

25th December 2017
Fr Chrysostom MacDonnell

Feast of the Nativity

The preparations are over. The Royal Hours were chanted on Friday; last evening, Vespers of the feast. Our feet stand once again in Bethlehem, here before the icon of the Nativity. Let us talk of that holy image. The children of our Sunday school have been considering that icon recently, of course. Hopefully, they have learned all about it, now. So if there is anything in my homily you don't quite understand, you can always ask your children and I am sure that they will explain it to you!

The Apostolic Tradition of the Church has furnished us in the first instance with the life of Christ, the proclamation of the gospel. It has supplied, as well, the biblical account, the God-inspired witness of that Holy Tradition. The actual accounts of Christ's birth in Luke and Matthew present us with sparse detail, an economy of words: only what is needed to confront us with the saving truth.

But the human mind longs for detail, not just that prurient relish and delight in gossip but also something warmer: that longing for intimacy and familiarity; of wanting to share in and commune with what engages the heart. So it is that every preacher, every teller of the Christmas story, every work of fine art and Infants' school nativity play thrives on embellished details not found, in fact, in the writings of the evangelists. Yet like the gospels, the best Orthodox icons of the Nativity are simple in their provision. Yes, the more homely details are present, perhaps but the straightforward telling of the events is telescoped into a simple two-dimensional tableau.

What we may presume, following Luke, is that Christ was born during the reign of the emperor Augustus, the unwedded-bride, Mary and the guardian-husband Joseph, having made the journey to Bethlehem. Here they are registered for tax, for Joseph's tribal origins were there and he traces his line of descent from King David.

It is, of course, well known that ancient Palestinian houses were built into caves. Here the animals were brought at night, while the family and guests slept in the upper chamber, the *katályma*. I have

an idea that it was St Jerome's Latin translation that rendered that word into Latin as *diversorium*, meaning lodging or possibly, *an Inn*. Thus were enriched the plots of a thousand nativity plays and the picturesque details of many an old master's painting.

And what we may presume, following Matthew, whom we hear this morning, is that before the family return to Nazareth, eastern sages arrive; Magi, astrologers, perhaps from Persia. We are not told their number, only their three gifts which, when we contemplate them theologically, turn out to be sacramental in their own way; prophecies of His life in the form of presents.

We also know that, as the local king, the Roman's vassal, Herod, rejected the coming of Christ as a threat to his dominion. But that underclass of men, mere shepherds, now with their flocks brought to winter pasture nearer the little town, receive the Messiah, the long-awaited, with great joy.

Whatever the bear facts of the story or whatever the seasonal traditions that decorate this season, for most people this time continues still, just another season of the year that will come round again next year. But as for us, we for whom the Nativity is not an end in itself; we for whom the Christmas story is part of the gospel of Christ: as we stand before the Nativity icon, the mystery of the feast confronts us with the same two questions each time, each year, each Christmas: firstly, what has changed? But also, how have you changed?

What has changed is that God has dwelt among mankind. The liturgical hymns of the feast make this very clear, that the Maker of Man has been made man; that the Uncontainable has been contained in the womb of the God-bearer and has been brought forth. The Creator has entered into His creation and nothing can be quite the same any more: *that* is what has changed. The seemingly unending revolution of the seasons of measured Time, the hypnotic cycles of life so dear to the pagan mind, now have an end in sight. But what of us, how have we changed?

It is one of the possible effects of any great journey, especially any pilgrimage undertaken in our search for communion with God, that we can be changed in some way. Indeed, to go on pilgrimage, to journey like the Magi and not be changed, is to have missed the point of making the journey in the first place. But we can be changed. St Mary of Egypt, you will recall, went with the pilgrims to the Holy Land in the days of her sinful life, hoping to profit from her 'usual trade' but ended up powerfully confronted by God and awestruck by the purity of the Theotokos, which led to her repentance and a wholly strange and new life in Christ.

We have not journeyed from Persia to be here this morning. But we have come to stand in worship before the holy icon of the Nativity, to feast here, in this Bethlehem, this *house of bread*. And the worthy keeping of any great feast brings us the grace to change, to be affected, perhaps just as much as by the rigours and difficulties of any pilgrimage on foot. We have come, after all, to engage in, to be familiar with, to be enriched by that new humanity in Christ that was born among us. If not, then why keep these holy days? Why bear the name of Orthodox Christian at all if we should still prefer, really, to side with Herod and not be *unsettled*?

The truth is, we who through this icon venerate the new-born Christ with a familiar kiss, must become, fully, of the same *house and lineage of David*, knowing who we are and where we belong as Christians. We who embrace his cross here in church at the end of the Liturgy, must take up that same cross in the way we walk through this life. And we who receive into the guest chamber of our own souls and bodies, the most sacred of all Christmas gifts from the chalice of the Lord, must know ourselves, soul and body indeed, as not our own to possess but consecrated to Him by whom we now may live and move and have our being, not in ever turning wheels, arriving nowhere but in that eternal bliss that lasts forever.