

Homily on Nativity by Metropolitan Archbishop Paul Saliba

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AND THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND DWELT AMONG US AND WE BEHELD HIS GLORY,
THE GLORY AS OF THE ONLY BEGOTTEN OF THE FATHER, FULL OF GRACE AND TRUTH.
(John 1:14)

The Gospel accounts of the Nativity are limited to a mere 40 verses. In the Gospel of Matthew, there are 19 verses about the Nativity; the Gospel of Mark makes no mention of the Nativity, but instead begins with the Baptism of Christ. The Gospel of John summarizes the Nativity in one verse: And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His Glory. In Nativity scenes and Christmas pageants, we are so enamored with the figures of the Nativity story: the angels, the shepherds, the Magi that sometimes we forget the main figure in the story: our Lord Jesus Christ.

When we call the feast of Christmas “the birth of Jesus”, this, too, causes confusion. A relative wife of mine and her husband were blessed with one child, who was born in a finite moment in time. Before his birth, they had no son. He did not exist. This is not true for Jesus Christ. Saint John captures this best with the opening chapter of his Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.



He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made (John 1: 1-3).

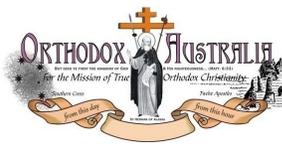
“Word of God” is another title given to the second person of the Trinity, who is also called Jesus, Christ, Son of God, Son of Man, Only-Begotten Son of the Father Messiah, Savior.

It is easier to understand the beginning of John’s Gospel if we insert “Christ” for “Word”, so please allow me to do this for better understanding: in the beginning was CHRIST, and CHRIST was with God, and CHRIST was (and is) God; all things were made through Christ (He was co-Creator with God the Father and the Holy Spirit) and without Christ was not anything made that was made.

We read, And Christ took on flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His Glory. The Feast of the Nativity is the day that the Son of God left His mother’s womb to live among us. He took on flesh in the way that we do. He came into this world as a new-born baby. He didn’t just drop in as an adult. From the time of His Incarnation in the womb of His mother, He followed all the steps that we take. He grew up as we do, He learned to walk, He went to school, He had friends, He had struggles. The difference between us and Him is that throughout His life, He walked in tandem with God, He never ventured away from God, as we do when we sin. He came to show us the path to salvation. He came to show us how to live in God, with God, and for God. And He came to balance the equation, to die for our sins, to open a path back to Paradise for us. So the Feast of the Nativity celebrates not just the birth of Christ, but the Incarnation of the Son of God in the flesh. It is the day on which the Creator was unveiled to His Creation. It is the day that the uncontained God was shown to be “contained” in a human body.

The scriptural account of the Nativity is captured in the Icon of the Nativity included in today’s reflection. There are three distinct things that this icon depicts. First: it captures the event of the Nativity. Mary gives birth to her first-born Son in a cave, because there is no room at any inn. Joseph is nearby, taking it all in. Second: the icon captures the reality that all of creation worshipped at the Nativity. All of Creation was present and invited to share in the miracle: the poor, the shepherds, the powerful, the Magi, the angels in heaven, the celestial bodies and the star, the animals, the earth itself, the cave. All Creation gathered to worship the Creator in its midst. Third: the Icon serves as an invitation to us to come and worship also. The manger is shown as a tomb, the swaddling bands are burial cloths. This is the Creator, come to save us through the cross and the tomb. His purpose is clear. The cave is heaven; surrounded by big rocks, the cave itself is a setting of peace amidst danger. We are called to follow, the way the Magi followed the star. Whatever your stage in life, whatever your status in society, you are welcomed. The heavens declare the glory of God. The angels sing God’s praises and invite us to do the same.

When I study the Icon of the Nativity, I find that I relate to the figure of Joseph most of all. He sits at a distance. His thoughts are confused. He has been the loyal protector. He has put his reputation on the line. He has followed and trusted. Yet he is still trying to make sense of the whole thing.



That's okay. He's still there. He is still trying. It is a lesson to us to do the same.

Every person in the Icon has followed a tough calling: Mary has lost her parents; given many years of her life in the temple, and has given birth to a Son whom she will see killed in a heinous manner. Joseph has risked reputation to protect his betrothed, who is "with child" not by him. Joseph won't live long enough to see Jesus grow into a man. The shepherds were the first to see Christ, but still remained scorned outsiders. They weren't even important enough to be counted in the census, yet God counted them the first to be called to the manger. The Magi left kingdoms and riches and followed the star. It was a two-year journey in, and presumably a two-year journey home. What possibly could have been left of their lives after a four-year absence?

In their supreme sacrifice, in their trust, in their faith, all of these people received the greatest blessing. They beheld His glory. They beheld with their own eyes the Son of God, made flesh, come to dwell among us. They were all profoundly changed by the experience. All are profoundly honoured, both by God and now by us.

Indeed, John captures the message of the feast in the most succinct way. We are called to behold His glory. This is the message of the Nativity. It is also the goal of every human life.

Amen

†Paul