**SUNDAY AFTER THE NATIVITY Matt. 2: 13-23**

Today we honour three members of the Holy Family: Righteous Joseph the Betrothed, the Lord’s earthly father, his ancestor King David and his brother James, the leader of the Church in Jerusalem. Joseph, the husband of the Mother of God, is regularly depicted in the bottom left-hand corner of icons of the Nativity in dialogue with a shabby character that looks like the Evil One or one of his underlings. In some depictions he looks forlorn and abandoned and one can sympathise with his predicament. In his mind after all these comings and goings there must be doubt, uncertainty, shame, confusion, fear, guilt and lack of faith. What is happening to me and my family? A cry with which we can all sympathise. Let us stop for a moment and consider what he has endured.

In the first place he finds that his betrothed is pregnant though he has not had physical relations with her. He does the honourable thing and offers to divorce her quietly but an angel appears to him in a dream telling him not to do this since she has been made pregnant by the Holy Spirit. He is then given instructions about how to name the child. It must be Jesus, which means ‘He will save’. He soldiers on manfully and the family is displaced by an order of the Roman emperor as part of a census and forced to return to his home town. But in the midst of these migrations they find no accommodation at Bethlehem and are forced to live in a cave with animals while his wife gives birth.

No sooner has this taken place than unexpected strangers begin to arrive: some Zoroastrian astrologers from Iraq or further east, following a star which will lead them to the King of the Jews, bring precious gifts as they fall down and worship the new born child. Local shepherds also arrive on the instruction of an angel who appears to them in their fields at night with a heavenly choir. Then an angel appears to Joseph again in a dream and instructs them to depart promptly for Egypt as King Herod, betrayed by the Wise Men, is looking for their child to destroy him as a future enemy. Pure evil is unleashed by these events. Darkness rises up against the Light which has come into the world with his birth. A massacre of thousands of innocent children two years old and under ensues. Christ later describes part of his mission as to bring a sword to divide good from evil. Finally, Herod dies and the family return home, but it is not entirely safe since his son rules in his place so they make a diversion and set up home in Nazareth where he grows up with his family

All this entirely justifiable fear, confusion and stress contrasts with the Mother of God who, we are told, “ponders all these things in her heart” and who perhaps reads the spiritual signs more clearly and in faithful obedience to God accepts in peace the extreme events which are befalling her and her family. Her son will have to take the battle to the devil by enduring his temptations in the wilderness with the armour of scripture to vanquish his attacks. Finally, he will have to surrender to his opponent in the ‘hour of evil’ as he calls it at his arrest in the garden of Gethsemane to achieve the goal of the salvation of the world.

The figure of Joseph is perhaps not as commonplace in the Orthodox tradition as in Roman Catholic churches where in this country at least it is unusual to find a church without a statue of him but his path in his spiritual life is common to many of us. Suffering, confusion, fear and lack of faith we all know only too well. He is directed by angels in his dreams but the burden he bears is still very heavy. At this present time in history the phenomenon of people being forced to leave their countries because of internal wars and brutal regimes is one with which we can immediately and easily identify. We witness it daily in the media.

The Mother of God gives birth and immediately embarks on a long and painful journey with her family to avoid a merciless king who is trying to murder her son. And yet in the middle of this seeming absence the voice of God can be heard guiding them through angels who appear three times in dreams to her husband and direct them finally to the place where they will bring up the Holy Family – Nazareth. The place prophesied many years before in the words “He shall be called a Nazarene”.

As Christians we are promised sufferings as part of our time in this world, which is both good and evil. St Peter writes in his epistle to a young church, “Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which has come upon you to prove you as though something strange were happening to you but rejoice in sharing Christ’s sufferings”. Similarly, St Paul writes to Timothy, “Take your share of suffering as a good soldier of Jesus Christ”. Both of these apostles were executed in Rome for the faith. In the wedding service of the Orthodox Church the couple make the circuit in the middle of the church holding on to the priest’s epitrachil, the symbol of Christ’s presence in the marriage while the choir sing hymns, one of which is to the martyrs reminding them that ‘green martyrdom’ is promised to the couple. A similar promise of martyrdom is made at the ordination of a priest. But in the middle of this experience is Christ’s presence in his apparent absence. Christ answers the temptations to which he is subjected by the Evil One with words of scripture especially from Psalm 90, which is read at services for the dead, but is also for the living. “I will protect him because he has known my name.” “He shall give his angels charge over you: to keep you in all your ways.” This is a powerful psalm emphasising God’s protection of those who call upon Him.

Like the Holy Family in today’s gospel reading we too shall be buffeted by events which we could not foresee, find ourselves in places and situations we did not expect to visit or wish to see and have to face all manner of threats and dangers sent by our enemy to dislodge us from our faith and trust in the Lord. But by continuing steadfastly in prayer to the Holy Trinity and by resting in peace in the prayers of the Church and its sacraments we too shall reach our own Nazareth like the Lord and find rest albeit temporarily in him on our inner journey. May God grant us the faith, strength, tenacity and joy for this task!

***31st December 2023, Oxford***