Of Silk and Sand

2nd Sunday of Advent

December 8th, 2019

The life of Christ mirrored the life of his country and people in many ways. The miracle of his birth reflected earlier miracles—the birth of Isaac to Sarah, the birth of Samson to Manoah and his wife, the birth of Samuel to Hannah, whose song bears many similarities with the Magnificat of Mary. Much of his life was spent wandering, just like his ancestors, who had no permanent abode. Like the people under the yoke of Egypt, of Canaan during the time of the judges, of Assyria, Babylon, Persia and Macedonia, Jesus lived under the yoke of the Roman Empire. Like King David, he meditated on the law and the words of God. Like Josiah and Ezra, he brought people back to the sacred scripture and the meaning of the commandments of God. Like the prophets, he spoke the truth to authorities, even at the cost of his life. Like his people, he was driven out of the temple, out of Jerusalem, and into exile through death. Like his people, he returned to a rebuilt temple, the temple of his resurrection body. Jesus of Nazareth lived out the sorrows and joys, the temptations and triumphs of every man and woman in Israel. And like his ancestors Abraham, Isaac, Joseph and Jacob, he was driven into Egypt as a refugee, when Herod murdered the innocent children (Matthew 2:16-23). Yet, through his life, Jesus brought peace—not just to his own people, but also to the very people who were traditional enemies of Israel. In the Exodus, Moses and the refugees could sing: “Pharaoh's chariots and his host he cast into the sea,

and his chosen officers were sunk in the Red Sea” (Exodus 15:4). In her early history, Israel had no greater enemy the Egypt who had enslaved her for four hundred years, Egypt who came and sacked the temple during the invasion of Shishak, Egypt who could not be a trusted ally against the Assyrian invasion or help against the Babylonian invasion. How, shocking, then, that Isaiah the prophet would speak of a time when Egypt would be called the people of God: ““Blessed be Egypt my people” (Isaiah 19:25). And this indeed happened, for Egypt became the heartland of the early church producing great scholars such as Origen, Cyril of Alexandria, John Climacus, St. Anthony and countless Desert Fathers living quietly in the sands where the Pharaohs and Cambyses sleep. Nothing demonstrates love like reconciliation and peace. And history has demonstrated that God has brought salvation to all, even those who were once enemies.

In the 8th Century, Egypt would produce a beautiful Advent hymn speaking of the peace that Christ brings, as we read in the Coptic Doxology, or “Entrance of the Lord Into the Land of Egypt”. It is a poem full of praise and thanksgiving for being drawn into the friendship of God and into an imperishable inheritance:

God glorious in the renown of his saints,

Enthroned upon the cherubim,

Appeared in the land of Egypt.

We have seen him who created the heavens and the earth,

The Good One in the bosom of Mary,

The New Heaven

Together with the faithful Joseph the Righteous.

He who is of endless days,

Praised of the angels,

Has come on this day to the Land of Egypt to save us,

For we are his people.

Rejoice and give praise, O Egypt,

Together with her children and all her districts,

For unto you has come the Lover of Mankind,

He who is before all ages.

Isaiah the Great said,

“Behold the Lord comes into Egypt upon a swift cloud,

He who is king of heaven and earth.’

We praise him, we glorify him, and exalt him,

The Good One and Lover of Mankind;

Have mercy upon us according to your great goodness.

For the Egyptian church, the coming of Christ is the coming of goodness, salvation, and righteousness. The poets emphasize the cosmic proportions of this new beginning: “We have seen him who created the heavens and the earth”; “Behold the Lord comes into Egypt on a swift cloud, He who is king of heaven and earth.” The hymn goes so far as to say that “The Good One in the bosom of Mary” is the “New Heaven”—a theological sentiment and truth repeated by Albertus Magnus five hundred years later: “St. Luke says: ‘The kingdom of God,’ that is, Christ, ‘is within you’” (Saint Albert the Great, *On Union with God.* London: Aeterna Press, 2014. 7). Twice, the hymn calls Jesus the Good One, and twice it calls him the Lover of Mankind. For our peace indeed derives from this—from the goodness of Jesus and from his love for humanity.

From the heartland of Christianity on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, missionaries and apostles traveled eastward. This eastward drift received a great impetus in the 5th Century. A Syrian by the name of Alopen was one of the first to be recorded in Chinese documents as a bearer of the faith in a time when China was known to the Romans and Syrians as *Serica—*the land of silk. Some scholars believe the Daqin Pagoda was originally a Christian church. On a rather interesting historical footnote, 大秦 Daqin was originally the name of ancient China, but it was the name given by the Tang Dynasty to Syria and Rome, which came to be viewed as a utopian place beyond Persia. Imagine, out of great respect and affection, giving another country the name of your own country, without any hint of conquest. Syrians would exert considerable influence on Central Asian and Chinese culture. The Mongolian script in use from the time of Genghis Khan until 1946 was an adaptation of the Old Uygur Alphabet, used by Christians, as well as Buddhists and Manichaens, for almost 800 years in Turpan on the Silk Route—this script was derived from the Syriac or Aramaic alphabet, from the very language spoken by Jesus and his disciples. Sadly, Syria and the Uyghurs, who contributed so much to spreading faith and culture, are now the victims of outrageous ethnic and religious cleansing, suffering atrocities we are too cowardly or apathetic to discuss openly. In the 8th Century, the same century that saw the writing of our Coptic Doxology which we just read, a monument was erected in Xian, the capital of Tang Dynasty China, to commemorate the Good News, called 景教, *Jingiao*, or the Radiant Teaching or Shining Faith:

