



THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST

December 25

THE GOSPEL READING

Matthew 2:1-12

[Gentiles Worship the Christ Child]

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet: 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel.'"

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star appeared; and he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." When they had heard the king they went their way; and lo the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.



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THE SERMON

The love of God is beyond measure and understanding. It inspires awe because it is impossible for us to grasp the greatness of His kindness. The Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ is the Birth of God the Son into the world and His Birth into our hearts. It is His coming to His people, uniting us with Him, abiding in us, redeeming us, and transforming our entire lives.

The Word of God, Who created the world, has now entered the world in the womb of a Virgin. Jesus, the New Adam (or the Second Adam), as the Fathers of the Church say, became Incarnate in the womb of the New Eve (or the Second Eve). Mary, a humble girl from Galilee, had conceived in her womb and became the Mother of God. The Holy Spirit hovered over her in the new creation for the redemption of humanity and the renewal of all things.

The Blessed Virgin Mary, the Most Holy Theotokos, is full of grace, and the Lord is with her. Blessed is she among all women because blessed is the Fruit of her womb, Jesus. Now is the time for the Son of God to be born, as the Light will shine ever brighter in the darkness of fallen humanity. She gives birth to the Son of God, which takes place not in a palace fitting for a King, but in a humble cave. The King of Kings comes in humility. Saint John Chrysostom says, "What shall I say! And how shall I describe this Birth to you? For this wonder fills me with astonishment. The Ancient of days has become an infant. He Who sits upon the sublime and heavenly Throne, now lies in a manger."

The Lord Jesus, the Creator and Sustainer of all things, comes to redeem the world, but He comes not in His unveiled glory. He comes as a Baby who needs to be cared for, fed, nourished, protected, and loved. God becomes a man, so He does not merely relate to humanity externally, as it were, as One whom we only encounter as a stranger. Without ceasing to be God, He who is without sin takes humanity upon Himself completely so that He can live not only *with* us, but also *in* us.

There is a famous icon of the Theotokos, usually above the altar of churches, which we call "Platytera" (in Greek, Πλατυτέρα). It means that the Virgin Mary's womb became more spacious than the heavens, containing God who cannot be contained. In the icon, we see Panagia (the Virgin Mary) with open arms and Young Jesus in the center. The icon reminds us of His Birth, but we notice that He is not placed exactly in her womb, but a little higher, in the center of her being. This reminds us that, as the Son of God was born of the Theotokos, He is born in us daily, at the center of our beings. The Apostle Paul says, "My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you! (Galatians 4:19).

As the Baby Jesus is born, He is wrapped in cloths and laid on a manger. As depicted in the Nativity icons, the same kind of cloths would be used later for His burial. Jesus Christ came to live and to die for us and to rise from the dead to destroy the power of

death. He is placed in a manger, the feeding place for livestock. He is born in Bethlehem, which, in the Hebrew language, means the House of Bread. Bethlehem becomes indeed the house where Jesus, the Bread of Life, is given for the life of the world.

Wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?" The wise men represent us. They come from a far country. They were not from Israel, but God called them to follow the star and find the Messiah. They were students of the astronomy of the time, and God's love used their science to encounter the King of Kings Who had been born. The Apolytikion we chant today says that through His nativity, Christ has shone the light of knowledge upon the world so that those who worshipped the stars were instructed by a star to worship Jesus, the Sun of Righteousness.

When the wise men followed the star, they had great joy as they saw the Child with Mary, His Mother. They worshiped Him because the Baby was not only the promised King but the Creator of the universe. A Baby in cloths needed to be cared for and fed. While, at the same time, He was holding all of creation in the palm of His hands and giving breath and life to every living being. A Child is born, Who is the Savior, Christ the Lord.

A multitude of the heavenly host praised God, saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" Heaven and earth rejoice because this is the culmination of the history of God's love towards us, that His own Son would come to dwell with us and in us. The Nativity of our Lord has deep and profound significance for us today because He comes to live in our hearts and homes, and makes us a member of His family. He unites us with God and one another. His life is our life.

Christmas is a great time to join with family and friends, to give and receive gifts. The greatest gift we can give each other, however, is love. God's greatest gift has been given to us, His only Son, because He is love. The gifts the wise men brought Jesus had symbolic significance. The gift of gold symbolizes that Jesus is the King of Israel, even of the entire universe. The gift of frankincense symbolizes that Jesus is God, since incense is for worship, and only God may be worshipped. The dead were anointed with myrrh, as Jesus was at His burial. Therefore, the gift of myrrh symbolizes that the great King had come to die as the perfect sacrifice for us to redeem us through His Resurrection from our sins.

Humanity has been redeemed in Christ. Christ has sanctified birth, and He has sanctified death. He has sanctified riches and poverty, time and space, history, and all peoples. When we struggle, and we feel like we live merely to survive, Christ assures us that His birth opens the possibility for us to be born anew to abundant life in Him each day. The Incarnation reminds us that Christianity is not merely a set of timeless ideas but a Faith of flesh and blood, which redeems the soul, the heart, and the whole body. Christ Jesus redeems women and men, the elderly and the young, the rich and the poor, and

people from all races, from every tribe, tongue and nation. He redeems the whole cosmos.

Let us open our hearts to the King of Glory so that He may enter and be born in our lives. Let us bring Him forth as the Light of the world. He *is* our life. May our hearts become more spacious than the heavens, for the Creator of the universe, the Son of God, lives in us. The Light has shone in the darkness, and our lives are enlightened and redeemed by His Birth. The Lord Jesus comes to us, who are His own. As we receive Him, we become children of God. As He is born in us, through Him we are born to a new life by the Holy Spirit.

Christ is born! Glorify Him!

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