

Let us begin the Christmas season with the question of: Why did the Son of God take flesh and become man?

A good, even necessary, starting point for this question is another question: where are we going? What am I destined for, or do I even have a destiny? If there is nothing more after physical death, then the answer is largely no, I have no real destiny. If there is nothing for man after this life, then there is no point in God becoming man. If physical death is the end of the story, if the book of our existence is completely closed at the moment of death, then Christmas is nothing more than a human celebration with nice decorations, presents, a good meal and a good nap; “Christmas joy” is not something lasting and enduring, it is rather nothing more than having a good time for a few hours on just one day. If man is not immortal then there’s something to be said for: eat, drink, and be merry. If it’s true that there is no “Act II” for us, then there really is no point in God becoming man. Man can certainly figure out for himself how to follow his own whims and desires, he can figure out for himself how to “eat, drink, and be merry” – how to satisfy his immediate desires.

But if:

1. there is something after this life, if man is in fact immortal, and
 2. his state after this life – happiness or misery – is connected to what he is and how he lives in this life,
- then the Incarnation and the birth of Christ is the single most important, most consequential, most spectacular event in human history since the creation of man.

So which is true? Is man immortal or not? Does man have an immortal soul that will, at some point, be reunited with his body, or not?

Which do *you* believe? Which do you *really* believe, which do you *know* to be true, down to the core of your being? Which do you believe so firmly that it determines your *actions* as much as your words?

Many people live as if the first is true, a belief that the world today certainly encourages. Is that the basis for knowledge – what everybody says, what everybody does? How about the use of your own mind? Is that off-limits? Maybe we should try it with the question at hand: is there a human soul and if so, is it immortal? If not, there was no significant reason for the birth of Christ and Christmas is just another day.

Is there such a thing as a soul? To answer that question the first thing to do is say what is meant by a “soul?” Well there are some things that are alive in the material world and some things that are not. The most basic meaning of soul, then, is that which makes a material thing alive. In that case, plants, animals, and human beings all have souls; plants and animals don’t have a human soul but they are alive and “soul” means that which makes a thing alive so they have some sort of soul. The next question is: well, is the soul something material or immaterial? This takes a little more thought. A person might start by thinking about a human being and they might say: well, if the heart was severely damaged or removed, the person would die; in fact, the same could be said for almost all of the body parts. But now I have to think about it a little further. What about plants or microorganisms like bacteria? They don’t have those body parts and yet they are alive, and they also experience death. Can I really say that just having all the right body parts and in good shape makes a thing alive? Well if that was the case, then I’d have to say that a car, for example, is alive, at least if it’s up and running. I’d have to say that a boulder or soil or other such things are alive since they have the “parts” that are appropriate to them. So here’s what I have to say or conclude: for living things there are material things necessary for it to be alive, namely those things that are natural to it. But those material things are not the principle cause of life; they alone do not cause life so they cannot be the soul – the soul being the “first principle” of life. We have to conclude, then, that the soul – that most basic thing which causes material things to be alive – is itself something immaterial.

But now, is the human soul immortal? There are 2 ways to answer this question. One is “philosophical” – meaning that, without using Revelation, the person uses and thinks about that which can be observed. Aquinas, following Aristotle, did this. The argument for this is rather involved and is too much to present in this article;

basically, Aquinas argues that the intellect (thinking) is a faculty of the human soul, demonstrating that the soul has its own “operation” and thus exists/lives regardless of whether united to the body or not.

There is an easier way to know that the human soul is immortal. You start with the question: is Jesus God? He gave ample evidence that he is (prophecies and miracles). Once I know and accept that truth, then I can simply say: yes, I know the human soul is immortal because...God said so.

Why all of this time on the immateriality and immortality of the human soul? The point is not so much the “proof” itself but rather in talking about the “proof” it gets us to think about the human soul and the fact that it never dies, never. If we want to really grasp why God became man, why Jesus was born, we have to start by thinking about the immortality of the human soul. If I don’t really ponder this truth, this reality, and its implications, then I will never have much of an appreciation for the birth of our Lord. You are never going to die, at least not in the way that people often think of death – as some sort of final and absolute end. At some point you will experience physical death, when the soul (that which makes the body alive) separates from the body, but your mind, your consciousness, your soul lives on. At the moment of death, we will be fully conscious and we will go and stand before the judgement seat of our Lord. What a terrifying moment that will be if I haven’t gotten to know Him, if I’ve spent most of my life placing judgement on Him and His commands. The point of talking about the immortality of the soul is simply to get us to think about this reality.

Is there any chance? Any chance of a good outcome? No, unless...unless what? Unless God Himself becomes man, makes restitution for sin – purchases for us entrance into Heaven – and teaches us what we need to do, how we must be, in order to receive our ticket, so to speak. This is why God become man, this is why our Lord was born. The essence of that ticket is becoming like Him and forging relation with Him in this life.

If man *is* immortal and his never-ending state (happiness or misery) is determined by what he does and doesn’t do in this life, by what he becomes, then this has big implications. It means that man does have a destiny, a destination. Now what do you have to do to reach a particular destination? You can’t just start walking or driving around aimlessly and expect that you’re going to get there. If you want to go to (say) Japan and you just jump in your car and start driving around saying: oh, well, sooner or later I will get there, you will never get there. And yet, how often people do that with their life here on earth. Man has destiny, a great one. Jesus was born so that we could reach that destiny, but all too often people give little or no thought to reaching their destination. It’s like getting in your car and driving around aimlessly, believing that sooner or later you’ll get to Japan. No one hits a target that they do not look at. Man’s ultimate destination, his ultimate fulfillment, is not realized (attained) in this life; rather, this life is the time and place for the “journey” to that destination. Our Lord became man to enable us to reach it and to teach us how to get there. But I have to choose to do so.

Is there a purpose to life? How many live as if there is no purpose except the satisfaction of their own immediate desires, giving no thought at all to their true destination – eat, drink, and be merry is taken as the sole purpose of this life. If that is the case, then there was no reason for God to become man. Do I really believe that God became man, in the immortality of the soul, that Jesus is God? I cannot answer yes unless these truths determine everything I think, say, and do. Use the Christmas season to ponder these questions.

Who among us created themselves, brought themselves into existence? Of course no one, except our Lord. So are we the landlords of our life? Suppose we are not the landlords but rather the tenants even of our very own lives. If God created not just man but each individual human person, then a person’s life is a gift from God. It is a gift that we have on trust for a short time, so to speak, then we go back to God. The fact that human life is a gift from God, is what gives human life value, something so often lost in our times. If Aunt Betty is a nuisance, well let her die or even kill her. If somebody is opposed to me, kill them. If a baby is inconvenient, kill them. The birth of Christ stands as both a beacon of hope, for those who take seriously their true destination, and as sign of condemnation for those who do not. Christmas joy is real but it can be experienced only by those who fix their mind on their true destination. That destination can’t be reached by never thinking about it. Take time this Christmas season to contemplate it and thus renew commitment to the Lord. *God bless you, Fr Kahn.*