-man, Jesus Christ. And the *Cross*...*that* shows all of us the *why*...*why* God went through all of that *what, when, where, and how*. The *Cross* shows us the *why* of it...and the *why* of it is simply this: God loves us *that* much.

In just a moment, we will come forward to venerate the cross “on which hung the salvation of the world,” and we come to adore. And soon after, we will come forward again to receive Christ in the Eucharist – the very same Christ who died on the cross and rose again on the Third Day. In both of these acts of adoration – venerating the cross and receiving the Eucharist – may we totally be filled with love, joy, peace, and all good things – with praise and thanksgiving to Almighty God Who did this, Who endured *all* of this, for our salvation.