

Father Matta El-Meskeen

The Birth of Christ is our life



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ميلاد المسيح حياتنا (إنجليزي)

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Introduction

TODAY WE CELEBRATE THE FEAST OF THE NATIVITY, but our feast, beloved, is not a commemoration or a memorial. We have joined together today in prayer and a eucharistic liturgy in order to meet with the Lord Jesus Christ personally in Bethléhem. We have an appointment with Him, for the Lord's nativity is a great event that continues to live in our lives. We do not read of it simply as a story narrated by the evangelist; rather we are in the presence of a heavenly event, and the angels attend to bear witness.

On this day God made a revelation that history could not contain. The nativity, beloved, is the incarnation, and the meaning of the incarnation is that "God appeared in the flesh" (1 Tim 3:16). Now the appearance of God cannot be encompassed or contained in history, so the Gospel is here not merely relating the story of the birth of Jesus Christ; it is recording a heavenly event which took place in history and thus brought history to an end, or rather fulfilled it, for it is unmistakably clear in all the prophecies that the birth of the Lord is the declaration of the fullness of time.

This is why I have said and continue to say that the nativity is incarnation, and the incarnation is now our life, our faith and all the hope in which we live, through it overcoming every human weakness, and all the shortcomings of temporal life with all its cares and burdens, as if they were nothing at all. And today we are present together at the heart of this heavenly event, the day of the nativity, in the fullness of time in Bethlehem, at the revelation of the incarnation.

I wish here also to draw your particular attention to the fact that our place in Bethlehem is not with the shepherds or the magi, as mere witnesses or bearers of gifts. Nor is it with Joseph, watching over the virgin birth. Nor, may I dare to say, beloved, is it with the Holy Virgin, the Mother of God. We are more to Christ than all these, for we are His flesh and bones. In saying this I do not go beyond the words of the Apostle Paul, who said, "We are members of His body, of His flesh and His bones" (Eph 5:30). Now you perceive with me the depth of the meaning of our feast, the importance of our meeting together, the significance of our relationship to Bethlehem, the manger, the nativity and the Infant Christ.

For we are not concerned with remembering, commemorating and explaining the events of the story of the nativity and the Gospel narrative. Rather we are concerned with a living relationship with the Christ of the manger, a relationship of vital importance, a relationship that has a bearing on our existence and being. Christ is born and so I am! For His birth on this day is our eternal birth, and His life on earth became the beginning of our life without end, our eternal life.

As for Bethlehem, I do not exaggerate if I say that it is our birthplace, for it is the birthplace of Christ, who is our head, the head of the Church, and indeed the head of the whole new creation, the second Adam. If the Garden of Eden was the birth place in ancient times of Adam, our first forefather, then Bethlehem is worthy to be the new Garden of Eden.

Again I say, beloved, that if we do not understand spiritually what the Gospel and sacred history tell us, then the Gospel was written in vain, and the Church celebrates a mere historical event rather than the spring of our life and eternal salvation.

Remember what was written through divine inspiration so that we should always give heed: “The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor 3:6). So, led and inspired by the Spirit, we enter into the depth of the divine nativity, to discover our life, our existence and our being in Christ. For today we do not merely celebrate the birth of Christ; rather we pray through the Spirit that our existence be renewed this Christmastide—by supplication, repentance and worship in the Spirit—for it will then become a true feast for us bringing joy to the heavens. The more the Spirit reveals to us the depths of the mysteries of the birth of Christ, the more directly will our life and witness be linked to His life.



Christ's Genealogy

THE GOSPEL presents us with a list of Christ's ancestors. St Matthew begins with David and Abraham: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Mt 1:1). And St Luke ends with Adam and God: "...the son of Adam the son of God" (Lk 3:38).

What does this long list have to offer us and our life? It appears to the reader that it is concerned simply with Christ's Jewishness and humanity.

Son of David

The first point to which the Gospel draws our attention, through the words of St Matthew, is that this child that was born is the Son of David, and so He is the anointed King or the promised Messiah. "The Lord swore to David a sure oath from which He will not turn back: 'One of the sons of your body I will set on your throne'" (Ps 131:11, Septuagint version). "I will make all the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession" (Ps 2:8). Here we have the first name and the first distinctive function of the Messiah. He is the "Son of David." This is consequently the first indication of His lordship, for the "Son of David," in its great prophetic meaning, is the Christ, David's Lord. Christ Himself also indicated this, speaking of Himself: "Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, 'What do you think of the Christ? Whose son is he?' They said to Him, 'The son of David.' He said to them, 'How is it then that David, inspired by the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to

my Lord, sit at my right hand till I put thy enemies under thy feet? If David thus calls him Lord, how is he his son?' And no one was able to answer Him a word" (Mt 22:41-46).

