

SINGING THE MYSTERY OF SALVATION: AN ORTHODOX CHRISTMAS MEDITATION

Bethlehem has opened Eden. Come, let us see! We have found joy in a secret place. Come, let us seize Paradise hidden in the cave! There the Unwatered Root has appeared, blossoming with forgiveness. There is found the Undug Well, from which David longed to drink of old. There the Virgin has borne a child, quenching Adam's and David's thirst. Let us hurry to this place, where the eternal God was born as a little Child!

Orthodox Christianity expresses its deepest theology in prayer—specifically in liturgical prayer. What we believe we proclaim in our worship and when we do so we tend to sing it! The Feast of the Nativity in the Flesh of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ, or, more simply, Christmas is especially filled with sung theology in our tradition. The hymn quoted above and all the others in this article are sung as fixed parts of the various services of Christmas in the Orthodox tradition.

We begin our proclamation of the great mystery of the Incarnation—the enfleshment of God as a human being—not on December 25, but nine months earlier at the Feast of the Annunciation when the Church sings:

Oh, wonder! God is come among men! He Who cannot be contained is contained in a womb; the Timeless One enters time. Oh, great mystery! His conception is without seed, His emptying past telling! So great is this mystery!! For God empties Himself, takes flesh, and is fashioned as a Creature...

This has tremendous moral and ethical ramifications, as it teaches us that God becomes one of us at the very moment of conception—at the very beginning of our existence and explains the Orthodox Church's unyielding pro-life stand.

In the Christmas hymn at the beginning of this meditation our understanding of the sacredness of human life is given an added dimension; in it we are told something of the *why* God became human. He did so to show us the way to a deeper joy than this world can ever provide; He did so to show us the way back to Paradise through the healing grace of forgiveness; He did so to quench our thirst for understanding and hope in the face of what often appears to be a meaningless and hopeless existence. As an aside, I often think that the best response to ardent atheists like Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens isn't to engage them in a battle of logical statements but to confront the meaninglessness and hopelessness of their universe with the richness and joy of the universe revealed to us in Jesus Christ, God become a man for our salvation.

I see little hope of changing any atheist's mind, but a clear articulation of the ultimate emptiness of what they believe in (can one actually believe in nothing?) certainly makes the Orthodox affirmation of life, light, and joy much more powerful.

The hymn below speaks of a whole universe filled with joy and light—one in which every creature (recall the cattle in the manger and the sheep in the fields) join with the human race to rejoice in the coming of the One who will deliver us from all sorrow and confusion. There can be no doubt that all life has a meaning and direction in the mind of God and that He concerns Himself with each and every creature He has made.

Your Kingdom endures forever, O Christ our God. Your rule is from age to age. Made flesh by the Holy Spirit, made man of the ever-virgin Mary, You have filled all creation with joy. The light of Your coming has shone on us; every living creature praises You, the Image of the Father's glory. Light of Light, the radiance of the Father, the same yesterday, today, and forever, You have shone forth from the Virgin. O God, have mercy on us!

But the celebration of God with us in the infant Christ is not unidirectional. We have a part to play in it, too. We are called to make a response to the offer of salvation. In fact, the whole creation has a role to play—as is made wonderfully clear below.

What shall we offer You, O Christ, Who for our sakes have appeared on earth as a man? Every creature made by You offers You thanks: the Angels offer a hymn; the heavens, a star; the Wise Men, gifts; the shepherds, their wonder; the earth, its cave; the wilderness, a manger, and we offer You a virgin Mother

In order for God to become one of us, one of us had to be willing to allow Him in and the one to do so was none other than the Virgin, Mary. This event occurred on the day of the Annunciation when she accepted the Angelic greeting from Gabriel and said, "Be it done to me according to your word!" (Luke 1:38) and in so doing opened the way for God to enter into human existence. What a wonderful affirmation of human freedom and Divine humility! It explains the Orthodox veneration of the Virgin better than a hundred books filled with theological rationalizations. Why do we love and honor her so? Look what she has done for us—expressed so beautifully in these words:

All of creation rejoices in you, O Full of Grace: the assembly of Angels and the race of men. O sanctified temple and spiritual paradise, the glory of virgins, from whom God was incarnate and became a Child –our God before the ages. He made your body into a throne, and your womb He made more spacious than the heavens. All of creation rejoices in you, O Full of Grace. Glory to you!

Again, all of this is sung as part of the various Christmas services. All we need do is open our ears and hearts to contemplate the deepest and most beautiful of mysteries—the coming of God in the flesh as one of us. The hymns sung at Matins on Christmas tell us more specifically about the reason for His coming among us; they answer the question, “Why did God become a man?”

Christ is born, glorify Him! Christ comes from heaven, go to meet Him! Christ is on earth, be exalted! Sing to the Lord, all the earth, and praise Him in gladness, O people, for He has been glorified!

Man was made in the image of God, but he sinned, and lost immortality. He fell from the divine and better life, enslaved completely by corruption. Now the wise Creator fashions him again, for He has been glorified.

The Creator shaped man with His own hands, but when He saw us perishing eternally, He bowed the heavens and came down to earth, and clothed Himself completely in our nature, truly incarnate from a pure and holy Virgin, for He has been glorified.

Wisdom, and Word, and Power, Christ our God is the Father’s Son, His Radiance. He was made man, a mystery concealed from every spirit above or on the earth. He has won us for Himself, for He has been glorified.

Why did He do it? To “win us for Himself” when “He saw us perishing eternally”; to refashion us back into the image He had given us in Paradise; to show us that life does indeed have a meaning and purpose and that His light and love are stronger than the darkness and despair that is so powerful in our world today.

The great, good, and wondrous message of Christmas as we experience it in our Orthodox tradition is that there is still hope—hope for each and every one of us personally and hope for the entire world and all the creatures in it. Everyone and everything counts. We know this, we pray it and we sing it in our celebration of the festival of God’s birth in the manger—for us and for our salvation.