

The Nativity of Our Lord

Nativity Epistle by St. John Maximovitch, 1962

Thou Who art the God of peace and the Father of compassion, didst send unto us the Angel of Thy great Counsel, granting us peace.

The Angel of the pre-eternal Counsel of the Holy Trinity comes to the earth. This is not an ordinary messenger; it is the Only-begotten Son of God Himself. He brings peace to men. *Peace be unto you*, He said more than once to His disciples. *Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you*, He says to the Apostles at the Mystical Supper, *not as the world giveth, give I unto you*. And appearing after His Resurrection, again He says: *Peace be unto you*.

For he is our peace, the Holy Apostle Paul says concerning Him: *He came to the earth to reconcile man unto God by the Cross, having slain the enmity thereby. And having come, He preached peace to those afar off and to those near, because through Him we both have access unto the Father.*

The wall that separated heaven and earth is destroyed; the sword that barred the way to the Tree of Life disappears. Unto man that had sinned comes his Creator, calling him into His embrace! By the mouths of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit cries out: *In Christ, be ye reconciled to God*. You that had sinned came not to God, but the Son of God, before Whom you sinned, came to you! He calls everyone to Himself; He gives forgiveness to everyone who merely thirsts for this. For without the desire of man himself, without at least his little effort, God's peace cannot settle in him.

The Lord forces no one to come to Him, but calls everyone: *Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*. Come all ye who are heavy laden with sins, who are exhausted from your labors and who do not find rest! You shall find that inner peace, which you will find nothing on earth more desirable than. The soul will feel unearthly peace and joy.

The Magi who worshipped the Babe experienced that joy; the Shepherds, finding Him lying in a manger, also felt it. But neither peace nor joy touched the heart of Herod and those who wanted to destroy the Child. For evil desire and malice are incompatible with inner peace. And whoever does not have inner peace, also sows strife and malice about.

The Church now calls us to meet Christ Who comes from Heaven. What can we do in order to meet Him like the Magi, and not like Herod? *Ye that desire life, keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking guile. Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it*. It tends to be hard to do this; we are weak when it comes to everything good. But the Son of God even came for this: in order to strengthen us. Not for naught was He born in Bethlehem, which signifies "house of bread."

He feeds us with heavenly food, His flesh. "God, the Lord and Creator of all, as a babe in the flesh, is worshipped in a poor manger, crying out: 'Eat My body and through faith be made steadfast.'"

These words of the divine Child are directed to us. Let us hearken to His call! Let us follow the Magi; let us hasten with the Shepherds! Our churches are now that cave of Bethlehem. Not illusory, but in reality does He, Who is now being born in His most pure flesh, rest in them. Let us worship Him; let us offer as a gift our thoughts and desires; let us confess our sins, and let us taste of His immaculate Body and Blood. Whoever did not do this earlier, let him at least accomplish it now, when the star of Bethlehem is already shining! Our minds will be enlightened and the heart will hear:

Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace, good will among men!

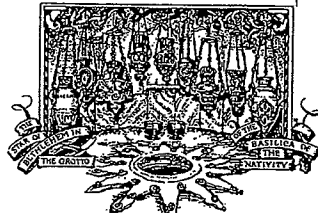
Nativity of Christ, 2011

Archpastoral Message of His Beatitude, Metropolitan Jonah

To the Very Reverend and Reverend Clergy, Monastics, and Faithful of The Orthodox Church in America

Dearly beloved in the Lord,

Christ is Born!



I greet you with the love, joy and hope that is so graciously granted to us with the Incarnation of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Today, we celebrate the “Winter Pascha,” proclaiming that God is indeed with us! Today, the only-begotten Son of God takes on our human nature, enabling us to become partakers of His divine nature. Today, the Law and the Prophets are fulfilled as, in the “fullness of time,” the long-awaited Messiah ushers in that peace which is beyond all understanding!

And today, we celebrate that for which we have prepared during the Nativity Fast. Our fasting, intensified prayer, and almsgiving find their meaning and fulfillment in the Mystery of the Incarnation: All that we have is a gift from God, given to us as faithful stewards, that we might proclaim God’s very presence in our midst. Our calling is to “incarnate” the Incarnate Word into our lives, our actions, our very being, at all times, and in everything we do. This, to be sure, is not easy. The world will challenge those who embrace “The Way” at every turn. Yet, it is the world that, in its self-proclaimed emptiness, precisely reveals its thirst for “something more,” a “sign” or “reality” that gives meaning to life beyond the superficial trappings of the “holiday season.”

In rendering thanks to God for His manifest love for His People, and in strengthening ourselves to proclaim the Incarnation in our lives, it is crucial for every member of the Church to discern his or her gifts and to employ them for the building up of the Body of Christ. How? One of the Nativity hymns gives us a clue.

