



Nativity Epistle Bishop John of Melbourne

Christ is born! Glorify Him!

“Today the Virgin giveth birth to him Who is transcendent in essence; and the earth offereth a cave to Him Who is unapproachable. Angels with shepherds give glory; with a star, the Magi do journey; for our sakes a young Child is born, Who is pre-eternal God.” (Kontakion of the Feast of the Nativity)

*They, observing the obedience of the star, understood the dignity of the King.
(St John Chrysostom, Homily 2 I:208-209).*

*The Magi did not see before them either sceptre or throne, only utter poverty. What was it then that moved them to undertake the toil of a journey without reward?it was the star and the light that God had placed in their hearts that led them step by step to more perfect knowledge.
(St John Chrysostom, Sermon, The Epiphany and the Flight into Egypt, P.G.57:81)*

The star mysteriously calls the Magi from afar. This is an image of our conscience, which mystically calls us to the true Church, where we will find Christ, the Truth, the Saviour of mankind. The Kings followed the star faithfully for more than two years. Leaving their palaces behind, they dedicated themselves to this mysterious call. They took with them the best of their riches as gifts for the newborn King. This is equivalent to us leaving our homes, our jobs and families, sacrificing time and exertion, visiting holy places and monasteries, making donations, and dedicating our life to prayer and the Church. Each one of us has been called by that mysterious light of faith, which at some point in our life has begun to shine in our soul. The kings are an image of us Gentiles, the Church of the nations, the New Testament Church.

Now we must respond, and if not leave our homes, at least offer our gifts – faith, love and good works. *“Faith instead of gold, love instead of myrrh, and good works instead of frankincense let us bring to the Creator Who cometh unto His own”.* (Aposticha stihera, Matins, 23 December, Forefeast of the Nativity). We offer our **faith** in abiding by Orthodox doctrine, practicing the commandments, and keeping the Canons of the Church. We offer our **love** by prayer and diligent attendance at the Church services every Sunday and feast day, participating in the Mysteries. We offer **good works** when beautifying the temples of God and the services, by our hands, by our voices, and also by our monetary donations. According to the Holy Fathers, alms-giving is the most powerful means for receiving mercy from God and a direct path to God. This is especially true for us people in the West, who live in a material abundance unheard of even by the three ancient Kings. We are called to *glorify Him*, in obedience, prayer and works of mercy.

Exhausted by years of wandering, the three Kings finally arrived at Jerusalem, guided by the mysterious call. Then the unthinkable happened. For a moment they lost the star - the light of clear faith. This may happen to us also. But let us not be disheartened! At that point, even without seeing the star, the Magi headed towards Bethlehem, now guided by Scripture, the Old Testament prophecies. In the same way, in moments of hesitation, we must refer to Scripture, especially the Revelation of St John concerning the last days of the world. None of the confusion of present modern life should be a surprise to us. Let us hold fast to the teachings of Holy Scripture and the Holy Fathers of the Church! The Church always taught that in the end times these two stars would be our only true spiritual guides.

The Church teaches us not to be guided by emotions, feelings and earthly thoughts, which so easily express disillusionment, distortions, and untruth. A gross mistake is to accept *these* as the voice of our *conscience*. Our conscience is the voice of God in our heart, and calling *human feelings* the *conscience* is in essence a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Our feelings easily deceive us, make us susceptible to the power of evil, and gullible followers of false teachers, based on irrational, emotional trust. We should never forget that the spiritual deception of our modern apocalyptic world is the work of false churches and false pastors, wolves in sheep's clothing.

Having put their trust in Scripture itself, rather than in the authority of the Jewish priests and scribes who told them what the prophets said, the three Kings made their way to Bethlehem. They never returned to the false teachers. On the way, the star re-appeared, and their faith was re-ignited. They reached their goal of seeing God by trusting the Scriptures and Old Testament prophets. The Lord Himself says: "*O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: (...) And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself*". (Lk 24:25, 27).

We could reasonably expect the rich Kings to be dismayed when they reached their destination – a poor and dirty cave, full of animals, hay, manure, stench, and a few poor shepherds attending to some homeless people. But they were not disheartened! Similarly, let us also not be discouraged by the poverty of Church life in our last times. Indeed, it is difficult, because our feelings cry out for more familiar, physical comforts - rather than the elevated, spiritual gifts of God. Brothers and sisters, let us resist our this-worldly emotional thirst for luxury, comfort, ease, grandiose churches, radiant vestments and magnificent choirs in large cathedrals. Even more important for many are the sumptuous banquets, gorgeous clothes, beautiful houses, and gifts to be given *to us* rather than *from us* - all accompanied by *fuzzy* feelings of 'love', directed *toward ourselves* rather than *toward God and our neighbour*. Many, even among those who call themselves Orthodox, and especially in the West, have decided that food, gifts, family and fuzzy feelings encompass the very *meaning* of the feast. Such people have lost the true understanding and significance of Church feasts and church life. In the correct context and proportion, these comforts are not evil in themselves. Nevertheless, as Orthodox Christians, we must know all this is of the fallen world. If we become excessively attached to the world, we will not reach our destination of spiritual salvation.

Anything to which we attach more importance than Christ – be it even our family, children, or career – becomes an idol. In our times, especially among us in the West, families are seldom united in Christ. The Lord sternly warns us: "*He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.*" (Mt. 10:37). Today, some find it necessary to take their children to heretical and schismatic churches to celebrate the birth of Christ, ostensibly for the sake of their children's happiness. They do not see that it is not the children who have led the parents out of the True Church, but rather, it is the parents who have led the children astray. But Christ says: "*Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God.*" (Mk. 10:14). We hear continually in the Divine Services: "*let us commit ourselves, one another and all our life unto Christ our God.*" If we heed this call, "*all these things shall be added*" to us (*small litany; Mt 6:33*)!

Everything depends on our discernment – a choice between the physical and the spiritual; between the earthly and the Heavenly. Our reward is not limited to the next life only – for when we set God *first* in our lives, we receive peace of heart even here and now, during our short sojourn on earth. He will give us true life and happiness, which will most certainly last forever. Let us love Him, our God, rather than ourselves and our fallen world! We are all invited to receive this joy and peace of the true God in His true Church! We will not find this joy and peace anywhere else.

Brothers and sisters, do not hesitate! The doors are open to us all – now, come, and join the spiritual feast! Christ is born! Glorify Him!

+ *Bishop John*

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