

Christmas

25th December 2018

‘Bethlehem: *here* God truly became man!’

Throughout the season of Advent leading up to this great feast, I’ve been associating the places that the Scripture speaks of with those very locations that I was able to visit again on my Holy-Land pilgrimage in October. I was recalling being at **Nazareth**, at the remains of the home of Our Lady, where she was asked to be the Mother of God; at the **River Jordan**, where John was baptizing; at the peaceful, green Village of **Ein Karem**, in the hill-country of Judah, where Zechariah and Elizabeth raised St John the Baptist; at the caves in the hills at **Beir Sahour**, on the outskirts of Bethlehem where the shepherds, first to receive the news of Christmas, would have sought shelter. But as we enter tonight (today) into this great feast of Christmas, I am transported to the Nativity Grotto itself, in **Bethlehem**, and to the blessed time I was able to spend there.

Usually, one gets only a few moments in there: one queues up the right-hand-side aisle of the Gk Orthodox church of the Nativity; at the moment it’s having major

restoration work, so one would also be queuing amongst the scaffolding. (One or two pilgrims I met told me that they had had to queue 2–2½ hrs to get to visit the Grotto.) But I was very lucky — the Bridgettine Sisters in whose guest-house I was staying with invited us to join the 8.30am morning Mass at which they were going to sing — Mass right in the Nativity Grotto, that is. So, along with maybe 20 or 25 others, we took our places in the low-roofed cave which surrounds the altar built over the traditional spot of the birth of Christ. Rather than the few snatched minutes, therefore, which most pilgrims get to stoop down, pray and kiss the 14-pointed star representing the birth-place of Jesus, we were able to get an hour’s peaceful celebration of Mass said by the Franciscan friars, with singing by local sisters from the various communities in Bethlehem. As you can imagine, that turned what can sometimes seem almost a frustrated, ‘touristy’ moment into a truly blessed and prayerful reflection. I’d never before had that great privilege, of Mass celebrated in the Nativity Grotto.

What does it mean to be able to visit and pray at that

spot, those caves where Joseph and Mary took shelter in lieu of any other accommodation that night in Bethlehem? By no means can all of us get the chance to go to the Holy Land and visit the holy places. But to know that they are there, maintained diligently by the Franciscans Friars and many communities of Sisters, with and for the Christians of Palestine and Israel, anchors our belief in reality. To have the report of those who have been pilgrims there — whether from hundreds of years ago such as those who built the first churches and shrines over the holy sites, or those who visit those places in our own days — provides a foundation for our faith in the biblical events; it brings them closer to each of us. The Lord truly was announced here (in Nazareth); He truly was born here (in Bethlehem); he truly was baptized here (at the Jordan); He truly did preach here, perform a miracle there, get betrayed here, crucified there, rose from the dead at this spot. This matters, as it defeats those weak and mindless arguments that seek to undermine the historic facts of Jesus's existence and ministry.

When we celebrate Christmas, we are not just

celebrating a very, very big birthday — 2018th, or something! We are celebrating the true birth in human flesh and in human history of the one and only divine Son of God. This is greater than all other mysteries of God's relations with His creation, and we pin our life-long hopes on the truth of this! Without Our Blessed Saviour's incarnation, and His saving death and resurrection, our life has not meaning or purpose; but when we see and know that He has come amongst us, our human lives acquire such value. God Himself values human existence so highly that He is willing to come and share it with us, and to save us from the worst that our sins have done to ruin human happiness. No wonder, then, that Christmas captures the delight and imagination of us all: to gaze at the Christmas scene, the infant God in the manger, the devotion of blessed Mary, the courageous care of St Joseph, and to know that this is no myth or fable — to know that it took place, right there in that Palestinian town that one can easily visit today — brings our hearts such inordinate relief. God really did make Himself a humble baby boy, to unite Himself to our

race, and so reach out to us, shake us out of a despair for our sins. The reality of Christmas, the truth of the birth in time of the eternal Word of God, allows us to centre our lives on God's plan for us, and not be shaken by the sinful and shocking events of the world. When we keep our Catholic faith properly, when we follow this Christ child, daily, in our prayers; weekly, in our Sunday Mass; frequently, in confessing our sins; daily, in simple charity and love to family, friends, neighbour and strangers, ... then life acquires a different and more wholesome perspective. We cease to be worried about building up earthly treasure, but would rather treasure other people; we cease even to seek to live a long earthly life, unless that happens to be God's will — rather, we should be asking God that we are able to imitate Jesus, who Himself was granted only 30yrs from cradle to grave: from Crib to Cross.

This Christmas, let's take good stock of ourselves. For whom am I living? For Christ or for myself? Where is my centre? Is my centre just my own life's cares, and home? ... or is my centre bound up deeply with the Lord

Jesus, in those saving events of Nazareth, Bethlehem, Galilee, and Jerusalem? Is my heart centred on the Lord who truly became man, truly lived and died and rose, for me? We have to have that firm foundation. We have to know that the Lord God did act, in history, to take to Himself the humanity that had long ago walked away from God. God did not walk away from us; He came closer. He took that awesome path of humility and was born, poor and out of the way, in a cave stable in out-of-the way Bethlehem. Let our hearts rest there, this Christmas. Let's imagine entering that cave, stooping to kneel at the manger, bowing to kiss the Lord who has taken flesh, for He is the centre of my life, the centre of human history. Whatever our other ways of happily celebrating this great feast, let's give our greatest affection to Him who lay, new-born, on that spot in the Nativity Grotto. Not just today, then, but throughout the year, and for our whole life, *O come let us adore Him, O come let us adore Him, O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.*