

The Confessor's Tongue for December 24, 2023

29th Sunday after Pentecost: Nativity Eve

In honor of St. Maximus the Confessor, whose tongue and right hand were cut off in an attempt by compromising authorities to silence his uncompromising confession of Christ's full humanity & divinity.

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December 25: Nativity of Our Lord in the Flesh

We celebrate the Feast of our Lord's incarnation by greeting each other with the greeting, "Christ is born!" and the response, "Glorify Him!". We do not fast again until January 5, the Eve of Theophany. We sing the troparion (before) and kontakion (after) of the Feast in place of our usual prayers before and after meals through the Leavetaking December 31.

Nativity, Troparion, tone 4

Thy Nativity, O Christ our God / hath shone upon the world the light of wisdom. / For by it, those who worshipped the stars / were taught by a star to adore Thee, / the Sun of Righteousness, / and to know Thee, the Orient from on high. // O Lord, glory to Thee!

Nativity, Kontakion, tone 3

Today the Virgin giveth birth to the Transcendent One, / and the earth offereth a cave to the Unapproachable One! / Angels with Shepherds glorify Him! / The wise men journey with the star: // since for our sake the eternal God was born as a little child!

The Sunday Before Nativity

In the services of this week, the Church glorifies the Old Testament saints from whose human family came our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore in the Gospel appointed for this Sunday is read the "genealogy" of Jesus Christ. Together with these on this Sunday, as well as on the Sunday of the Forefathers (see Dec. 11), are commemorated all those living in faith and all the Old Testament saints who have come to the Savior, who are listed in the Epistle reading for this Sunday.

The Central Question

Patriarch Pavle of Serbia +2009)

And precisely today — here and now, for the two thousandth time — we celebrate and remember the event that divides history in two; the event so significant that we count the years from it, and now complete the second millennium. Two thousand years have passed since that night when history's greatest miracle took place in that cave near Bethlehem, when the Son of God Himself came and put on flesh and became like one of us and 'dwelt among us' [John 1:14]. He is none other than the eternal and uncreated Son, the Word or Logos of God, through Whom all things were made. Since that night, nothing in human life and history is as it was before. The 'Sun of Righteousness' [Malachi 4:2] was born to us, and all the depths of human fallenness and struggle against God have been filled by His warmth and light. From that night on, all human life and the history of every nation comes down to only one dilemma — to one simple question: Are you for or against Christ? One

simple question, but a question so crucial that our entire life, and the future of our people, hinges upon it. That question overshadows and defines every historical period of the past twenty centuries.

For or against Him? Earlier periods that were, at least for the most part, 'for Christ', brought forth fruit that stands as an example and a starting point for all times. That fruit is called Christian culture. It represents an attempt to Christianize every segment of personal, social and national life, so that nothing remains outside or apart from Christ. We call it an attempt, since nothing in history is absolute and final. But the value is truly in the deeply Christian attempt, since a basic characteristic of Christianity is its all-inclusiveness — that Christ be all in all. . . .

What is man, and what is he worth? The twentieth century said that man is nothing, but this feast today tells us, just as that day two thousand years ago told us, that man is sacred. And that applies not only to his spirit or his soul, but also to his body. The whole of man, body and soul together, is an inviolable shrine of incalculable and eternal worth. Today's feast tells us this: the day on which the Bodiless becomes embodied and on which the Son of God becomes the Son of man. This precisely is what is radically new in our faith. That the soul is holy is suggested by other religions, but that the body is equally sacred is found nowhere else. During the whole first eight centuries of Christianity, which were characterized by struggles against heresies, the Church unyieldingly defended this truth: that the whole of man, both body and soul, is holy. And that applies to every human being, regardless of his religion or nationality. Every murder, every disrespect for human personality and freedom, is sin, even more so when it is justified on ideological or nationalistic grounds. (*From a homily given in 1999*)

Questions at Christmas

St. John of Kronstadt

You are preparing yourselves to meet the Feast of the Nativity of Christ, you must ask yourselves: Have you preserved the spiritual birth from God which we each received in Baptism? Are you always heedful of your Divine sonship and the sacred treasure of the Spirit which you acquired in Baptism? Have you grown closer to God through faith and love, like His beloved children? Have you loved on another as befits children of God? Have you despised evil and all-destructive sin? Have you loved truth and every virtue? Have you loved immortal and eternal life prepared in a land which will not pass away and to which we are called by Him who now has come to our corrupt earth? These are questions which we must ask ourselves now and decide; not only with our minds, but above all, with our hearts and our very deeds.

