

We had intended to make last week's column the last—the degree of interest aroused is not worth the effort—but instead make an end with a comment on a horrible subject.

## *A Thought for Innocents' Day*

Western Christians have been celebrating the Feast of the Nativity, some few perhaps with a bit of help from our last Column. Many people of all levels of faith or none will have been to services of lessons and carols, which usually end with part of the first chapter of the Fourth Gospel, headed, in Milner White's classic liturgy, "St John unfolds the great mystery of the Incarnation". So he does. "The Word was made flesh." But that was not the subject of the annual commemoration: rather the birth of Christ fits the subsequent clause "and dwelt among us." Christmas particularly celebrates the Nativity, and the Incarnation only as that is assumed in the birth.

The Incarnation is particularly celebrated on 25 March, the Feast of the Annunciation, commonly ignored by Protestants but listed by the Book of Common Prayer as one of the "feasts that are to be observed by the Church of England". Incarnation precedes birth, in this calendar by exactly nine months.

Christians believe that Christ is fully God and fully man. So we celebrate on 25 March Emmanuel, God with us, God in the womb before birth, as well as in the baby in the Temple, the precocious youth left behind in Jerusalem, and the man full of grace and truth.

If He was very God in the womb, must He not also in the womb have been truly man? Otherwise have we to imagine humanity somehow coming upon God during Blessed Mary's pregnancy?

The legal systems of most of Christendom permit abortions in certain circumstances, usually with a time limit. One principle is that the "foetus" should not be aborted after it may be "viable", that is, after it could survive birth. Another common idea is that the "foetus" does not become recognisably human until some time after conception, so abortion in the early stages of pregnancy is thought not to be killing a human being, but only a being with the potential of becoming human.

These matters are debated by ethical committees and biologists, and their conclusions can have whatever authority is possible to ethical committees, biologists, and legislatures acting on their findings. Whatever conclusions they reach and whatever laws are made in consequence, it is clear that the option of taking abortion as innocent is not available to Trinitarian Christianity.

The Annunciation, like both the Old and New Covenants, is not a matter for negotiation. A covenant is a kind of agreement: but the new covenant in His blood is given as a command. The Angel tells Mary that she will conceive and bear a son, but does not ask her permission. If the Blessed Virgin had been a truly modern woman she would not have said in response, "Be it unto me according to thy word," but would have remembered her rights and freedoms. She would have had an abortion.

The speculation is very unpleasant. What does seem clear is that for those who recite the Nicene Creed ("and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man") the Incarnation takes place at the moment of conception, the humanity and the godhead being parts of the nature from that moment. The humanity of the Lord is not a special case: He is flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone. If His humanity dates from the moment of conception, so does ours.

### THE COLLECT FOR THE ANNUNCIATION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

We beseech thee, O Lord, pour thy grace into our hearts, that, as we have known the incarnation of thy Son Jesus Christ by the message of an angel, so by his cross and passion we may be brought unto the glory of his resurrection: through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*