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Gospel for Christmastide

IN THE BEGINNING was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: which were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us...full of grace and truth. John 1:1-18.

CHRISTMASTIDE, the Twelve Days of Christmas, in liturgical tradition, extends from Christmas Day until January 6, the feast of the Epiphany—also known as the Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke each tell the story of the Nativity with significant differences. For example, the census ordered by Caesar Augustus is told in Luke but not in Matthew. Only in Matthew do we read the beautiful story of the Magi, the Wise Men following the Star of Bethlehem and bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. In Luke, angels tell of our Lord's birth to shepherds in the fields.

Most notably, Luke tells the story from the perspective of Mary while Matthew tells it from Joseph's point of view. In the Magnificat (Luke 1:46), scholars point out that Mary's words are not those of a naïve young woman but are "astute and revolutionary": "*For behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed for he that is mighty hath magnified me; and holy is his Name. And his mercy is on them that fear him throughout all generations. He hath showed strength with his arm; he*

hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away." A group of "holy women" always followed Jesus and his disciples, and Mary's intervention at the wedding feast in Cana, in the opinion of many, exemplifies an abiding participation in her son's public ministry, even as he hung crucified on Calvary.

Matthew tells us almost all that is recorded of Joseph in Scripture. He was a "just" man in that he upheld "justice," that is, the Law pronounced by Moses. Joseph's betrothal to Mary was a legally binding contract, voidable only by a "bill of divorcement." (Deut. 24:1). Mary's well-being, if not her life, was in danger should her pregnancy be broadcast. The tradition that Joseph was an older man finds support in his careful deliberation. He "thought on these things," balancing justice and compassion. In a dream, an angel told Joseph, in effect: Don't be afraid to marry Mary. She's a good woman. The Holy Ghost, the creative power of God, is at work here. Call the child "Jesus," *the salvation of Jehovah*, not an uncommon name among the Jews in its Greek and Hebrew form, *Joshua*. Joseph gave the critical protection of marriage to Mary, perhaps the supreme example that God works through human agency. Among Christians, Joseph's choice to stand by Mary crowned him with everlasting honor "greater than that of any king." Joseph lived to see the young Jesus "in His Father's House," and then his figure recedes from the New Testament. His job done, Joseph probably died before our Lord's public ministry began.

Although silent on details of the Nativity—like the Gospel of Mark—the prologue to the Gospel of John is heard resoundingly at Christmastide throughout Western Christianity. "*And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us...full of grace and truth.*" (Eastern Orthodox churches read this Gospel passage on Easter Sunday.) While Matthew and Luke relate different accounts of our Lord's Incarnation, John explains it spiritually. "Never will the day fade from my memory when the prologue of the Gospel of John became, for me, the profoundest philosophy on earth," wrote Sir Knight and Reverend Joseph Fort Newton, Past Grand Prelate of the Grand Encampment in 1929.

The foregoing message was prepared at my request by The Eminent Grand Prelate, Sir Knight and Reverend J. Knox Duncan.

In His Name,

Dock F. Dixon, Jr.
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