It is well-known that the name commonly given to the Messiah, that is the anointed one, in the prophecies is the Son of David, and this was familiar to the people. "Then a blind and dumb demoniac was brought to Him, and He healed him, so that the dumb man spoke and saw. And all the people were amazed, and said, 'Can this be the Son of David?' " (Mt 12:22-23). We remember too the cry of the blind man, "Son of David, have mercy on me" (Lk 18:38), and the cheer of the whole crowd on the day of His last entry into Jerusalem: "Hosanna [save us] to the Son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the Name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest" (Mt 21:9).

By divine inspiration a whole psalm (Ps 72) is devoted to the Son of David, that is, the son of the king, to whom all kings will bow down, whom all nations will worship, whose name will endure as long as the sun and extend and be called upon for blessing, and whom all nations of the earth will call blessed. This is the psalm that the Church has a special love for and traditionally uses as a hymn of praise during the Christmas season.

And so, beloved, the Gospel's introduction to the birth of Christ, pointing to Him as the royal Son of David, gives us an initial understanding, or rather awareness, of the Kingdom of God, of which Jesus assumed rule so that it might encompass all nations and peoples, an everlasting kingdom that will not pass away (Dn 6:26).

We, by the birth of Christ, the Son of David, have become "fellow citizens with the saints" (Eph 2:19) in the Kingdom of God. Hence the name "King of the Saints" (Rev 15:3) given to Christ, for

the day of His birth is for us the beginning of the manifestation of the Kingdom of God and our entry into it, or its entry into us, for Christ said, "The Kingdom of God is within you" (Lk 17:21). The Lordship of Christ, as everlasting king after the order of Melchizedek, is revealed by the Gospel through the story of the magi, who knew by wisdom the mystery of His kingship and came and worshipped Him and offered Him royal gifts. The Apostle Matthew's calling Him the Son of David is therefore mysteriously and amazingly linked with the story of the magi, and in our own lives this is inevitably related to the discovery of the heavenly bond that relates us to the Christ of the manger. Is our wisdom, beloved, less than the wisdom of the magi, who saw in the Child Jesus a true King and out of devotion to Him undertook a journey lasting for months in the cold of winter, and offered gifts of loyalty, love and honour to His mysterious heavenly Person?

Son of Abraham

By the birth of Christ, the nations enter into the blessing of Abraham, and then into the righteousness of his faith, and so become his descendents. Here the concept of the "father of faith" and the blessing of the first promise to Abraham is extended, for Christ's circumcision took place when He was eight days old to strengthen the bond between the newborn child, that is us, and Abraham, the father of the circumcised. So Christ was born, according to the promise, so that faith and blessing might not be restricted to the descendants of Abraham.

The birth of Christ is a declaration that the blessing has been extended to all the earth. "In your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gen 26:4, cf Gen 12:2). Here we must make it clear that "seed" does not mean "those born", but "the one born." The Apostle Paul clarifies this point: "Now the

promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many; but, referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' which is Christ" (Gal 3:16).

The universal work of Christ, in accordance with the promise, becomes clearer at the end of the life of Christ on earth, immediately before the crucifixion, when the highpriest himself prophesied: "He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (Jn 11:51). Here Abraham is represented in the person of Christ, opening as it were his arms to gather all the peoples of the earth to his bosom.

So when the Gospel says in the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ that He is the Son of Abraham, it is tantamount to a declaration of the beginning of the fulfillment of all the promises spoken to Abraham concerning us and every man on the face of the earth. And the Apostle Paul gives evidence that the divine promise is truly fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ when he says: "And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.' So then, those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham, who had faith... There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal 3:8-9, 28-29). So through faith and unity with Christ, you and I have become Abraham's descendents.

