

CHRISTMAS 2023 MESSAGE OF HIS HOLY BEATITUDE THE PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM THEOPHILOS III

“A strange and marvellous mystery do I behold;
the cave is a heaven; the Virgin a cherubic throne;
the manger a space wherein Christ God the
Uncontainable One hath reclined.
Him do we praise and magnify”

(Christmas Canon, Heirmos of Ode 9)

Mankind beheld “a strange and marvellous mystery” indeed, as the hymnographer of the Church writes, at the end of times, during the reign of Caesar Octavianus Augustus. We saw God’s condescension manifested in Bethlehem of Judea. Fulfilling His promises to the prophets, God “sent redemption to His people”. This redemption is the Only Begotten Son and His Word, “of the same essence” as the Father. Through God the Father, He was blessed to be incarnated, to take on human soul, flesh and body from the Holy Spirit and the Ever-Virgin Mary. “As He willed and as He pleased” and as the Evangelist John says, “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”. (John 1, 14). For our sake, He “emptied himself” (Phil. 2, 7), and was “secretly born in a cave”. He accepted the ultimate poverty; He was born in a cave and wrapped in swaddling clothes; He lay in a manger. In this poverty “the wealth of His Divinity shone”. Because of this, “the heaven through the star brought over to

Him the Magi as the beginning of the nations” and “precursors of the Church” according to Saint Chrysostom. An angel revealed Him to the shepherds who kept the night watch and a multitude of angels proclaimed Him from heaven through the hymn, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill among men”, announcing that God’s goodwill for men is peace. This all-pervading Divine peace is brought to the world by God’s Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ; He is “the Angel of great counsel, the Prince of peace and the Sun of righteousness”.

Based on this Divine revelation, as it was witnessed by eye and ear witnesses in the Holy Scriptures, the Church believes and preaches to its members and the whole world, that Christ is the Saviour and Redeemer of the human race, not as deified man but as God Incarnate, for the salvation, that is, the deification of man. God came down to earth, to raise man to heaven, because “our conversation remains” (Phil, 3, 20) according to Saint Paul. The Fathers of the Church say incessantly, “God became man and man became divine”. And Saint Gregory Palamas proclaims that “the flesh is glorified along with the reception and the glory of the body, which becomes the glory of the Godhead”. Through the Incarnation, the Cross, the Resurrection from the dead and His Ascension, Christ as God and man, God-man, sat down at the right hand of the Father after assuming His human nature and paved the deification for those believing in him.

Having ascended into heaven, the Incarnate One, the crucified in the flesh and risen from the dead, our Lord Jesus Christ, left the Church on earth, that is, the holy disciples and apostles, their successors, the hierarchs, priests and the Christ-named congregation, so that it may fulfil His mission unto the ages; the mission of the teaching, the conciliation and the sanctification of people, so that what was heard on the first night of His Nativity, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace goodwill among men” prevails on earth.

The Church worldwide, especially the blessed Church of Jerusalem, proclaims this word and performs this work, obedient to its founder, as it ministers in the places of His manifestation in the flesh, the first of which was the city of Bethlehem. In the magnificent Constantinian Basilica of the Nativity and the humble Grotto, the Mother of the Churches will celebrate again this year, starting from Jerusalem, keeping its ancient tradition since the days of the pilgrim Aetheria and our late predecessor Patriarch Sophronios.

Filled with the joy of the Nativity of Christ, we address Our Patriarchal and Fatherly wishes and blessings to “every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh” (Jn.1, 4, 2), to the pious pilgrims, especially to Our reverend flock in Gaza, along with Our prayers, that Saint Porphyrios remains its protector and of all those suffering there under the raging war.

In the Holy City of Bethlehem CHRISTMAS 2023

THEOPHILOS III

PATRIARCH OF JERUSALEM