**THE FEAST OF THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD GOD AND SAVIOUR, JESUS CHRIST**

*Christ is born. Glorify Him!*

For the next few days we will be celebrating a feast beloved especially of Western Christians, where it certainly, in popularity terms, takes precedence over Easter, namely to give it its proper title, that of the Nativity of Our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ or Christmas. In the increasingly secular times of today it receives ever greater recognition, if only superficially, even amongst peoples and countries which are not avowedly Christian like the Japanese or even in some of the less strict Muslim and Hindu countries of the world like Malaysia and parts of the Indian sub-continent. As we study religion and realise that at the base of all spiritual searches and pilgrimages there are many similar common desires, techniques, disciples and experiences, it is natural that people share a greater tolerance, respect and sympathy for each other’s religion and realise that there is much that we have in common, love for God, each other and ourselves.

The birth of Jesus supports this. We find Persian astronomers, probably Zoroastrians, the first visitors according to today’s Gospel reading from Matthew, coming to the cave where Jesus is born having used their star gazing capabilities to predict the coming of the star and the significance for the world. Even the Jews, apart from the Forerunner and Baptist John and the prophets who have been predicting his coming, have not quite the same degree of accuracy. And even at this birth there are no Jews present apart from the humble shepherds. So, Jesus and especially his birth, find favour in many non-Christian cultures and yet this beloved feast, on deeper examination is actually the one which divides Christians most from other religions. The idea or fact that God has come down to us in human flesh is one that is utterly abhorrent to some other religions. It is an idea too ridiculous to contemplate if one has a concept of a wondrous distant God who has made the world. And yet the Old Testament is littered with ideas that man is made to be God (“You are all gods all of you” is written in the Psalms) and Jesus is our pioneer, our brother whom we strive to follow towards God. This is an idea called “theosis” in the Fathers. A word which means becoming Godlike. The marriage of Heaven and Earth is deeply embedded in the Orthodox hymnographic material for the Feast: “What can we offer thee O Christ?” And the answer is “A Virgin Mother”. Thus are heaven and earth joined.

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And then there are certain other statements made by Christ, which really increase this tension and division. Jesus says: “All power on heaven and earth has been delivered unto me”. A stunning statement for a Muslim, who nevertheless believes that Issa or Jesus will come again. Again Jesus says: “No one comes to the Father but by me”. And in another place “I and the Father are One”. It is important to bear in mind what these verses mean because, as much as we engage in dialogues with other religions, and quite frankly the more the better in these dangerously fanatical times, we must recognise the earth-shattering dimensions of Christ’s statements, the uniqueness of his claims and, as we contemplate the Feast of Christmas, what it means for God to become Man. Christ expressly warns his disciples, “He who would be first among you, let him be the servant of all”. This is the model for all of us “to serve” and it is exemplified above all in the birth of Jesus Christ who emptied himself, taking the form of a servant (kenosis) as St Paul writes in his letter to the Church of Philippi.

But while we must bear in mind the overwhelming claims of Christ to be the founder and foundation of all things visible and invisible and the logos or reason for all things and we must accept that Christianity is the fulfilment of all, the miracle of Christ’s birth is about God’s gift to all creation: to people of all faiths (symbolised by the Magi in the narrative); to the animal kingdom (symbolised by the place where he was born and the animals who shared the maternity suite); to the created order which produces the special star in the heavens which has come from the East and the angelic hosts who appear to the shepherds out at night. 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 of race or religion, or political or sexual difference 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.

Christ is born! Glorify Him! ***Oxford, Feast of the Nativity 2022***