What shall we offer Thee, O Christ, Who for our sake has appeared on earth as man? Every creature which Thou hast made offers thanks. The angels offer Thee a song. The heavens, their star. The wise men, their gifts. The shepherds, their wonder. The earth, its cave. The wilderness, the manger. And we offer Thee a Virgin Mother!

It is the Mother of God, the Theotokos, who is the very model of stewardship, of discernment, of embracing all that the heavenly Father called her to do. Where the first Eve said “no” to God, she responded positively. And in so doing, she embraced all that her Son accomplished by His birth in time and space, becoming an example for us.

As we continue our celebration, let not our faith be “shelved” with our ornaments and seasonal decorations. Let not the flame of our commitment wax cold. Let not our devotion to serving the Incarnate Word, even as His Mother served Him. May the grace and peace from above, so abundantly given by our all-merciful Savior, remain with us throughout this most glorious feast, and be strengthened within us in the days, weeks and months beyond!

Let us glorify Him!
Faithfully yours in Christ,

+JONAH, Archbishop of Washington, Metropolitan of All America and Canada

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS?

Fr. Panayiotis Papageorgiou, HOLY TRANSFIGURATION, Marietta, GA

What is the meaning of Christmas?

I recently asked people around me what is the meaning of Christmas for them and the overwhelming answer I received was that "Christmas is about giving!". And we do a lot of giving during these days; we share time, we share gifts, we share food. It is the best time of the year! It is necessary, however, to not forget that Christmas is also about the greatest gift humanity received, the baby Jesus, Who is God made man!

The Birth of Christ is the most momentous event in the history of the world. It occurred at a time when humanity was at a desperate crossroads. The Roman Empire was at its glory, but the people of the Empire lived in the midst of wars, oppression, poverty, disease, uncertainty. Their gods to whom they turned for comfort were capricious, full of passions and mischief and provided no hope of transformation for the human person. Turning to Zeus, or Poseidon, Mars or Aphrodite, provided no hope of deliverance from their human predicament because the lives of these gods were in many ways full of the same vices that plagued humanity. The gods were in the image of men, rather than the other way around. The people who honored and sacrificed to these gods were the tyrants of the world who turned around and made the lives of the people miserable. Arrogance, greed and licentiousness were the norm among the elite of the time. Humility was seen as a weakness and kindness was upon by the rich.

For the Jews, centuries had passed since Abraham and Moses and the promise of the Prophets for deliverance of the Jewish nation was nowhere in sight. The suffering of the people under the yoke of Roman occupation was growing more and more unbearable. Zealots, one after the other declaring themselves as the promised Messiah, turned to violent resistance against the Romans with the only outcome being more bloodshed and further oppression for the people. Peace was a fleeting prospect. Pain and sorrow was the prevalent feeling among the Jews.

It was at such a time that God chose to come to earth as man. In the humble manger, sharing the poverty of the people, but bringing the peace of the heavens, unknown by men, He was revealed by the angels to simple shepherds. Even nature stood still in awe as it beheld the miracle. The ineffable, incomprehensible Yahweh was lying in a manger as a vulnerable baby. His Mother knew what a great mystery this was but could not comprehend why she was chosen to participate in it.

The shepherds, simple and faithful, their minds and hearts pure from the machinations of the intellect saw the angels and are filled with fear: "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And they rushed to find Him and worship Him, as a multitude of the heavenly hosts were praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men." (Lk 2:10-14) He was born humbly, He lived and grew up humbly. He did not attend the great philosophical schools of his time. He lived and worshipped quietly in Nazareth until the time was right. Then, He revealed Himself fully. Since that time there has been no prophet, teacher, miracle worker or moral paradigm that the world has seen who can match Him.

Above all, He brought a message of peace and hope, not only through the Divine Wisdom he imparted, but also through the personal example He revealed of humility, love and sacrifice. He gave us the potential to be transformed in ourselves from fallen people who are immersed in our passions and vices to "sons of God" like Himself, perfected through the power of the mystery of humility revealed to the simple of heart at the manger. Here lies the meaning of Christmas: We must be transformed in the image of Him who lies in the manger.

Read: John 1:1-14

"And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

The ultimate of polarities has been united. The Creator of all has become that which He made. The inconceivable has been conceived. The words used by the saintly evangelist to tell of Christ's birth are deceptively simple. His genius united with divine inspiration to produce for us a record, a simple statement of what we through Him have experienced; hence, we learn not the story of Christmas as recorded in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, but the profound meaning of the Divine-human event.

When we are tempted to hate ourselves, ashamed and guilty for having once again fallen into temptation, blaming the weakness of our flesh, let us call to mind the awesome truth; that God Himself in Jesus Christ has lived just as we, in flesh just like our own. When we give up on ourselves, determining not to try any more, choosing to believe that lie our moderns tell us, that we are programmed for sin and have no real recourse, think of One who lived like us just to show us it can be done. As though you had purchased a puzzle and struggled with it for weeks, deciding finally that there was just no solution and giving up on it, only to be visited by the person who had drawn up that puzzle and have him show you the solution; so in studying the life of Christ through Holy Scriptures you are given a multitude of clues as to how your own life may be lived fully.

