



Announcement to the Shepherds by Govert Flinck (1639)

## *God So Loved the World*

**D**O YOU REMEMBER the man with the frizzy, rainbow-colored hair who used to show up in the crowds at golf tournaments wearing a t-shirt that said John 3:16? Or maybe you have seen “John 3:16” displayed at other sporting events or on other occasions? How about while on the highway? When I was a young man, traveling with my parents, I used to enjoy looking at the opening pages of the Gideon Bible in the motel room. There you can find a translation of John 3:16 in every language of the world!

So what is John 3:16? We quote the Ignatius Bible: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” This is certainly the Good News to proclaim to the world! It is also a good verse of Holy Scripture to keep in mind during the Christmas Season. Let us add to it John 3:17: “For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”

In the Maronite Rite, we have a traditional Christmas hymn that begins, “God sent his only Son.” We also find in the Prayer of Forgiveness for the Divine Liturgy for the Glorious Birth of Our Lord these words: “Let us raise glory, honor, and praise to the Father, who in his love sent his only-begotten Son to us.” God the Father sent his only Son. For what purpose? To save us, lest we perish. That we might have eternal life and not eternal death. And why did he do this? Because of his great love for us. And this love of the Father is also the love of the Son. So we address the Son in the same Prayer of Forgiveness: “Today, we celebrate the mystery of your love for us.”

Our Maronite Liturgy is very much a teaching Liturgy. Let us look at it in more detail and see how it unfolds for us this great mystery of the Glorious Birth of Our Lord, which is the mystery of God’s love for us. Look at the first line of the Opening Prayer: “O Christ our Lord, though you are God, you became man.” This

is the doctrine of the Incarnation in a nutshell.

The Opening Prayer then goes on to introduce the two main characters intimately connected with the Incarnation, namely, Mary and Joseph. Mary is called “your mother” (the prayer is addressed to Christ here). Mary is the Mother of Christ, who is both true God

and true man. That is why we can call her the Mother of God. Joseph, on the other hand, is called “your chosen one” and not “your father.” This brings to mind that Joseph did not beget Christ. He was not the biological father of Christ. Rather, he was the chosen father of Christ, the guardian of the Redeemer. Then the same prayer goes on to introduce the angels. We are asked to join with them in thanking and praising and adoring Christ our Lord as we cry out with the same words they sung in Bethlehem on that first Christmas night: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth

peace and good hope to all.” Based on the Syriac Bible, our Maronite tradition presents us not only with the peace that Christ brought to the world by his glorious birth but also the good hope it has given to the human race. How fitting that at every Mass throughout the year we join with the angels in singing this hymn!

Other characters from the Nativity story are mentioned in the Prayer of Forgiveness. We hear of the shepherds receiving the message from the angels that a Savior is born to them in the city of David. They adore

God, who now lies as a child in a manger. Also mentioned are the magi and their act of adoration. For the Maronites (and the other Eastern Churches), Epiphany is about the Baptism of our Lord, and so Christmas is the proper time to remember the adoration of the magi.



The Nativity by Federico Barocci (c.1590)

In the second verse of the Entrance hymn, we call upon the prophets of the Old Testament to rejoice, since today, in the birth of Jesus, their words have been fulfilled; Isaiah, Jeremiah, and David are addressed by name. At the end of the verse we sing of Christ: “By his birth he has fulfilled the prophets’ words and embodied every hope.” What a powerful expression! By his incarnation he “embodied every hope!” Hope has taken flesh!

Mary, Joseph, the angels, shepherds, magi, and the prophets of old; the Glorious Birth of Our Lord brings all of these characters together.

In the Prayer of Forgiveness we pray: “By your birth, you brought together those who are far and those who are near to celebrate your feast.”

In the Maronite Christmas Liturgy there are two important words which are repeated over and over again: “Holy” and “Wonderful.” In the Hymn of Incense, we join the angels and repeatedly sing to the Son of God, the Son of Mary: “Holy, holy, holy Lord God.” Fr. Benedict Groeschel used to say that “holy” means “different.” Thrice-holy, this little Child in the manger is

very holy. This little Child is very different. For this little Child in the manger is God, and to this little Child we owe our adoration. In the Prayer of Forgiveness and again in the Psalm of the Readings, we join Isaiah (cf. Isa 9:6) in calling this little Child “Wonderful!” For “as a child God is revealed.” What a “Wondrous Child!”

Another important theme is “seeing.” How beautifully we pray in the Prayer of Incense: “When you became flesh, our eyes were able to see God, bringing us closer to the One who dwells in the heights. With the light of your knowledge, you enlightened our minds with the knowledge of the One who is beyond our understanding.” And in the third verse of the Entrance Hymn, the cherubim and seraphim cry out: “O Lord, mighty God, blest are those upon the earth, for you granted them to see with their own eyes your eternal majesty!” This reminds us of the words of the Gospel of St. John (v. 1:14): “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld

his glory, glory as of the only-begotten Son from the Father.” And again: “No one has ever seen God; the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.” (v. 1:18)

And in the First Epistle of St. John (v. 1:1-3), we read: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life — the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us — that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”

During this Season of the Glorious Birth of Our Lord, let us rejoice in God’s great love for us!

