

Sermon for Christmas 2 Year C

[RCL] Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84 or 84:1-8; Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a; Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

The Christmas season is a period in which the Church celebrates that God unites God's self to humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. At the very heart of Christmas is the birth of our divine Savior, Christ the Lord, who is the Word made flesh. As Christians, we believe that the Son of God took upon himself the fullness of our human nature and that at his conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary he received a human body of flesh and bone, a human heart to love, and a human mind to reason, think, and will. Indeed, following the teachings of the Holy Scriptures Christians affirm that Jesus is like us in all things except for sin.

Theologians call the belief that God became flesh "the Mystery of the Incarnation." It is one of the key points of the Church's faith as expressed by the Nicene Creed: "For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate and was made man." It is not a mystery in the sense of being any sort of secret. Rather, it is a mystery because its reality goes beyond our limited ability to understand it.

Today's reading from the Gospel according to Matthew, the story of the flight into Egypt, illustrates some of the ways in which the Lord Jesus, in his humanity, identified himself with the faithful people of God in moments of both hardship and rejoicing.

First, Jesus identifies himself with the people of Israel. The passage from the second chapter of Matthew is chock-full of evocative words and names that are meant to make the reader remember the story of Israel's sojourn in Egypt. Just as there is in the book of Genesis, here there is a Joseph who sees visions in his dreams and who leads the people to refuge in the land of Egypt. Like the story of the Exodus, here we find a Miriam, or Mary. There is even a Joshua, or Jesus, like we find in the book of Deuteronomy and in the story of the return to the Land of Promise as told in the book of Joshua. Even Herod's wrath and seeking to kill the Holy Child echoes the pharaoh's cruelty toward the Hebrew children. Such allusions to the story of the Old Testament are an intentional part of Matthew's story about Jesus. By connecting Jesus to the story of the salvation of the covenant people, the Evangelist demonstrates how Jesus' life and story are one with the life and the story of Israel. Matthew is telling us that Jesus is one with God's covenant people because he has lived their history and their experience in his own flesh. Thus, one might say that Jesus is not simply Jewish; Jesus is the authentic embodiment of Israel.

Second, Jesus identifies himself with the promise to bring all nations, including the traditional enemies of Israel, into God's Kingdom. The story of the flight in Egypt is a healthy reminder that God's interest is not limited only to Israel. National borders do not limit God's sovereign power. God looks upon the whole world and upon every nation and people. As the creator of the entire human race, the Christian God offers mercy and grace to Jews and Gentiles alike. Matthew seems to revel in the irony that the newborn Messiah was rejected by the King Herod of Judah but welcomed by Gentiles in Egypt. One might consider just how deep Jesus' identification with the children of Egypt was. He spoke their language. He played their games and shared their

friendship as children across the world do. Once again Egypt, too, has become holy ground. This was, perhaps, a first step toward the long promised reconciliation of the Gentiles to the creator. This was announced by the Hebrew prophets and was fulfilled in the eschatological vision of people from every race, language, and nation singing around the heavenly throne.

Third, with the Flight into Egypt Jesus, who later teaches, “blessed are the poor,” identifies himself with the poor and the marginalized of this world. It must never be forgotten that the Holy Family were on the run, that they were fleeing their homeland as victims of political persecution. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus lived as refugees in Egypt. They, like Abraham, Jacob, and his sons before them and like so many people in the world today, were exiles from their home and migrants in a foreign land. Christ, therefore, knows firsthand the experiences of the outcast, the foreigner, and the immigrant. He knows the trials of the refugee seeking safety and protection from the wrath and cruelty of evildoers and tyrants.

This experience of the flight into Egypt explains the force of Jesus’ teaching that whatever we do for the least of his brothers and sisters we do for him because he has made himself one with the marginalized. He has been the exile, the migrant, and the refugee. Therefore, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and sheltering the exiled are things Christians rightly do to honor our Lord. Christians must identify with the poor and the exiled because Christ himself was counted among their number. We must serve the needy among us because in doing so we serve Jesus Christ who loves all people. As the Apostle James wrote in the first century, “true religion is to care for widows and orphans in their distress.”

During the Christmas season it is also important to recall that Jesus identified himself with the joys of our celebrations. In Matthew’s telling of the flight into Egypt, Jesus does not only suffer the hardship of exile. He also experiences the joy of coming home. The joy of returning to one’s homeland is a regular theme in the message of the Hebrew prophets that can be seen from today’s lesson from the prophet Jeremiah: “He who scattered Israel will gather him... for the Lord has ransomed Jacob from hands too strong for him. They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion... and they shall never languish again.” This is a joyous celebration that God brings God’s children home. This experience of return further signals Jesus as the one who embodies the life of Israel. It suggests something of the great expectation that God will provide a definitive return to the life of justice and peace in his divine kingdom, as Matthew suggests by his citation of the prophet Hosea: “Out of Egypt have I called my Son.”

The return from exile in Egypt reminds us that Christ also understands the human need for celebration. We rejoice in God’s blessings. We rejoice in hopes fulfilled. The desires to sing and to dance, to laugh and to rejoice are not foreign to our Lord. After all, these expressions of joy and happiness are a powerful part of what it is to be human, to be fully human as Jesus Christ was and is. In the mystery of the incarnation, God shares this human joy in all its fullness.

The incarnation of Christ therefore provides the Church with a powerful reason to celebrate. Not only is it that, “the Word become flesh and dwelt among us,” but by becoming of a human being Christ has united himself to the human race and made us members of his own family. Christ Jesus has joined the human family by virtue of his birth from the Virgin Mary, and we have joined the household of God by believing in his one and eternal Son.

Today the Church rejoices, as we hear from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, that: "We have been adopted by God the Father as children through Jesus Christ to the praise of his glorious grace and that we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us." We celebrate that we, too, have become sons and daughters of God, true brothers and sisters of Christ. We rejoice that God's grace has been lavished upon on us and that the same love that fills Jesus' heart has been poured into our own hearts to give us new life. We rejoice that our sins have been forgiven and that we have been redeemed by the blood of the Savior. Therefore, let every heart celebrate God's mercy and the gift of his Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

Written by The Reverend Dr. John J. Lynch

The Rev. Dr. John J. Lynch is the rector of Christ the King Episcopal Church in Yorktown, Virginia, having previously served in the Diocese of Honduras. He is also the Province III Chaplain to the Order of the Daughters of the King. In addition to his pastoral responsibilities, Father Lynch writes and publishes the Spanish-language blog ["El Cura de Dos Mundos"](#).

Published by the Office of Mission Communications of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017.

© 2015 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved.