

There are people who are very fond of words, lots of words. And there are those who have the great gift of brevity; being able to convey a lot with few words.

In November 1863, during the American Civil War, the military cemetery at Gettysburg was consecrated, following the great battle that had been fought there that July. The famous orator, Edward Everett, spoke to the crowd for two hours; the President, Abraham Lincoln, followed him with speech that lasted barely two minutes. Who's speech is still celebrated?

My own patron saint, John Chrysostom was famous for his lengthy sermons: you can still read them in printed editions and on the Internet, if you have the time! Very different from Kyros Panopolites, Bishop of Kotyaion in Phrygia, during the mid-fifth century. He stood up before his congregation one Christmas morning and, as expected, preached on the Nativity of Christ. I shall now read you his entire sermon.

*'Brethren, let the birth of God our Saviour Jesus Christ be honoured with silence, because the Word of God was conceived in the holy Virgin through hearing alone. To him be glory for ever. Amen.'*

That was it! In one sense need we say more? What more can words do when standing in awe or bowed in worship before *The Word Himself*?

The Fathers of the Church taught that all created things contained their *Logos*, the Word, which is Christ Himself in all creation. But here, today, we commemorate and celebrate that Word *inside-out*, made flesh and made manifest in the form of an infant. The hymns of the Church reflect on the great paradox of the infinite held within the finite; the uncontainable, contained, the eternal within time. *'He Whom nothing can contain, how is He held within a womb? And while in His Father's arms, how in His Mother's pure embrace? ...Without forsaking His own nature, He hath partaken of*

*what we are. For Christ is born now, twofold in nature, to fill Heaven with mankind.'* (Kathisma from Orthros for Nativity)

This mystery, this theophany, the revelation of God on earth, is three-fold in its appearing: at first, deeply personal and private in the Annunciation to the blessed Theotokos; then to a select few, to Shepherds and Magi, at Bethlehem, as we celebrate this very day; and soon, to the wide world in His baptism in the Jordan. Whether the world will be silent now and listen, however, might actually depend more on how we appear and act in the world as Christian people, rather than in the abundance of our own words.

Meanwhile, those of us who approach the holy chalice this morning, let us pay heed to Bishop Kyros' exhortation to honour Christ's birth in silence, for in receiving the Holy Gifts we too are conceiving the Word; He is condescending to enter into us as well; we too shall bear the unbearable, contain the uncontainable and commune with the unknowable. To do this let us at the very least approach in silence. Listen carefully to the words of the Cherubic Hymn from the ancient Liturgy of Jerusalem, that of St James:

*Let all mortal flesh keep silent and stand in fear and trembling, giving no thought to the things of the earth, for the King of Kings, and the Lord of Lords comes forth to be sacrificed and given as food for the faithful.*

But all the busyness, the activity, the preparations in house and home, in heart and mind, in memory and conscience, can now cease. Our words can now fall silent, useless in the presence of the Word Himself. *'Brethren, let the birth of God our Saviour Jesus Christ be honoured with silence, because the Word of God was conceived in the holy Virgin through hearing alone. To him be glory for ever. Amen.'*