

## Christmas II.

St. Matthew ii, verse 23 - *...that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, he shall be called a Nazarene.*

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

In today's brief gospel lesson we continue in the second chapter of St. Matthew from the point at which we left off last week on the feast of the Holy Innocents. Joseph has taken the Holy Family down into Egypt to flee the murderous jealousy of Herod the Great. In today's lesson Joseph learns from God through a dream that Herod has died, so he assumes that it is safe to return to Israel from Egypt. But on his return Joseph learns that one of Herod's sons, Archelaus, is ruler over Judea, where Bethlehem is located. Remember that Bethlehem is not where Joseph and Mary lived, but only the place their ancestors were from, where they went to be counted and taxed in the census. Joseph apparently thinks that Archelaus might share his father's jealousy of a descendant of king David, so he avoids Bethlehem and Judea, and instead returns to Nazareth in the northern region called Galilee. Now Nazareth was so obscure that it is never mentioned in the Old Testament. Yet Matthew tells us that the prophets foretold, 'He shall be called a Nazarene...', meaning, presumably, that the Messiah would come from Nazareth. But there is no such direct prophecy in the Old Testament. So what does this verse mean?

This prophecy may in fact be a play on words. A 'Nazarite' in the Old Testament was a member of a kind of primitive religious order instituted in Numbers vi. The Nazarites did not drink alcohol, they did not cut their hair, and they strictly avoided contact with a dead body. Samson is perhaps the most famous Nazarite of the Old Testament, and John the Baptist may have been one as well. In the cases of both Samson and John the Baptist, the child was destined by an angelic message before his birth to be dedicated to God in a special way. So when Matthew tells us that 'the prophets' foretold that 'He shall be called a Nazarene,' he may want us to connect the name of Nazareth with this Old Testament group of people specially dedicated to God. Matthew, in that case, does not mean that the prophets said that the Messiah would come from Nazareth, but rather that the Messiah would be, as it were, surrounded by circumstances and facts that connect him to the heroes of the Old Testament and that show his special mission from God. If this interpretation is correct, then 'He shall be called a Nazarene', means, 'His childhood in Nazareth shows that he is a kind of Nazarite, protected by and dedicated to God from birth.' We know from elsewhere in the gospels that some people doubted our Lord because he was from obscure places in Galilee (St. Mark vi.3; St. John vii.41f.). By his

word play of Nazarene/Nazarite, Matthew partially answers such doubts.

More generally, St. Matthew here is showing us something typical of the gospels. On the one hand the gospels constantly show Christ fulfilling the Old Testament, doing what was expected of the Messiah, making old prophecies come to life. And if this is a characteristic of the gospels in general, it is particularly a characteristic of Matthew, which is the most Jewish of the gospels and therefore the one most interested in the Old Testament background to our Lord. But while doing this, on the other hand, the gospels also show Christ fulfilling prophecies in unexpected ways, breaking Old Testament laws and expectations, and in general coming as a thief in the night. Our Lord is close enough to expectations to fulfill the prophecies, but he also is far enough from expectations to leave room for faith and to allow people to reject him with their free will. Christ's fulfillment of the Old Testament is there to be seen by those with eyes to see. It also is subtle enough that it does not compel anyone.

This is the way God usually behaves. God gives us plenty of evidence for himself. There is the testimony to the Creator conveyed by the immensity, variety, beauty, and order of his creation. There are the testimonies to God's existence derived from the process of human reason and from the religious and personal experiences of millions of people. There is the evidence of the gospel and its miracles and those of the saints. There is evidence to God given by the love of his people. But God does not give us foolproof proofs. He always leaves room for doubt and denial. In this life, as St. Paul says, '[W]e walk by faith, not by sight' (II Cor. v.7). We glimpse God, but as in a glass, darkly, not usually in his overwhelming splendor. In this life God does not compel our wills but seeks from us a voluntary love that reaches further towards him than can our knowledge. Faith, hope, and love are the cardinal Christian virtues, not knowledge, reason, and intellectual clarity.

Why? Why doesn't God just show everyone the truth, if he is there? Well, in part let me say, I don't know, because I'm not God. God has created angels, who are spiritual beings who do understand him clearly and do know the truth about him unmistakably. Perhaps God has created worlds with people to whom he has revealed himself as clearly and as dazzlingly as he has revealed himself to the angels. But that is not the way he created this world.

In our world and with us it seems that God wished to give a particularly high position to free will. God created us, for whatever reason, so that we are poised between faith, hope, and love on the one hand, and disbelief, despair, and selfishness on the other. God's gift of freedom to us gives us the choice whether to move towards

him, though we do not fully see him, in a hopeful and loving faith, or to close in upon ourselves in a denying, hopeless rejection. Someone who is determined to be faithless need not and will not believe God even if a miracle were worked in front of his face. God has so consecrated the dignity of our nature by the gift of freedom that he will withdraw from such a person and will permit him to live out his free choice. Why God made us free, we cannot fully know. But so it is.

Therefore, the gospel shows prophecy fulfilled, but not fulfilled so as to compel belief. The gospel shows miracles worked, but not worked so as to compel faith. The gospel shows God's love at work, but not working so as to prevent us from rejecting it. On Christmas God incarnate revealed his face, but we are not compelled to look. On Christmas the angels sang, but no one is forced to listen. On Christmas a gift is given to us all, but no one has to accept it. Christianity means that we do freely accept God's free gift, and that we then strive to live in gratitude for what we have received.

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