

29th December 2019  
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Sunday after Nativity

For more than one thousand and six hundred years the Church of Antioch has kept the feast on the Nativity on 25th December; a date received from the Church of Rome, which had been the first to keep Christmas as a separate festival on that date. Before then the birth of Christ was celebrated in one feast, alongside the Annunciation and the Baptism of Christ. Together, they commemorated the Incarnation, one of the two great mysteries of the Christian Faith, the other being, of course, The Resurrection.

Those three original commemorations: the Annunciation to the Theotokos, the Nativity at Bethlehem and the Baptism in the Jordan, are all related in the common idea of Theophany, that is, the revelation of God to mankind. The first, announced by one angel, is in secret, where He who contains all in Himself is contained in the womb of the Virgin, fulfilling obscure sayings, hidden in the teachings of the prophets. The second, revealed to a select few, first to shepherds, dazzled by the angelic host; then to Persian Magi, drawn on by a celestial phenomenon, where the natural objects of their supposed knowledge, led them to worship the True Wisdom. And the third, revealed to all Israel the Anointed One, baptised in the very river where once, the children of Israel under Joshua, entered the promised land and now, there on the border, as it were, the two worlds, Jewish and gentile, are united in one person and drawn in to God's kingdom.

Clearly, our Faith is the revealed religion, and with respect, but with no apology to any other that might make the claim, the only revelation in Truth. Late in time, following in the tracks of Abraham's faith, we tell again the mystery of Christ, the way, the truth and the life, without whom no one can come to the Father. Still intimately close in our calendar, the current feast and that of the Baptism on the 6th January, proclaim and show forth God in the flesh to all the world. This is further reflected at the very end

of St Matthew's gospel, in the Great Commission, where Christ commands His apostles to proclaim the gospel to all, and to baptise in the name of the Holy Trinity; the same Triune Godhead revealed in shadows to Abraham at Mamre, and then made manifest and speaking plainly at the River Jordan.

This revealing of God St Paul makes clear, writing to the Galatians in today's Apostolos: 'The Gospel, which was preached by me, is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ.' Paul may well have received instruction in the Faith from his baptiser, Ananias in Damascus. He even spent time, as he tells us, in the deserts of Arabia, immersing himself in the faith of Christ. But for him it was that initial revelation, that encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus that opened his eyes to the truth.

As happens now, so then in those far off days: not all accept the revelation, not all find comfort in the epiphany of God. He was known as Herod the Great among the Jews, a client king of the Romans. He had enlarged and beautified the temple and built the port of Caesarea and the fortress of Masada. A man who murdered several of his own family, including his second wife, would not be troubled by the deaths of children in Bethlehem. But what is clear is that for Herod the longed for Messiah of Israel, even if He had been born, was not going to take his place. Herod's chief priests and doctors of the Law evidently expected the Messiah to be born in Bethlehem at some time. But Herod could only see a rival to his throne, and his determination to destroy the Chosen One makes you wonder whether he actually believed in the Judaism he professed outwardly, or was he, more likely, just another cynical ruler, using religion to keep himself in power?

Yes, it is true: religions cause division and separate mankind, but such divisions are also part of the human condition. Our Lord Himself tells us that he would cause division, even in families. 'Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did

not come to bring peace but a sword. I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother... and 'a man's enemies will be those of his own household.' [Matt.10:34-36] But merely agreeing with those who would be rid of all religion and imagine that, once freed from its grip, all humanity would be enabled to live in peace and harmony, requires a leap of faith into the darkness far more dubious. Our contention as Orthodox Christians is that mankind in his fallen nature, cannot find the fulness of truth through natural religion, nor work out eternal salvation through reliance on his own rational mind, even if the human brain is indeed the most complex object in the known universe. As the saying goes, you cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.

King Herod with his dysfunctional family, his megalomania and ruthless desperation to be in control was, like all mankind, a fallen creature like everyone else, even if some have dropped lower in the moral scales than others. Though we have might not shared in Herod's sins, yet we share in that same nature; we are the same creature.

Of this human nature the scriptures speak of God saying, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let him have dominion...' [Gen.1:26] Here Man is spoken of as One, a singularity of kind, even though we exist as many exemplars of that kind, that nature and, moreover, created as either male or female (and no other, by the way). But that oneness of the first Adam has been lost through Sin. Man, the unique icon of God, having fallen, has fractured the image within. Like a mirror crashing to the ground, the glass has cracked and we exist in jagged fragments. Thus, through Sin, we lost our communion with God; even the intended mutuality of male and female is spoiled, where the biblical dominion becomes domination of one by the other. Moreover, it is only in a fallen world that earthly rulers are required to keep order at all, even if, as with Herod, such benign rule and justice is corrupted into despotism.

This is why we receive the revelation of Christ; this is why we commemorate His showing forth to the world; this is why we work and struggle in the ascetic path of the cross, co-operating with His grace: putting back together the fragments of the mirror. This is why God the Word was incarnate: to refashion, to restore, to reintegrate our fragmented humanity. This is the reason why marriage is venerated among us as one of the holy mysteries, where the union of the male and female is blessed to become an icon of reunion and the sign of the beginning of our human reintegration.

This is why we are charged to announce Him to all, in our communication, our compassion, our way of life before the world. Any who wish to be united with Christ and find their own reintegration we invite to accept the mystery of the revelation; to restore the image in which they were created, as intended by the Creator. All are, of course, free to reject the revelation, to piece together, from among the broken fragments of humanity, a life of their own contriving, with more angles and distorted perspectives than a Cubist painting. We wish them good luck with that, with whatever, system or ideology they choose!

Because freedom of choice is a great thing, where it is possible in this world, but Free Will belongs to our nature as creatures of God. And none had such freedom as the first Adam, the metaphysical Adam, before his fall. Maybe Herod would have argued that he had no other choice; he was constrained and had no freedom here. To retain his seat upon a throne He had to have the little ones slaughtered, echoing pharaoh, who slew the Hebrew infants in the book of Exodus. Yet his desperation only served to fragment further his own wretched humanity. For all his supposed greatness, he ended his days as a warning sign to all, pulled down to hell by fearsome disease and dreadful suffering.

But we, for our part, shall choose the other path, receiving the revelation and accepting Christ. We shall put ourselves back together again. As St Paul writes to Titus, 'For the grace of God

that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ.' [Titus 2:11-13]