

CHRISTMAS, 2012

We've all heard the saying that "haste makes waste," just as we have likely learned from sad experience that rushing to get something done in a frenzied state of mind has led to our failing to accomplish in a suitable way the very thing we set out to do. There is, however, a sense in which haste may at times very well be called for. We just heard in the Gospel of the shepherds learning of the birth of the Messiah, and a couple verses later St. Luke tells us that the shepherds "went in haste" to Bethlehem to see the wondrous sight that had been announced to them by the angels (Lk 2:16). And just two days ago, in the Gospel read at Sunday's Mass, St. Luke used a similar expression in his account of Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth, for he writes: "Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeting Elizabeth" (Lk 1:39-40). In his recently published book on the Infancy Narratives, Pope Benedict made a special point of noting this phrase "in haste," and he went on to ask a question that ought to lead each of us to serious reflection. The pope asked: "How many Christians make haste today where the things of God are concerned? Surely if anything merits haste—so the evangelist is discreetly telling us—then it is the things of God."¹

There is indeed a sense in which this kind of haste for the things of God was evident in the life of Jesus himself. At one point in his public life, the same evangelist Luke writes of Jesus saying: "I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing! There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished" (Lk 12:49-50). Clearly Jesus was someone to whom we could really ascribe the phrase "a man with a mission," perhaps most clearly seen in a verse that many regard as the principal turning

point in Luke's entire Gospel, where the evangelist writes: "When the days for his being taken up were fulfilled, he resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem" (Lk 9:51). In other words, the birth in Bethlehem that we celebrate tonight was a kind of first step on a single-minded journey that ended only when Jesus was raised in glory and exalted at the right hand of the Father. We might say he journeyed "with all deliberate speed."

If we are genuinely to be his followers, something of that same hastening to our goal should mark our lives as well. Blissful enjoyment of an eternal Sabbath rest may come later, but for now it is for us to do what the author of the Letter to the Hebrews says in the fourth chapter of that letter: "Whoever enters into God's rest, rests from his own works as God did from his. Therefore, let us hasten to enter into that rest" (Heb 4:10-11). To be sure, if we adhered to one of the Eastern religions that teach about multiple rebirths, there may not be this same sense of urgency. If one expects to be reborn hundreds if not thousands of times before eventually attaining full union with the Godhead, it might be enough simply to try to do enough good in the present life to be reborn into a somewhat higher state the next time around. But there is no convincing evidence for multiple rebirths, and our faith tells us that this is our one and only life on earth—what we might call our first and last chance—which makes the whole question of the way we live an utterly serious one indeed. To repeat that phrase of Pope Benedict, "If anything merits haste, it is the things of God."

For those of us in the Benedictine tradition, whether as monks or oblates, there is the added teaching of St. Benedict himself, for it is truly remarkable to note how often he uses the language of running already in the prologue to his Rule, whether quoting Scripture or writing in his own words: "Run while you have the light of life, that the darkness of death may not overtake you" (Prol 13). "If we wish to dwell in the tent of [the Lord's] kingdom, we will never

arrive unless we run there by doing good deeds” (Prol 22). “If we wish to reach eternal life, even as we avoid the torments of hell, then while there is still time, while we are in this body ... we must run and do now what will profit us forever” (Prol 42-44). And finally, at the end of the prologue, “As we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love” (Prol 49).

It should by now be pretty obvious why we have all this talk of haste and of running in some of our most foundational documents: Mary hastening to Elizabeth, the shepherds hastening to the manger, Jesus hastening toward the baptism with which he was to be baptized, Benedict’s monks being urged to run toward the tent of eternal life. It is simply because there is something really important at stake, the all-important choice between life and death that Moses placed before the Israelites centuries ago and that continues to be placed before us today: “I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, therefore, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the Lord your God, heeding his voice, and holding fast to him” (Deut 30:19-20). Our life as Christians is both joyful and serious. Those two adjectives are not at all mutually exclusive. The most joyful persons who ever lived were surely the great saints—we speak, for example, of “the perfect joy of St. Francis”—but the saints were also the ones who took most seriously the call to follow their Savior and were, in the words of our second reading, “eager to do what is good” (Tit 2:14). In this joyful Christmas season, may something of that same eagerness mark our lives as well. The shepherds hastened to the manger, which actually refers to a trough holding feed for livestock, and they found lying in it the one whom we revere as our own spiritual food, the bread of life. Let us, then, hasten to our Eucharistic table to be fed with this heavenly bread, and with the same eagerness let us then go forth to do as much good as we can during the limited time that remains for each of us in our one and only life on earth.

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*, trans. Philip Whitmore (New York: Image, 2012), 79.