



**Coptic Orthodox Diocese of
the Southern United States**

**The Monthly Message
to the Fathers, the Priests**

January 2024 **The Birth of Jesus Christ**

With the onset of the new year, we all celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, this great mystery that brings joy to heaven, earth, the angels and humans; and is described by St Paul as "the mystery of godliness" (1 Timothy 3:16) and explicated as: "God was manifested in the flesh" (1 Timothy 3:16).

"And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory" (1 Timothy 3:16).

Along with all the celebrations and meditative readings throughout the whole month of Koiahk commemorating the great mystery of the Incarnation and all the deep, incomprehensible wonders that surround it, we find joy in meditating on this glorious birth and the persons that participated in serving this wondrously glamorous mystery in order to benefit spiritually.

1. The Star

"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.'" (Matthew 2:1-2).

The star that had appeared to the Wise Men was not a mere beautiful sparkling star shining in the sky, beheld by people; but in reality, that star ushered in the person of Jesus Christ pointing out His birth place, becoming a guide to those searching for Jesus Christ. Like this star, you must remember that however much you grow in status, honor, and appearance before people, your main role is to be an usher, guide and pointer to those looking for Jesus Christ until they find Him and worship Him. Beware lest you become a replica of Judas who guided to Jesus Christ those who arrested Him.

"Men and brethren, this Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus; for he was numbered with us and obtained a part in this ministry." (Acts 1:16-17).

As Jesus Christ's servant, however your light shines before people, your glow and radiance are nothing in itself but remain solely for the purpose of showing people the way to Jesus Christ.

2. The Wise Men

They represent those serious, faithful people who sincerely seek the knowledge and worship of God. They are those great people who, if need be, bear troubles and tribulations looking towards heaven wherein they find the source of all knowledge.

"Unto You I lift up my eyes, O You who dwell in the heavens. Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, until He has mercy on us" (Psalm 123:1-2).

Lifting up the eyes towards heave unequivocally procures God's mercy to that soul that fixes the eyes towards God the source of all help and power.

The Wise Men came from a far off country, not absolutely sure of the exact place, but still trusting the glowing star that boosted their determination to continue the journey despite its hardships. "...Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him." (Matthew 2:2). What a lesson to be learned about genuine worship void of any personal agenda or gain. For, we come before God not for the purpose of taking from Him; but rather for offering Him first and foremost our love, worship and glorification. As we pray in the midnight praises, "And ascribe unto You the befitting glorification, and win the forgiveness of our many sins:

Glory be to You, O Lover of Mankind" (Coptic Reader, Introduction to the Midnight Praises).

3. The Manger

That poor, empty place (except for the animals), that no mankind would ever want to be born or found living in, is the place where God accepted to be found in and would want all to come and behold the mystery of humility saying with Moses as he saw the burning bush, "Then Moses said, 'I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn.'" (Exodus 3:3).

According to today's standards, a simply built church might be unacceptable by congregations as well as priests; and hence compete to build ostentatious buildings. Without undermining or belittling the desire and efforts to build beautiful houses for God, there remains the fear that our vision concerning true worship becomes misconstrued limited to big expensive buildings, full of people. Thus the benchmark of success becomes delineated into two goals: big church and multiple people. The absence of one or both of these goals might become a cause of agitation, depression, or a mark of failure in service. The aim here is to highlight the greatness and efficacy of the manger wherein had been offered genuine, acceptable worship intended and favored by God. In comparison with the village and the

inns that were filled with those coming to be registered, the manger witnessed only a handful of beholders. However, God was found in that small place, inappropriate by human standards yet fully adored by God. The benchmark for the manger is found in Jacob's words "Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.' And he was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!'" (Genesis 28:16-17).

The manger teaches us that God's presence is the true beauty that adorns our churches; and He is capable of filling them not with onlookers, but with true worshippers who truly come desiring to participate in the Holy Mystery of the Eucharist.

"Jesus answered them and said, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him.' Then they said to Him, 'What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?' Jesus answered and said to them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.' Therefore, they said to Him, 'What sign will You perform then, that we may see it and believe

You? What work will You do? Our fathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Then Jesus said to them, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.' Then they said to Him, 'Lord, give us this bread always.' And Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen Me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day.'" (John 6:26-40).

4. The Shepherds

The shepherds are important to us because we replicate them in serving the herd of our Lord Jesus Christ. As we contemplate St. Luke's words, we would like to focus on two points:

"Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.'" (Luke 2:8-12).

"...living out in the fields..." (Luke 2:8). This implicates their permanent residence. The field is the shepherding place. Metaphorically it represents the church wherein a priest, the shepherd, is connected to his altar, and people. He knows the details and intricacies of his field and the good grazing areas. It is in the field that a priest gets detached from the world and all its worries that might deter him from serving his flock. The closer a priest gets to his field (church) and flock (people) the more satisfied and satisfying he gets.

"...keeping watch over their flock by night..." (Luke 2:8). God has entrusted the shepherd (priest) with his flock (souls) asking him to take care of them, feed them, and protect them against the snatching wolves that come in sheep's attire spoiling their innocence with

heretic and false teachings. It was against such danger that St. Paul has warned the Ephesians' priests:

"Therefore, take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves" (Acts 20:28-30).

Thus, a priest is responsible for shepherding, protecting, and retrieving the lost sheep that have separated themselves from the herd. Searching for the lost ones is a command from God because God has appointed him to do so.

Finally, even when the shepherds were engulfed "by night" (Luke 2:8), yet God's light soon dissipated the darkness "And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them,..." (Luke 2:9). Therefore, despite the hardships, darkness and toil that face you, O good faithful shepherd, do not worry because God who sees your faithfulness and watchfulness over your flock, will inevitably shine with His light upon you and "...bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people" (Luke 2:10).