Questions for the New Year A.D. 2024

We now celebrate the Feast of Christ's birth and coming into our dark world to bring us light. "Christ is born!" we cry. "God is with us!" The reality of God's joining Himself to the human race forever in the person of Jesus Christ is worth celebrating. It changes everything for us and the whole human race.

But how has this truth changed us since last Nativity? Have we grown in grace and in the knowledge of God this past year? Have we driven sin from more of the territory of our hearts like the Hebrews were to drive the Canaanites from the Promised Land, or have we allowed it to dwell peacefully within us and even increase?

The New Year will be upon us in a week. In the light of Nativity and in the midst of the joy of the Feast, take some time to plan spiritually for the new year, to set some spiritual goals, to set in order what has fallen into disorder in your life, to respond more fully to the truth that 'Christ is born' and 'God is with us.' What steps can you take this year to make sure that you really do seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, so that all the other things you need may be added to you in accordance with Christ's promise? How can you more strenuously resist the devil so that he will flee from you? How can you use the shield of faith to extinguish all his flaming darts of impassioned thought? How can you purify your heart to make it a worthy temple for the Holy Spirit? How can you grow in love for God and others?

Our faith is nourished by private prayer at home. Without prayer, we will not grow more attached to Christ or be able to stand against the evil one. The Church in her literature offers us extensive instruction in the art of prayer. Deep prayer is not just for monks and nuns—it is for all of us and can be cultivated wherever we live. Reading the Scriptures reveals God's will to us expressed in the commands of Christ and His apostles. If we do not actively apply Christ's commands to our lives to be directed by them, we shall not be purified, nor shall we be able to love God, our spouse, our children, let alone our enemies. Reading the lives of the saints and other spiritual literature of the Church shows us what the Christian life lived out can look like, giving us a vision of what we can be, and showing us how to do it.

Any day of our life can be the day we make a beginning of good. Any moment can be the moment we turn from sin in repentance and turn to Christ. The end of an old year and the start of a new is a propitious time, though, to think, pray, and plan about how we can make a start to acquiring a greater good in our life ahead.

We must give more earnest heed to the things of Faith which we have heard, lest at any time we let them slip away from us and we slip away from Christ. Take some time over the next week to plan prayerfully for your new year in Christ. *Fr. Justin Frederick*

Atheists in Space: Why the Future is Religious

Paul Kingsnorth

This is the larger part of a just-published article, for which a link will be provided in the regular Sunday email. Paul Kingsnorth publishes regularly at The Abbey of Misrule on Substack. He is an Orthodox Christian and well worth following.

Sometimes I think I've been lied to my whole life.

Everyone, everywhere, lives by a story. This story is handed to us by the culture we grow up in, the family

that raises us, and the worldview we construct for ourselves as we grow. The story will change over time, and adapt to circumstances. When you're young, you tend to imagine that you have bravely pioneered your own story. After all, the whole world revolves around you. As you age, though, you begin to see that much of what you believe is in fact a product of the time and place you were young in.

In my case, the time and place was Britain in the Eighties and Nineties, and the story we were immersed in then already seems like the product of a long-gone era. It was made up of the fading Christian heritage of England, the liberalism which had replaced it, an Enlightenment-era faith in science, reason and 'progress', and the much newer afterglow of the Sixties sexual revolution. This mess somehow gave birth to the weird combination of radical individualism and authoritarian thought-control that stalks the culture now.

Whatever the precise components, I grew up believing in things which I now look on very differently. To put career before family. To accumulate wealth as a marker of status. To treat sex as recreation. To reflexively mock authority and tradition. To put individual desire before community responsibility. To treat the world as so much dead matter, to be interrogated by the scientific process. To assume our ancestors were thicker than us. I did all of this, or tried to, for years. Most of us did.

Perhaps above all, and perhaps at the root of all, there was one teaching that permeated everything. It was to treat religion as something both primitive and obsolete. Simply a bunch of fairy stories invented by the ignorant. Simply a mechanism of social control. Nothing to do with us, here, now, in our very modern, sexually liberated, choose-your-own-adventure world. We were with Nietzsche, we moderns: we knew the God stuff was self-deluding balls, and soon enough the apostles of the New Atheism would be along to rub it in for us. Dawkins would sneer and Hitchens would bray and the pattern of the 21st century would open up before us: a slow, steady crawl towards a world unclouded by anything that could not be managed or measured by the people we believed we had become.

It was fun, in its way. Now that I look back, I almost wish it had been true.

