

SOLEMNITY OF THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD
CHRISTMAS, 2018

An old oxymoron states: “Up is down and down is up.” I believe this oxymoron captures the mystery of Christmas and from Christmas to the Christian life.

In the hymn known as the Prologue which St. John employs as he opens his Gospel account of Jesus, Jesus is identified as the divine “Logos”, the eternal Word of God. In the culture of the Bible a person’s word originating and flowing out of a person was equal to the person uttering it, as true and real an experience of another person as physically encountering them. A person was their word, and vice-versa. St. John reaches the climactic moment of the hymn as he proclaims: “And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (Jn. 1:14). In his birth in Bethlehem, Jesus, the eternal Word of God united to our human flesh in Mary is now manifest in human history. Quoting another early Christian hymn in his letter to the Philippians, The apostle Paul proclaims the truth and significance of Jesus’ becoming human: “though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not regard equality with God something to be grasped (other translations render this “clung to”). Rather he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave coming in human likeness and found human in appearance” (Phil. 2:6,7).

Christmas is more than just an historical commemoration. Christmas is the revelation of the outpoured love of God, a love not clung to; a love lavishly given freely to the world; a personal love poured out to you and me. Christmas proclaims the humility of God; a God who chooses to bow down to us; a God who makes himself small, insignificant, coming into our lives in the most nonthreatening way, the same way we came into existence; a helpless infant, dependent on others for food, clothing, shelter, protection, love to invite us into relationship with him. God in Jesus comes “down” in order to “raise us up” to our original glory and dignity as his children. In the birth of Jesus up is down and down is up.

If we are to know and enter into this mystery of God’s love for us in Jesus, Christmas’ call to “Come, let us adore him” is the call to imitate in our lives the divine revelation in Jesus of “up is down and down is up”; a call I pondered on my visit to Bethlehem six weeks ago in as part of my pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

The Church of the Nativity of Jesus is built over the cave in which He was born. Visiting the site is an invitation to enter into the wisdom of “down is up and up is down”. In order to visit the site of Jesus’ nativity you must go down, bow low physically and spiritually, descend to the level of His revealed presence among us to touch the mystery of his union with us. You begin by descending three perilous steps from the floor above in the church, each step with a drop to the next of about fourteen inches. At the bottom of the last step the entrance into the cave/grotto containing the birthplace of Jesus and the site of the manger is about four feet high. Once again you must “lower yourself”, bend down, to pass through the entrance. Inside the cave, to access the spot of Jesus’ birth located under an altar, once again you must get down on your knees to the ground to reach under the altar and reverence the circular opening in the floor over the place of the Nativity surrounded by a metal fourteen-pointed silver star. To come to Jesus requires descending, bending low, just as Jesus descended to us. In this we become like the shepherds and kings whom we are told bent low and prostrated themselves in adoration before the Christ Child that first Christmas.

In a recent homily Pope Francis stated: “Make yourself small, make yourself humble, make yourself a servant of others, and the Lord will give you the ability to understand how to make peace” and I would add, find peace within yourself. In this going down we rise with Christ and in him are seated in God’s presence. (Col. 3:1-4).

Up is down and down is up.

A Blessed Christmas to all of you!

Father Jim Devora
25 December, 2018