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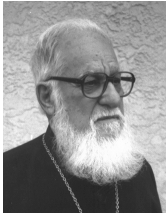
ORTHODOX EVANGELIST

“Do the work of an evangelist” - 2 Tim 4:5



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A Christmas Story in Contrasts

by

the Rev. Archimandrite Fr. Eusebius Stephanou, Th.D.

It is true that Christmas is a time of rejoicing. It is also true that it is a season to be jolly, when believers and unbelievers alike celebrate. Such festive gladness and merry making are well justified.

After all, we observe the birth of the Savior of the world.

On the other hand, in all the exuberance of the Nativity season, we must not lose sight of the sobering fact that there will be a Second Appearance of our Divine Savior on earth. For the true Christian the festive excitement of the first Advent with all of its awesome implications.

As a matter of fact, **if Christmas is to be enjoyed in its proper context and perspective, its celebration should definitely include the awareness of Christ's Second Coming.** Christmas is meaningless without taking into account His future return in glory.

Someone might object that such a viewing of Christmas takes away from the joy of the season. But the reference to the Second Coming should in no way detract from the Christmas joy. If the First Coming of Jesus is an occasion of universal rejoicing, how much more should the thought of the Second Coming be an occasion of celebration. Suffice it to remember that it will mark the supreme rule of Christ over all the earth, after the ultimate obliteration of Satan, and we will be seated on His throne!

A Complete Christmas Sermon

No Christmas sermon delivered by our priests and bishops can possibly be relevant, meaningful and complete without alluding to the Second Advent of Christ and drawing a sharp contrast that is obvious between the First and the Second Coming. Christmastime can be a time to imbue a sense of vigilance, renewed faith and repentance into the hearts of our people. They must be reminded that the helpless infant in that manger of Bethlehem is returning one day as Judge before Whom all nations of the earth shall bow in adoration.

Christmas worship is the time to contrast the return of Jesus with the first Advent of Christ. His appearance the first time was announced by heaven to a small band of simple shepherds. The rest of the world was totally unaware that the Creator of the universe had visited planet earth. He made His appearance in complete obscurity. The wise and mighty of the world hardly took notice.

But at the Second Coming no individual will miss His appearance. It will be plain and evident to those in the furthest corner of the earth. We might think that would be physically impossible. But God can do the impossible when He foretells and promises whatever surpasses human comprehension: *“For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be”* (Matt. 24:27).

The first time Jesus appeared in a stable and was laid in a manger surrounded by animals. The extent of divine condescension and humility defies human understanding. Even the poorest of the poor in that day had access to more comfortable provisions for the birth of a baby than what Jesus had.

But next time Jesus is not arriving in a stable. He will come in awesome glory and majesty that the human mind and imagination could never conceive. **He will be escorted by a host of angels and saints who have been waiting in heaven for this grand triumphant arrival on earth.**

The first time Jesus rode on a lowly beast, a donkey, but this time He will ride on a majestic warhorse in military array to smite the Antichrist and his armies that will be invading Israel in defiance of God.

The first time there was no place in the Inn for Jesus to be born. Planet earth proved to be most inhospitable to the King of kings carried in His mother's virginal womb. This time He will be seated on a throne in Jerusalem as successor of David. Fulfilling the Davidic covenant God had made with him: *“Of the fruit of thy body will I set upon thy throne”* (Ps. 132:11).

Longing for the Second Coming

Jesus came to die for the lost. He was sentenced to death for crimes He never committed and shed His blood upon the Cross, exhausting the curse of Adam for the redemption of the human race. *"For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved"* (John 3:17).

When Jesus returns in glory, He will come not to show mercy, but to execute judgment to those who rejected the Gospel of salvation. There will be neither grace nor forgiveness available. Absolute

justice will be rendered. He will welcome into His kingdom all the righteous who were obedient and knew Him in a personal relationship, and those who rebelled in a state of disobedience He will consign to outer darkness where there is grinding and gnashing of teeth.

As a result, it is a smart thing to always be ready for the return of Jesus. The Lord in His divine love warns: *"In the hour in which you think not, the Son of Man shall come."* Our eternal welfare is at stake. Why throw away your eternal reward simply for the sake of some fleeting gratification of self. It's not worth it. It's the height of

insanity to prefer the standards of this crazy world rather than the glorious promises of our Savior Who loves us and desires not the death of the sinner.

As you look this year at the Nativity scene, dear reader, and you see the Infant Jesus, try to find in it Jesus the soon coming King in divine majesty. If you do not know Him as your personal Savior, invite Him now to come into your heart and life. It will be too late when He returns. Time is running out.

