

9th January 2022

Sunday after the Theophany of Christ

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1] People move their home for all sorts of reasons. So many of you here have known that experience. I have lived in my present house for twenty years. That is the longest that I have lived anywhere. In fact, I have moved house nine times during my life. It makes me feel almost like a nomad and I am in good company, as they say. The Father of Faith, Abraham, left his home because God called him to search out the land of promise. Under the patriarchs, Jacob and Joseph, the children of Abraham found relief from famine in Egypt, then under Moses and Joshua, returned to the land of Israel.

2] St Matthew presents Our Lord, similarly, as a wanderer on the earth. He was born in Bethlehem, then sought refuge in Egypt before he returned to Israel, settling towards the North at Nazareth in Galilee. Then, following the arrest of John the Forerunner, He found a new home beside the sea at Capernaum.

3] For the evangelist, of course, Christ is presented as the reiteration of the sacred history of the House of Israel. He incorporates in Himself a reflection all that the old chosen people of God had undergone. They had gone down into Egypt, so had He; They had returned, crossing the Jordan under Joshua: He too had entered the waters of Jordan for Baptism and was revealed as the Anointed One, The Christ, fulfilling, as we heard, the prophecy of Isaiah, 'The land of Zebulon and the land of Naphtali, toward the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.'

4] And as Moses ascended the mountain to receive the elder Law, the Decalogue, the Ten Words or sayings to guide Old Israel, so the Rock who is Christ, proclaimed the words of the Sermon on the Mount, setting up for us the light of his teaching and the foundations of His Church, the new people of Israel. As Matthew writes, 'Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does

them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock.’
[Matt.7:24]’

5] So it was that Our Lord abandoned that obscure life in Nazareth amidst family, friends and relatives. And after His baptism at the hands of John, He moved out into the wilderness, just like the ancient Children of Israel once more, and it is there that Satan put His Divine Sonship to the test. True faith demands that we do not put God to the test. Yet although the devil can quote scripture, he feels no compulsion to obey it. And though He might have settled for a quiet life beside the sea at Capernaum, Christ became a wanderer once more, beginning His ministry and mission saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand.’

6] Think of those who encountered Him, this wanderer; all those who thought they might follow in His wake: the scribe who said to Him, ‘Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go.’ to whom Jesus replied, ‘Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.’ [Matt.8:19-20] Or the disciple who asked, ‘Lord, let me first go and bury my father.’ Yet Jesus said to him, ‘Follow Me, and let the dead bury their own dead.’ [Matt:8:21-22]

9] Do you remember James and John who, according to St Mark, in an impetuous moment on the road to Jerusalem, asked Him for seats at His right and His left in the kingdom, to whom He replied, ‘You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with?’ [Mk.10:38]

10] Yet this wandering is not aimless; it is, rather, a journey of faith, like that begun by Abraham. And the disciples themselves confirmed that. As St Peter said to Him, ‘See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?’ And Jesus replied, ‘You who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life.’ [Matt.19:27-29]

11] So what of us, His disciples; we who are joined to Christ in our own baptism? In a baptism, moreover, like His! We who drink from the cup from which He has drunk, as he told the sons of Zebedee. Surely, our discipleship must be more than mere symbolism; the acting out of some kind of sacred drama! From time to time we need to remind ourselves that the Holy Mysteries are not just religion, the shared tokens of some particular identity.

12] It was into Christ's death that we were baptised; it is from the cup of the sacrifice that we shall drink at communion. What an irony: that we should have chosen to build our lives now on the foundation that is Christ, as foretold in the Psalms: 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.' [Ps.117:22] What a paradox: that His Church was built upon the faith of Peter the rock, as St Paul bears witness in his letter to the church at Ephesus, 'You are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.' [Eph.2:19-21]

13] I say irony, I say paradox, for foundations are not meant to move; holy temples are not meant to wander the earth. But such is the power of the sacraments that we serve and in which we delight! Our faith is founded upon the Rock but the Church is still a pilgrim in this world. The great communion of the Orthodox churches has spread throughout the world. But even those churches that have put down local roots to proclaim the faith in the language of the local people, and have transformed the culture of that place, cannot be national churches; cannot be political churches in this world, for the Church of Christ is always on the move. As Paul says in Hebrews, 'We have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come.' [Heb.13:14]

14] Dynamis! With Strength! the people of God are commanded at the final and loud rendition of Holy God. We, whose whole life must be lived in the communion of the Holy Trinity, must be certain to live up to our calling; that incorporation into Christ that we have

received through the Holy Mysteries of the Church. For, as we are warned, 'No one, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.' [Lk.9:62]

15] I do not know whether I shall ever move house again, but whether firmly rooted in one place or a wanderer about the earth, we know the ground upon which we have built our house. But what matters supremely is the conversion of the heart and where the heart has come to rest. And where the scattered, fractured, wandering mind of the Old Adam has found repose from its restlessness.

16] None of us can partake of these heavenly mysteries thinking that we can repose in idleness, or as if our spiritual journey has drawn to an end. For our journey through this life is also a journey into Life. If we were to extend the analogy: our voyage on the ark of salvation, the Church, is not a cruise; there are no passengers. We are all enrolled in the crew. Each one of us in the Body of Christ has received his or her anointing in the Spirit; Christ, as Paul tells us today, has given His gifts to all that each one may contribute to the whole. For through Christ's gift all have received grace to equip His holy ones for the work of ministry, until we all attain to the unity of the faith to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.