

39 HOMILIES FROM THE HERMITAGE

WINTER QUARTET NO.3

THE BIRTH OF CHRIST: 'HE BECAME ONE OF US'

Fantasy land: let us go down to the stable at Bethlehem: there is the crib, with Jesus snug and warm in Santa's grotto, with the elves and the reindeer all around the glitter, and the ox and the ass there to speak (by the old traditional belief as the chimes of Midnight peal out). Then suddenly the glitter is shattered and the fragments disappear into the stark silence of the night as **THE WORD WAS MADE FLESH**. And the prophecy of old is fulfilled; 'When all was calm and the earth was still, suddenly the Almighty Word came down from heaven to earth.' This is not a cuddly warm text; it is a text of destruction—not of us but of sin and death. 'And the Word was made flesh'. This is the message of Christmas, and it is worth looking at the texts and how they proclaim the Son of God and our Salvation.

CHRISTMAS MASS TEXTS; VIGIL MASS: 1st Reading, followed by the start of St. Matthew's Gospel—the genealogy in which the link of Jesus with Abraham and David, and the birth of Jesus. Night Mass, Isaiah prophesying the Saviour and Luke's account of Jesus' birth: the Dawn Mass, Isaiah and the shepherds: Day Mass, Isaiah and John's birth of Jesus. Here instead of the flashy glitter of the fantasy there is the great light from heaven and the angel choir, praising the new-born Saviour: there is the homage of the shepherds (and later the visit of the Magi).

It is worth considering the texts and feasts in the days after Christmas. **26th Stephen—the first martyr: 27th John the Evangelist, proclaiming the WORD: 28th The Holy Innocents—slain for Jesus. 29th Thomas a Becket (see the Christmas homily in 'murder in the cathedral for a masterly linking of Bethlehem and Calvary). (This year 27th is the Feast of the Holy Family). The weekday readings give us St. John—his 1st Reading and the Gospel after the Proclamation of the Nativity. And on 1st January we celebrate Mary's part in the Nativity. On 6th January the Magi (wise men) visit Jesus, with gifts of gold (a King), incense (a priest) and myrrh (a prophet and one who will die for us).**

The whole presentation shows that the Birth of Jesus is the fulfilment of the Old Testament: the Son of David through Joseph, Jesus' legal father: the bright light (with angel choir), the visitors from the east, with camels and dromedaries (Psalm 71/72). This is not the illusory glitter of the material Christmas, but the light from Heaven to save us all. The message of Christmas is indeed joy and healing to us but is also the path to Calvary. One of the

mistakes which we make is the theme 'Joy and goodwill to men'. This suggests that Christmas is 'a quick fix': everything will be all right from Christmas Day. The story of Jesus' birth is not soft. The conditions are harsh and the threat of Herod is real. It is not a mistake to suggest 'it will be all right now'. The story of Bethlehem is a straight path to Calvary. It is there that our salvation is won. The 'easy' ambience of Bethlehem suggests that God is effectively saying that our sin didn't really matter, can be waved away! God did not send Jesus to overlook our sinfulness but to redeem us from it. Despite this rather grim aspect to Christmas, the Feast is indeed is one of joy. God has come down to us, one of us, not violent or vengeful, but as a helpless babe, fragile as we and one who lives with us, works with us, and died for us. It is indeed a wonderful and joyful story and we should proclaim the message 'The Word made flesh and dwelt among us.' Why should so many be afraid of our SAVIOUR and GOD?

The chronological aspect of the birth of Christ is difficult. The whole story from Nazareth to Bethlehem to The Temple after 40 days and then the flight from Bethlehem to Egypt can all hardly have happened in so short time nor so a fragmented set of journeys in 40 days or so. I cannot explain it, nor should we, but it is sensible to consider the facts and see that the story could cover a wider span of months.

Facts: We are told that the Emperor Augustus held a census in 8 BC. We know that Herod the Great died in BC 4 and we also know that he killed many children and others whom he feared a threat to him, including some of his own family.

In Luke Jesus is born in a stable (probably in an upper storey held in inns these for ostlers and grooms): in Matthew the wise men visit him in a house in Bethlehem. There is no Gospel mention of 'kings'.

The Presentation was 40 days after Jesus' birth, so there was a need to travel from Bethlehem to Jerusalem (and possibly back to Bethlehem). It seems that Jesus is likely to have been born in between 8 BC and 6 BC, given Herod using 2 years or under. NB There was no 'Year 0'; we move from 1BC to 1 AD.

So there is a possible wider time-space within the events, but so what!!

JESUS BORN FOR US ON CHRISTMAS DAY. ALLELUIA!