

THE NARTHEX

*The believers were first called
Christians at Antioch*
ACTS. 9:26

December-January
2008/9

THE COMING

As a major feast, the third ranking after Pascha and Theophany, The Nativity of our Lord is observed with careful preparation. The celebration of Our Lord's birth was originally part of a composite feast, linked with the Annunciation and Theophany. This pattern can still be seen in the Armenian Church. As a feast in its own right, Christmas appears in The Roman Church during the Fourth Century. The date of the 25th December (now, 7th January in the old Julian calendar) was probably chosen to discourage Christians, in a still largely non-Christian empire, from taking part in the more riotous pagan celebrations of the winter solstice.

The linking of Christmas, however, with a dark time of the year, if not planned that way, was still fortuitous: setting a dark, sunless season against the enlightening brightness of Christ's first coming. [Much the same can be seen in the celebration of the Resurrection at Pascha, linked in with the natural new life of Spring.] This linkage is not essential, of course, otherwise our co-religionist in the southern hemisphere would have problems! Interestingly, there is another link also, in that pre-Christian peoples would often see the season as a time for tightening one's belt, storing up food for the coming winter, in order to survive. Somewhere in this gloomy time, there would be, of course, a great feast to cheer

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the spirits - all perfectly understandable.

Something of this, no doubt, is to be found in our Nativity fast but that is as far as it goes. Though the practice of our faith might ride upon this natural, time-bound rhythm, observed in and sanctified by the passing of millennia, our real motivation is quite different. We are not just surviving the winter - though any brightness in the bleakness of mid-winter be greatly welcome - we are engaged in a spiritual activity, our hearts set on our heavenly, not our earthly home.

For this reason we are keeping a six week fast before the feast - not a survival technique in a lean time nor necessarily, for the good of our physical health - salutary and beneficial though such a fast may be for many! For us, the fast is always, primarily ascetic, a form of self-denial.

The Western (Roman) tradition observes the season they call Advent at this time. Now a four-week period, marked by changes in their liturgy, it was originally a six-week period with a fast like ours, brought into the Roman Rite from the Gallican and Mozarabic Rites. [Up to the 6th Century, these Liturgies were served in France and Spain and, it seems, were influenced by our Eastern rites]. We don't really have an Advent season, marked so much in the Liturgy but we do prepare for the feast of Nativity in our habitual, ascetic manner.

However, in the Western Rite, Advent was really fixed

not primarily on Christmas but rather on the *four last things*: death, judgement, heaven and hell. How much this holds true now, I cannot really tell but it makes the point - or it used to - that Christ will come again and we must prepare. In our own Liturgical tradition, the focus upon the Second Coming of Christ latches upon the so-called *Bridegroom Services*, the Orthros (Matins) of Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Great and Holy Week. Indeed, something of this is seen earlier, in the pre-Lenten period, with its emphasis on repentance in the gospel readings: Zachias, Prodigal Son, the Pharisee and the Publican and the Last Judgement.

Our celebration of the Nativity is, clearly, more an engagement with a past event: the first coming of Christ. For God's old people, The Jews, this was the consummation of their history and the fulfilment of the promises made to the Patriarch Abraham. In preparing, as we do, we are bringing the mystery of *God among us* into our present time; receiving the Holy Gifts at the Christmas Liturgy, Christ is born again within us; our heart becomes the manger; our celebrations a rejoicing in the birth of the Saviour.

This marking of the Nativity, though, is a looking back - it was the first coming of Christ. There is still the second to come and it is a point of doctrine for us, a clear belief of the catholic faith, as

