

THE FOREFEAST OF THE NATIVITY

Tonight we shall place in the centre of the Church the icon of the Birth of Our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ. It contains many different elements of the two accounts in the Gospels which are drawn in different areas of the icon but there is an extraordinary unity between them. In one part we see simple local rustic Hebrew shepherds who in great fear are visited at night by an angel while watching over their flocks of sheep in the fields. They are told that a Saviour, who is the Christ, the Messiah, has been born in the city of David nearby and they are given a vision of a heavenly choir praising God. Receiving precise instructions as to where they will find him, they dutifully set off and find him with his parents, to whom they recount what they have experienced.

Matthew's gospel gives an account of quite different visitors from the humble shepherds. These three Kings, or Magi, arrive from the East with priceless gifts; gold, frankincense and myrrh. Their name etymologically is connected with the word 'magic' but in fact according to the historian Herodotus they come from a very powerful group in the period of the Persian-Median Empire and are in fact astrologers and astronomers or Zoroastrians. This is a very ancient religious group which is persecuted by the Islamic establishment inside modern Iran. Their astronomical observations have led them, probably from Iraq, to follow a star from its rising to the place where the king is born in Bethlehem. Their dedication and determination to complete their mission can be seen from their lengthy journey, the earnestness with which they inquire of king Herod about the location of the child and their joy at the reappearance of the star after the meeting with him. The star is the witness of the heavens to the uniqueness of the child as is the heavenly choir.

The child is not born in the comfort of an inn but with the animals in a cave, a traditional stable in the middle east. His mother is with him as is his human father who is often depicted in a lower corner. Many Orthodox icons show Joseph confronted by an elderly shepherd or satan-like figure, always depicted in dark colours. This figure is the tempter, tempting Joseph into not accepting the miraculous birth of the Saviour from the Virgin.

The scene brings together humans, animals, the heavens, the natural world, angels and the music of the angels. All are brought together in an unprecedented cosmic unity around the miraculous virgin birth of a child. The two words which best sum up the atmosphere are peace and joy. This is to be contrasted with what will soon follow in the region, death and misery, as Herod sets about the task of mercilessly but unsuccessfully eliminating his potential rival by massacring innocent boys under the age of two.

Some years ago the press revealed the true story that Prince Charles liked to sit in his garden in Highgrove House and talk to his flowers and plants. Immediately he was derided as a crackpot and patently unsuitable to be our future king. However, the icon of the Nativity visibly demonstrates the inter-connexion between all the elements of the created order both visible and invisible. The Church has always believed that there is an inbuilt relationship between the created order in its many forms, human, animal, natural, psychological and spiritual. The closeness of this union is emphasised when love is present among its members and undermined when division arises. St Paul uses the image of a body to demonstrate our mutual dependence in the Church. In recent years we have begun to understand how a minor natural event in one hemisphere can cause a tsunami or an el Niño or a hurricane in another. Tragically, the US and the Caribbean have witnessed a number of these recently. Global warming, which is undeniable, despite the US President's protests to the contrary, is taking place because of our human failure to respect the environment over centuries. Even China is now spending enormous sums of money to reduce its dependence on fossil fuels which is affecting its economy and population. Without doubt the component parts of the natural world are interconnected at the deepest level.

Then going further into the spiritual world, we have been reminded by the saints about the effect of our spiritual life on the world. "Have peace in your hearts and thousands around you will be affected" urged St Seraphim of Sarov. All this is only in accordance with the miracle of Christ's birth when heaven and earth are united and a peace and unity descends on the world. I always think it interesting that amongst the first to recognise Christ as king of the Jews and to pay him homage are the representatives of another religion, the Zoroastrian stargazers from the East. This should warn us not to dismiss other religions out of hand as ill-conceived and simply in error. There are many practices which we share in common particularly in prayer and meditation, in techniques and in our religious experiences. This understanding and cooperation is particularly important today when we witness the damage being done to those devoted and peace-loving members of the Islamic community by those who deliberately pervert its teachings for their own violent and greedy ends. It is salutary to remember the horrendous crimes committed by our forebears, the Crusaders, in the 11th and 12th centuries not only against the Muslim population under Saladin but also against our fellow Orthodox Christians in Constantinople and the surrounding regions.

The icon gives us a momentary glimpse of the unity of heaven and of the earth. St Paul says creation is groaning like a pregnant woman in the final pangs before childbirth waiting to be transfigured. God and man are united in this virgin birth. The message of the heavenly host is a simple one "Peace on earth among men with whom God is pleased". This clear unequivocal blessing is enough for us at Christmas to find great joy in the gift of God to the world of his Son and to find a unity with our fellow man regardless of creed or colour or race or religion, or political or sexual differences in the reception of that gift. May it continue to feed our hearts over the period of the Feast so that we too can utter meaningfully and deeply from within: "Glory be to God in the Highest! And on earth peace, goodwill towards men with whom he is pleased" Amen.

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