In the first verse of his Gospel, St Matthew, when he calls Christ the Son of Abraham draws our attention to the kind of

inheritance that has become available to us in every blessing of Abraham and the righteousness he acquired by faith, and that by means of the birth of Christ. For Christ is Abraham's sole heir. He came according to the promise to impart all God's blessings to Abraham and all the blessings of the ancients to every man on the face of the earth.

By the birth of Christ, Abraham's joy for us was perfected, for we inherited the promise, the covenant, the blessing, righteousness and the good pleasure of God, and entered into the heart of the plan for salvation God had made from the beginning. So we do not rejoice alone today at the birth of Christ, for He reveals to us that another shares in our joy, and that is Abraham himself: "Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad" (Jn 8:56). Abraham saw the day of Christ's nativity, the day of God's promise was fulfilled. He saw it in us and continues to see it in everyone who believes with his faith and receives Christ, who is born in us every day, or rather, in whom we are born, and proceed until we meet Abraham in spirit and body and become his offspring.

Son of Adam

Luke the Evangelist here completes the picture of the relationship that so essentially binds us to Christ. The Gospel now reminds us of original sin, the deadly poison of the serpent's fangs and the first promise to Eve, that her seed would bruise the serpent's head (Gen 3:15).

Thus the birth of Christ, the awaited Son of Adam, came as a declaration of the end of the dominion of the serpent and sin. He is the seed of Adam, the saviour who would bruise the serpent's head, abolish the pains of death and release the prisoners in the abyss.

By Adam death entered into every man, but in Christ all

shall live. This is why St Luke stresses that the genealogy of Christ goes back to Adam, so that we shall be reminded, on the day of Christ's birth, of death, which is in us by inheritance, and which He was appointed to bear for us in His human body so that every man should live in Him.

The first Adam on the day he was created became a living soul. The second Adam on the day He was born became a life-giving soul: the Lord from heaven. So, just as on the day we were born of Adam, the first man, we put on the form of the earthly man, so by the incarnation of Christ, the Son of Man, we put on at His nativity the form of the heavenly man. For at the moment when the Son of God came down from heaven and was incarnate, that is when He put on the form of the earthly Adam, at that moment mankind put on the form of the heavenly man in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

And so today, beloved, is the feast day of every man, every son of Adam, for on this day God truly took the form of man and so bestowed an eternal honour on mankind. The form of Adam, which he had corrupted by sin and exposed to death, was put on today by Christ, and in so doing He brought it to life and imparted to it all the splendour and honour of the glory of God. Today is the feast of the glory and honour of the human race, and of the restoration of its life and the splendour of its image in God. It has been granted to us that we should be changed into the image of Christ as the Apostle Paul says: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into His likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18). The Babe of Bethlehem is the image of our new humanity in the righteousness and true holiness towards which we grow day by day.

The Division of the Genealogy

WHAT ATTRACTS OUR ATTENTION in St Matthew's ordering of the genealogy of Christ is that he presents it in three groups, according to periods of time. Each group is composed of fourteen generations. We believe that these divisions have a spiritual meaning which helps us to understand certain other obscure points.

It is well-known that the prophecies that dealt with periods of time would divide the years into groups of seven. In the prophecy of Daniel, for example, the years were counted in periods of seven years. St Matthew here groups the generations into groups of seven, each main group consisting of two groups of seven generations, making fourteen generations. If we add these together we find there are six groups of seven generations, and this is a spiritual representation of the days or periods of creation, for we know that the creation was completed in six days and that the seventh day was the Sabbath of the Lord.

We therefore understand that the Apostle Matthew considered that human history from Abraham to Christ, which is the period characterized by the promise and the direct intervention of God in action to fulfill His promise, was also made up of six ages. After Christ, or from Christ onwards, there begins the last age, or generation, which is the generation of Christ, the generation of the eternal Sabbath which awaits the age to come. This spiritual interpretation of the generations and the divine ages explains the saying of the Lord in which He describes the last days and the approach of His second coming: "Truly I say

to you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place" (Mt 24:34).

Son of God

The Gospel of Matthew and then the Gospel of Luke proceed step by step to build a complete picture of Christ on the day of His birth. He is first proclaimed as Son of David, then Son of Abraham, then Son of Adam, then Son of God.

