

+MIDNIGHT MASS

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Philip Anderson, Abbot of Clear Creek Abbey

December 25, 2023

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit Amen.

And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come forth the captain that shall rule my people Israel. (Matthew 2:6)

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,
My very dear sons,

It is high time we took the road to Bethlehem. Like the Magi, it is time we followed the star toward the City of David, not only because it is Christmas, but because we stand in need of much that is to be found in that place. Our world has grown cold. Times are hard. We are freezing in our materialism and our cultural sinfulness. The Lord is our last refuge: we need to see Him. *Let us go over to Bethlehem, said the shepherds, and let us see this word that is come to pass, which the Lord hath shown us.*

The ancients considered Jerusalem to be the center of the world. Such may well be the case in some mysterious way, according to God's geography. But the Son of God did not choose to be born in that great city, but rather in the little town, the hamlet, of Bethlehem. Not that Jerusalem was such a bad place—no more than Rome or any other famous metropolis. But Bethlehem was the appointed spot, where the Messiah, the King of Kings, had to have His human birth. It was there amid the poverty of little people and little things that God's majesty chose first to shine forth. As for us, we have gone astray somehow in our large cities; we have lost our way, and the most urgent need seems to be to get to the simplicity, peace, honesty and poverty of Bethlehem.

The Angels of God have come to the fields outside of Bethlehem, why shouldn't we join them? *Glory to God in the highest; and on earth peace to men of good will.* Angels only come to earth in order to accomplish a sacred mission or announce something of great importance. If they have gathered at Bethlehem, it could not be without a serious reason. There is something here more than meets the eye... Of course, we Christians know that.

If we do not get to ourselves—and soon—to the *little town* of Bethlehem, we may soon find ourselves once again at Littleton, that is to say on the outskirts of Columbine. Or we may arrive at a new destination, some place (again) like Newtown. The hour, especially in America, is momentous. There is a fork in the road, where two roads diverge in a yellow wood, and we have to choose. We have not sufficiently, up until now, followed the logic of Bethlehem, which is the logic of the Child. We have not sufficiently protected our children in the womb, and so now the little ones outside the womb are in danger—that is, if we do not get to Bethlehem. I am speaking more of the Bethlehem of the heart, of the Bethlehem of the soul, rather than the one on the map.

In the end a man—or a whole society—has to choose between finality or fatality. Either there is some rhyme and reason to our existence—a purpose and end to it all, a finality—or life turns out to be a useless passion, a fatal shock of random atoms whirling in the void of empty space and endless time.

Bethlehem is the place of finality, the land where things make sense, not just in some sentimental way, like nice thoughts about peace and the exchange of Season's

Greetings, but in a particular way, a real way, at a particular conjuncture of the History of the world. Bethlehem is a place of particulars, where every detail counts, including the ox, the donkey, the cold and the straw. All of that will speak to us and will teach us to wonder again—if only we can get to Bethlehem.

The spiritual Bethlehem is a place where parents act like adults, who honor their vows of Marriage (the real kind), who do not leave assault weapons around the house, who do not allow children to wander the virtual streets of the internet, among the very real wolves that prowl about there. In this little town simple joys are something that people appreciate, a place where rural mirth and manners abound. It is a place close to the earth, but not just “back to earth”. The joy coming to the world at Bethlehem has a reason: it is because the earth has found her King. There is no Wall Street in Bethlehem, nor any Walmart, but there are churches and houses, shops and farms...and many children.

Bethlehem is a biblical place. Its destiny cannot be measured in merely earthly terms. The prophet Micah (5:2) wrote these mysterious words that were to be fulfilled at the birth of Jesus:

But you, (Bethlehem) Ephrathah, the least of the clans of Judah, out of you will be born for me the one who is to rule over Israel; his origin goes back to the distant past, to the days of old.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Saint Matthew (2:6) rendered the text a bit differently:

And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, you are *by no means* least among the leaders of Judah, for out of you will come a leader who will shepherd my people Israel.

Indeed, Bethlehem was the least of the clans, and in this sense that was small and poor. But, precisely because of this poverty, it attracted the favor of God, who makes of it “by no means least among the leaders of Judah”. We Catholics of the 21st century in America really need to understand again what is great in God’s eyes and to forget the illusory greatness of a world gone mad. We must get to Bethlehem. But since we cannot travel to Palestine, we need to re-create it right here where we live.

We need to get to Bethlehem.

Now, Bethlehem is not the end of our journey. Bethlehem is a place of true finality, where we meet the meaning of life, but it is not the ultimate stopping point of our lives. In the end, we will need to arrive at Jerusalem, the heavenly one, the one Saint John saw descending from Heaven like a bride decked out for her bridegroom. But for now, we are still on the way. Tonight, in this night of Christmas, the Bridegroom is lying in the Manger. He has come to see us and to save us. Only with his help can we ever hope to contemplate someday the beautiful battlements and towers of the celestial Jerusalem.

May Mary most Holy, the true Mother of God and Queen of Bethlehem, guide us in spirit to the Manger and to the Crib. The rest will speak for itself. *And they came with haste; and they found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. And seeing, they understood the word that had been spoken to them concerning the child. And all that heard, wondered. Amen. Alleluia.*