On the other hand, if you already know Jesus, let the Nativity season fire up your longing for His appearance again in glory. Cry out, **"Maranatha, Come Lord Jesus!"**

An Eternal Hope for a Troubled World

By Joseph Abbate / President

With all of the world events taking place these days, it is of utmost importance for every Christian believer to be mindful of the words of Jesus: **"Watch"** regarding the End Times. Yet, at this time of year we are reminded of the hope of the Christmas Season in which God Himself came to planet earth to save the human race. It appears that when Jesus Christ returns in glory, that He is coming back to save the planet from ourselves and our fallen nature which during the End Times would come to a climax of evil corruption and destruction.

Let us not forget that we now live

on a planet which people can travel far faster than ever before. Though this may be good for tourism and travel, it is also a dangerous fact that military forces can also cross over countries with amazing speed. Throughout history, military units or spies could strike enemy targets or gather secret information with special missions. Now it only takes a computer hacker to be able to break into a nation's power-grid or a company's database to cause havoc or steal important technology.

We are currently witnessing events in the Middle East in which world powers are converging in the regions of Syria and Iraq. The prophecies concerning Military forces of Gog, Magog and Tubal as described in the Scriptures of Ezekiel 38 and Revelations can now be played out without much effort anymore.

If the foreign powers continue to build up their forces, then an invasion, or war with Israel no longer has to be conducted with

distant nations. Large numbers of Russian and European troops will already be in the local region and military bases in Syria, Iraq or Iran. **It does not take a wild imagination to contemplate a regional spark to ignite a military confrontation between nations**, such as the recent downing of a Russian Jet by Turkey. Remember that it only took a spark to inflame and commence WW1.

There is a disturbing shift of power taking place, not only of world powers but of morality as well. Many of the younger generation in Europe and America have been taught a deep hatred of their own countries. It is a sad but true fact. They are educated, yet unlearned in historical fact. Some Western leaders have enforced this position. We see America stepping down as the world's leader, not due to a lack of strength, but rather due to a recent belief that America has been seen as an historical tyrant. One college in California even took down the American flag off of its

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campus grounds because they claimed that the U.S. flag was seen as imperialistic. This view coincides with the moral decline. How can any nation continue to grow in the future with such extreme views. As the saying goes “An Empire falls from within before it fall from without.”

Jesus Christ, Hope for the Nations

I would like to take a moment to ask you what the main difference is between Christianity and other religions. Let me first point out that belief in Jesus Christ is not so much a religious decision as it is a personal relationship. After all, it was the religious Pharisees that put Jesus on the cross. One can arguably even say that religion crucified Jesus!

In other religions, one has to either reach a state of perfection, (which is humanly impossible since God's view of perfection is beyond our reach), or one has to perform certain actions or works to make it to heaven. But just how many works are needed to be pleasing enough for God? This often make one feel frustrated and depressed for that person's life.

Jesus Christ came to planet earth to give us eternal life as a free gift. Just imagine that! Something which is too priceless to be purchased is now given for no charge. No works are sufficient, though good works should naturally follow any true believer. No sacrifice is needed since Jesus as the “Lamb of God” became the perfect sacrifice for us! This is the true meaning of Christmas. Jesus said **“He who believes in me has eternal life”** (John 6:47). We gain this gift by believing in what Jesus said. We believe in Him.

Yet, something which seems so simple can often be too difficult for people to accept. Many people feel that something has to be done on

their part. Sometimes it may even be out of a sense of pride. However, the closer we grow in Christ the more unworthy we may feel, but we also know that it is because of Christ's great love for us and His mercy, that He makes us aware of the fact that we have this comfort and even confidence in Him and His word.

This is the main difference! God's love! God saves people, anyone who will believe in Him, all out of His great love for us. This invitation stands for all people, male or female, rich or poor and no matter what race someone may be. What a great gift! This is the hope for the Nations!



The Logos became flesh and dwelt among us

It is said in some religions that try to disprove Christianity that “it is impossible for man to become God.” Let me respond that it is not impossible for God to take on a human body and become a man. After all, nothing is impossible with God! In the scriptures we read: **“The Logos became flesh and dwelt among us”** (John 1:14). The term “Logos” in the original Greek means far more than “word” or

“rhema” in Greek for spoken word. Some ancient Greek monotheistic scholars used “Logos” to best describe an intelligent creator who made the universe and all living creatures logically and held everything together in order. Some of the greatest thinkers such as Heraclitus, and Socrates wrote about the importance of the Logos, yet remaining as an impersonal force which was often too unattainable to completely comprehend. Even St. Paul during his missionary trip in Athens quoted from the philosopher Aratus to more effectively reach the philosophically minded Greeks of the day. **“For in Him we live and move and have our very being”** (Acts 17:28). Remember that Socrates was sentenced to death because of his belief in the Logos as the ultimate being above all else, a universal truth, and that in doing so, in effect denied the rest of the Greek gods. He said that “The Logos spoke through him.”

One may ask what relevance this may have. It is relevant because what was once taught as an impersonal force high in the solar systems, the creator of all life everywhere and an unreachable mystery, took a human body and showed everyone on planet earth what God is like. He revealed Himself to us physically as well as in action what His character is. He taught, He healed the sick and those broken in heart and gave His life to give us eternal life. Then He rose from the dead and appeared to the disciples. The disciple closest to Jesus wrote: **“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our own eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled the Logos of life. For the life was manifested, and we have seen it and bear witness, and show unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father and was**

manifested unto us; that which we have seen and heard declare unto you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write unto you that your joy may be full” (1 John 1:4).

Christ is our Peace

Jesus Christ came in a world full of turmoil and hatred, and in many ways the world has not changed. Christians around the world are being persecuted in ways that have not been seen since the days of the Roman arenas. What makes a Christian martyr able to face eternity with confidence? Not a belief that to die in a certain manner would be the only way to make it into heaven, but they have confidence in Whom they believe. Not because they are perfect, but because Christ is perfect and that He lives inside every believer. As St. Paul wrote to the Christians of his day: **“Christ is our Peace”** (Eph. 2:14).

It is His peace in us which makes us overcomers in everything that we do. Not that everything will be perfect or that things may not get hard at times. Peace is often the subject of sermons in many churches during the holidays, but what they miss is that **Peace is not an It but a He!** This is the meaning of Peace during Christmastime.

When I first dedicated my life to Christ, I felt a peace which I never had before. I knew that it was not a state of mind, nor was it from a lack of trials, because I had plenty of trials at that time. It was a peace which surpassed understanding. I had a feeling as if I had someone standing by me. Someone who was a friend and made me have a consciousness of comfort. It is a sad fact that many people who call themselves Christians become a bad witness by not demonstrating love or understanding. I believe that this may be the case because they truly

have not given their lives in a committed serious way. In this case, these people do a disservice because people lump them together with truly devoted Christians. If we take a look at the beginning stages of the Church, we can see that Christians were not perfect then either.

Take a good look at the first Disciples of Christ and we see that one betrayed Christ, only one showed up during the crucifixion, one close to Jesus denied that he even existed, most of them didn't believe the first news of the resurrection and one couldn't believe until he had seen Jesus resurrected in person. I would



call that more than imperfect. I would even call that more than dysfunctional! They were far from perfect, yet, Jesus did not discard them because He knew that they would grow in faith and love through the power of the Holy Spirit. It was after the Holy Spirit filled them, that they were able to spread the message of the Gospel and changed the world.

Jesus and the Fulfillment of Prophecy

Another important fact to note is that Christmas celebrates a direct fulfillment of Bible Prophecy. The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem had been foretold by Isaiah several hundred years before. **“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder; and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace”** (Is. 9:6). Bible

prophecy is another main difference between Christianity and other religions. So many of the Old Testament prophecies have already been clearly fulfilled. Many of these prophecies are regarding the arrival of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Yet another famous Old Testament prophet declares: **“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you He shall come forth that shall be ruler throughout Israel, who's origins are from old, even from ancient times”** (Micah 5:2).

Just as many of these prophecies are in regards to Christ's first coming and birth, there are many more involving His second coming and return in glory. Christ came the first time out of mercy and to demonstrate to the world God's love. The second time He will come to establish His eternal kingdom. In the Old Testament, the prophet Zachariah declares Christ's return: **“And on that day He shall stand on the Mount of Olives”** (Zac. 14:40). He gives an example in great detail about the event. **“And one shall say unto Him, where did you receive these wounds in your hands, and He shall reply, these wounds I received in the house of my friends”** (Zac. 13:6). This is in reference to when Jesus was crucified in which Jesus had His hands nailed to the cross! Think of it. Just how accurate that prophecy was.

If the prophecies of the first coming of Christ were so accurate, just how accurate are the remaining prophecies regarding His return in glory? It also states in the same prophecy that then **“All nations will be gathered against Jerusalem”** (Zac. 14:2). As in the beginning of this article, I once again point out that we are already witnessing the nations of the earth gathering in the region. God is drawing them near for the final phase as the return of Jesus Christ draws near.