

1] Syria was an important province of the Roman Empire. It was governed by an Imperial Legate. Quirinius occupied that position in 6AD, when there was a census. Our Lord was born around 6BC (yes, BC!), certainly before the death of King Herod who, we know, died in 4BC. So what brought the Theotokos and her guardian and betrothed Joseph, to Bethlehem?

2] St Luke, who in his own words, 'having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first,' wrote an orderly account,' was not mistaken. At the time that Our Lord was born around 6BC, Quirinus was not the official governor, not the Legate of Syria: that was an inept man called Saturninus. Luke calls Quirinus the Hegumen, that is, a procurator who, as a more capable man, was put in charge of a type of census. The Greek word he uses is apographe, a registration of names for tax purposes.

3] There still remain two problems in Luke's account. Firstly, we know of no empire-wide census during reign of the Emperor Augustus. Neither is there evidence that the Romans required people to return to their ancestral lands for tax purposes.

4] But this is no real problem for us. The Orthodox are not biblical fundamentalists of the Protestant kind. The substantial point is that whatever circumstances brought Him there, Jesus was born in Bethlehem, as St Matthew also says. And Joseph, the betrothed of the Virgin, could certainly trace his legal descent from the Line of King David. Resident, like Mary, in Nazareth he, nevertheless, had clear family ties also in Bethlehem.

5] Let us, then, consider what has brought us here to this Bethlehem, this house of bread, to translate the Hebrew. We need to be very clear about this. We are not just adding a bit of religion to our celebration of the season; all that jolly conviviality and festivity that so many seem to need, not least in these apparently dismal times. And yes, there are many occasional churchgoers who, at least, put in an appearance, in order to keep in touch with something beyond

the usual life. Perhaps it is what the 17th century Anglican priest and poet, George Herbert called, something understood, albeit they soon return, to lose themselves once more in the busyness of life in this world.

6] The point is, we have not come to Bethlehem to make Christ part of our Christmas celebrations. Christ is not part of the story of Christmas; it is the other way round: Christmas is part of the story of Christ. We have come to worship the Christ born in our flesh. We were, as it says in the first letter of St Peter, 'Like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.' [1 Pet.2:25]

7] Have we not heard this prophesied before, just now. 'And the Lord shall stand, and see, and shepherd His flock in might,' says the prophet Micah. But as well as Shepherd, He is also the Overseer, the episkopos in Greek, that is in English, the bishop of our souls. As Isaiah says, 'Unto us a Child is born, and unto us a Son is given, Whose government is come upon His shoulder; and His Name shall be called: The Angel of Great Counsel, wonderful Counsellor, the mighty God.'

8] So what God had made known beforehand to the prophets, and that they had, in turn, written down for the fathers, He has now, in these last days, spoken to us by His Son. As long as this Day of Christ endures, this final revelation of God to Man, we shall return again and again, gathered as the flock of Christ, to be guarded and guided, taught and united, under our pastors and bishops in the faith.

9] Let us, therefore, resolve to feed here on the Word of God who is Christ Himself; the Word made flesh for us in the mystery, here in our Bethlehem, our house of Bread. Like the Theotokos, let us resolve to keep and ponder all this in our hearts. And like the shepherds let us resolve to return home once more, glorifying and praising God for all we have heard and seen today.