The revelation of the mystery of Christ's sonship to God is clearly and precisely declared by the Apostle Paul in his Epistle to the Hebrews: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days He has spoken to us by a Son" (Heb 1:1-2). The declaration that Christ is the Son of David, the Son of Abraham and the Son of Adam reveals how related Christ is to us, or rather we to Him; as we have said before, we are flesh of His flesh and bone of His bones. But the declaration that He is also the Son of God immediately changes the meaning of the nativity from the natural birth of a natural man to a supernatural event, for this is the Son of God made man. We are dealing here with Christ's eternal sonship, which preceded His temporal sonship which was a fact of history. His birth of the Virgin and the Holy Spirit is revealed as having its origins in eternity, for the miraculous virgin birth is in fact the point of entry for God's greatest mystery.

We are then in Bethlehem face to face with a divine event in the form of an incident of history. "God appeared in the flesh," an amazing union between the eternal and the temporal, a union defying reason and description, between the unlimited and incomprehensible nature of God, and the limited and comprehensible nature of man. The result of this wondrous union is the birth of the Son of God in the form of the Son of

Man. The incarnation is an open encounter between God and Man in the person of Christ.

The faith of the Church that the nature of the Christ born in Bethlehem is the one nature of the Word, the Son of God incarnate, is a faith that states before us now, and on this day, a firm fact, which is that God meets us face to face fully and perfectly in Christ. When God united human nature with His own in Christ, He put an end to the discord in it without annihilating it. The difficulty we find in understanding this doctrine is not due to the theological argument it contains, but to the fact that it constitutes and summons to mankind with all its weakness, sin and uncleanness to encounter God fully and perfectly in the person of Christ. How can we in fact enter the circle of this perfect union between the divine and human natures in Christ?

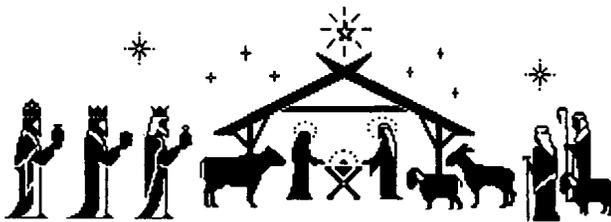
The difficulty, confusion and major problem here lie in our own faith. How can we believe that all our inadequacy, sin and uncleanness can be borne by Christ in His being and immediately wiped out? But is this not the mystery of the incarnation, and its aim and its supreme greatness, for all the love of God, beyond the imagining of man, is concentrated in this event. For the Son of God did not enter our world simply for a visit, whether brief or prolonged, to console mankind and instruct him and raise his morale. Rather He entered never to depart. He became incarnate; that is He took human flesh and He will never put it off. Later, on the cross, He bore in this body of His all the weaknesses and sins of man without exception and died of them in order to destroy their power over us and raise us up above their power. Christ bore the whole man in His body and reconciled him with God His Father.

In the nativity we therefore find ourselves face to face with a divine initiative of amazing generosity, consisting of a declaration of a fellowship established unreservedly with man. The weaker partner is not held responsible for his weakness, and the stronger partner covenants to provide free and unconditional salvation! This is the meaning of the incarnation and its consequence in us, and this is the truth of the birth in Bethlehem.



A concluding word

THE TRUTH OF THE INCARNATION or the nativity has retained for hundreds of years the same great significance and efficacy as the angel announced to the shepherds: "I bring into you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people, for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour who is Christ the Lord" (Lk 2:10, 11). But this truth, perceptible to faith, has regrettably begun to lose its effectiveness and its light shines more faintly in the world because of the increase of sin and the lack of true brotherly love between people. So life with God and closeness to Him appears terribly difficult, where union with Him in Christ was a joyful fact. There therefore remains for the world only the last stage in the fulfillment of the promise of God, which is the coming of Christ a second time in His divine body, which twentieth-century man rejects. His appearing will be with great glory and His incarnation will then be a matter not of faith but of evidence for all to see, and all flesh shall behold His glory (Is 40:5).



On this day God made a revelation in history which history could not contain: The most beloved, is the incarnation, and the meaning of the incarnation is that God appeared in the flesh" (1 Tim. 3:16). Now the appearance of God cannot be encompassed or contained in history so the Gospel is here not merely relating the story of the birth of Jesus Christ, it is recognizing a heavenly event which took place in history and thus brought history to an end, or rather fulfilled it, for it is unmistakably clear in all the prophecies that the birth of the Lord is the declaration of the fullness of time.

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