A greater promise is given you. Since most of us might be satisfied with living a life of peace, joy and prosperity, we must learn that those criteria are not enough. Christ wants, indeed insists, that we fulfill that life given us, so that we also may be "full of grace and truth." To be like Christ is to be kind, but more. To be humble, gracious, polite, charitable, loving, yes all these; still there is more to Christlikeness. It is to know the truth about God, the world and ourselves, and to proclaim it to others. It is, also, to acquire the gifts of the Holy Spirit, called grace. More than the good life, it is the holy life. Nothing less is worthy of Him.

(Fr. V. Berzonsky)

What shall we offer Thee,
O Christ?

Who for our sakes
has appeared on earth
as a Man?

Every creature made
by Thee offers Thee thanks!

The angels offer Thee
a hymn;

The heavens a star;
the Magi gifts;

The shepherds, their wonder;
the earth its cave;

The wilderness, the manger;

And we offer Thee
a Virgin Mother.

O Pre-eternal God,
have mercy on us!

When Augustus reigned alone
upon earth,
the many kingdoms of mankind
came to end;

and when Thou becamest Man
of the Pure Virgin,

The many gods of idolatry
were destroyed.

The cities of the world
passed under one single rule;
and the nations came to believe
in one sovereign Godhead!

The peoples were enrolled
by the decree of Caesar;
and we, the faithful,
were enrolled

in the name of the Godhead,
When Thou, O our God,
was made Man!

Great is Thy mercy:
Glory be to Thee!

~ Vespers of the Nativity

Chalcedon: "Perfect God and Perfect Man"

The definition of the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451) states that Jesus Christ is "perfect God and perfect Man," being "of one essence with God in regard to His divinity" and "of one essence with man in regard to His humanity."

It describes the "union" between divinity and humanity in Jesus as "hypostatic," i.e., in the one hypostasis or person of the Son of God. And it defines how this union occurs by the use of four negative adverbs: "*indivisibly, inseparably, immutably, and unconfusedly.*"

PEACE ON EARTH, GOODWILL TO MEN

Drawing closer to God, one is able to see his own flaws. Drawing away from God, one is able to see the flaws of others.

Have you ever met a chronic complainer? According to such a person, the world has given them a lousy deal and everyone is going to hear about it. If you have the ill-fortune of being stuck in such a conversation, don't think that the complainer won't throw you into the mix at a later date. You may have bought the line, that you were the only one who ever listened, but when you can't fix that individual's problems, guess who is the next in line to be blamed.

At this time of year, we proclaim "Peace on Earth, Goodwill to Men!" Of course, the Incarnation of God, Jesus Christ brought goodness into this world. Many opt to downgrade the occasion, wishing something less like a Happy Holiday(s). But the New Year or any other day nearby, does not compare with the event in Bethlehem two millenia ago. Without it (and the subsequent gift of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit) no goodwill. It would be like C.S. Lewis writes about in the Chronicles of Narnia, "winter, but never Christmas." Imagine the complaining then.

Each Sunday, we are asked to "Draw Near, with the Fear of God, Faith and Love." The immediate response after receiving is one of Love. Love for our fellow man; which is why fellowship immediately following is a natural by-product. But those who would try to have fellowship via their own devices and desires, are not going to have the same affinity for the brotherhood of man. Having not partaken, nor prepared, they seek to pull others to their way of thinking, apart from God, though some argue quite persuasively and are able to convince the weak. It is very easy to discern. If you say you Love God, you will love your fellow man. Maybe just a little bit more, but you will not fall into the trap of judgment of others (first, you have no idea of their personal experience and secondly, who made you the judge). But that is as old as mankind; setting oneself up in open defiance of God.

We are all guilty and in desperate need of a pardon. Only when we receive that pardon are we able to understand others and love them. Christianity is the only place where those who plead guilty are automatically given a pardon. The more you try to defend yourself, the more entangled you become in your own guilt and in the trap of judging others.

~ Fr. James O. Berends, ST. BARBARA, Raleigh, NC

"Shouldn't I be doing something?"

- An Instruction of St. Theophan the Recluse (+1894)

✠ "Look to Heaven, and measure every step of your life so that it is a step towards it. What to do? Do whatever is presently before you, in your circle and in your situation — and believe that this is and will be your true work; nothing more from you is required. It is a great error to think that one must undertake important and great labors, whether for Heaven or in order to serve mankind. That is not necessary at all."

"It is necessary only to do everything in accordance with the Lord's commandments. Just exactly what is to be done? Nothing in particular- just that which presents itself to each person according to his or her life, and which is determined by the individual events which each of us meets. That is all! God arranges the lot of each person, and the entire course of life of each one is also His good work, as is each moment and each encounter."

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