Monument Commemorating the Diffusion of the Illustrious Religion of Ta-Tsin in the Middle Kingdom (China, 781, Tang Dynasty)

Some point to the creature,

To trust in it as the ultimate.

Some take things and nothingness,

And destroy the two.

Some pray and sacrifice to induce blessings.

Some set forth their own merit to deceive others.

Wise counsels were abuzz.

Thoughts and feelings were toil.

Far and wide they went without achievement.

The dry hastened to turn to burning

As darkness gathered, they lost their way,

Until confusion was beyond return.

Whereupon the Trinity became incarnate:

The Illustrious Honoured One, Messiah,

Hid away his true majesty,

And came into the world as a man.

An angel proclaimed the joy.

A virgin bore a sage in Syria.

A bright star was this propitious portent.

Persians saw its glory and came to offer gifts.

He fulfilled the Old Law

Of the Twenty-Four Sages’ Discourses,

Governing tribes and nation.

He determined the salvation of the Eight Stages,

Refining the earthly and perfecting the heavenly.

He revealed the gate of the Three Constants,

Unfolding life and destroying death.

He hung a brilliant sun

Which scattered the regions of darkness.

The Devil’s guile, lo, he has utterly cut off.

For the poet, the coming of Jesus is a coming of order and peace. Before this advent, things were in turmoil: “Thoughts and feelings were toil.

Far and wide they went without achievement. The dry hastened to turn to burning…As darkness gathered, they lost their way, until confusion was beyond return.” The apostle Paul likewise says: “For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light” (Ephesians 5:8). And like the Egyptian hymn, this Chinese poem speaks of peace of a cosmic scale; Jesus “determined the salvation of the Eight Stages, refining the earthly and perfecting the heavenly.” The Eight Stages refers to the Beatitudes (Matthew 5). The Three Constants are “faith, hope and love” (1 Corinthians 13). What is especially striking in this poem is the geographical references to events and peoples beyond China: “A virgin bore a sage in Syria. A bright star was his omnipotent portent. Persians saw its glory and came to offer gifts.” The nativity narrative becomes something that various nations can participate it—a walking narrative that makes its way from distant shores to distant sands, from Daqin to Daqin, from Rome, Syria and Persia to China. Such is the kingdom of heaven—a kingdom of all peoples drawn to the light of the Morning Star. China, like Egypt, has many shining stars of faith in her history—Ding Limei, Jeannette Li, Liang Fa, Shi Meiyu, Shu Shan, Sung Sangjie, Wang Laiquan, Wu Baoying, Xi Shengmo, and Yu Cidu. Better known, perhaps, are Lin Yutang, who authored *Moment in Peking,* Lao She, Watchman Nee, and Cardinal Joseph Zen—all who struggled to preach the good news of freedom and peace.

For John the Baptist, the coming of the Saviour was the opening of a great road, a road even greater than the Silk Road or the caravan roads that brought gold, spices, frankincense, pepper, amber, and ivory from distant countries. It was a great road of the kingdom of heaven, and to this road flocked pilgrims of every walk of life, confessing their sins and being baptized, seeking the grace of salvation to be bestowed: “In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’’’ Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins” (Matthew 3:1-6). The journey of Advent, the coming of Jesus in history and the coming of Jesus today, and the coming of Jesus again at the end of time, is a coming of peace to the hearts of those who welcome the Christ, to those who desire to live at peace and in love. It is both a journey and a narrative. It is a narrative that teaches us peace. It is the peace that comes from the Eight Stages, the Beatitudes that teach us that true blessing is to be poor, meek, mournful, peaceable, righteous, pure, persecuted, and merciful (Matthew 5:3-12). It is the peace that comes from the brotherhood and sisterhood that crosses national boundaries and shares the good news over caravan routes, in distant cities, in airports and train stations, in cargo holds of ships, in warehouses and waystations. This is the grand narrative of peace that the apostle Paul shares with the Romans in his letter, writing: “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, ‘Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name’; and again he says, ‘Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people’; and again, ‘Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him’; and again Isaiah says, ‘The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.’ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:4-13). The life of Christ is mirrored in the life of each one of us. Through faith, Christ is born in us, through baptism, we identify with Jesus and with other followers, through following Christ, we live the beatitudes he practiced, through sorrows and temptations, we overcome with Christ; through death, we are united to Christ, through resurrection, we are raised with him. Through Christ, through His Advent or coming into our lives, we come to know peace and make peace.