A feast without a fast is a strange, half-finished thing: this is something I've only learned recently. We are in the midst of the greatest annual feast of all, the one that most people, whether Christian or not, are going to end up celebrating. I've celebrated Christmas all my life, mostly with no religious trappings, and I've always loved it; more so since I became a father. But Christmas, in historical terms, is only one of a number of great feasts that make up the Christian ritual year, which was once — and still is in those parts of the world which continue to take it seriously — studded with saints days, festivals, processions, and feasts.

The Christmas feast is the last remnant, in the secular West, of the ritual year that made us. Since I [unexpectedly became a Christian](#) three years ago, I have thrown myself into it with the predictable gusto of a

new convert, and it has helped me to understand something about the world I grew up in: we wanted the feasts without the fasts. This, in fact, is the basis of our economic model.

In the Eastern Orthodox Church into which I was baptised, as in the pre-Reformation Catholic Church in Europe, Christmas, like Easter, is preceded by a long fast. The Orthodox fast for 40 days before both major holy festivals, which are then marked by several days of feasting. The fast, as I can currently attest, sharpens the feast. It counts down the days, it provides a communal experience — everyone in the Church is following the same fasting rules together — and most of all it trains the body and the mind to do without, in the service of focusing on something higher. That, at least, is the theory. After doing this for 40 days, Christmas lunch certainly tastes better.

What happens, then, if you feast without fasting? What happens if your culture encourages you to feast every day, because your economy is predicated on endless, consumer-driven growth? Probably the same thing that happens if you decide that all borders, boundaries and limits, be they economic, social, sexual or cultural, must be torn down in the name of 'freedom'. It's like taking a child to a sweet shop and allowing him to eat anything he wants. For a while it's fantastic, and then it isn't. More, it turns out, is not actually better. More just makes you sick.

A century ago, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats and his new wife George were ensconced in their Norman tower house in County Galway, taking down dictation from the spirit world. Yeats had just published one of his greatest poems, *The Second Coming*, which reads like a news report from the 2020s:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity ...*

William and George were newlyweds, and only a few days after their wedding, George, who shared Yeats's passion for the esoteric and occult, had begun to produce what spiritualists back then called 'automatic writing'. Both came to believe that, as the text progressed, they were being given access by something or someone to what Yeats called 'a system' that explained the narrative arc of human history. Yeats laid out this system, based on George's writings, in his strangest book, *A Vision*, published in 1925.

The symbolism contained in *The Second Coming* doesn't make much sense without reading *A Vision*. What, for example, is this 'gyre' and why is it 'widening'? Who or what is the 'rough beast' which the last stanza chillingly sees 'slouching towards Bethlehem to be born'? *A Vision* answered the questions. Yeats and George had come to see human history as a series of 'gyres', rising and falling according to a predictable pattern. A gyre, Yeats explained, is like a cone of time. It begins as a tiny circle, then spirals outwards and forwards, widening with

each revolution. When it reaches its widest point, it is unable to hold together. The 'widening gyre' begins to break down under the centrifugal pressure, and a historical epoch crashes to its end. But as this is happening, a new gyre is being born within the first, spiralling out in the opposite direction. In the death of one world is sown the seeds of the next.

Each gyre, wrote Yeats, has a fixed timescale of around 2,000 years. *The Second Coming* is the story of the end of the gyre which began in Nazareth 2,000 years ago. The 'Christ gyre', Yeats prophesied, would come to an end in the 21st century. Something else, then — some rough beast — would begin its slow, slouching rise. . . .

Mary Harrington has been writing for some time about [self-creation](#) as one of the new sacred values of the post-Christian world, while Wesley Yang has recast what he once called the 'successor ideology' of Western wokeism as a '[successor theology](#)', offering up a new set of sacred values.

What might those values be? We could start with nature worship, self-worship, and a sacrificial attitude to disposable human lives. Then we could combine these with the increasingly obvious religious vision of the Silicon Valley crowd, with their [transreligions](#) and [AI Gods](#) and pursuit of [silicon transcendence](#). Add it all up and we can make out the dim shape of the second religiousness in what passes for the cultural mainstream: self-creation in a Godless, genderless, borderless, natureless world of tattooed, disposable people and all-seeing living machines. Behold the silicon paganism of the 21st century.

In response, we are now beginning to see a resurgence in genuine religion. Personally, and anecdotally, I am noticing this everywhere. In American Orthodox churches bursting with young families. In atheists or neo-pagans suddenly becoming Christians (I plead guilty). In my own speaking events about Christianity, which are suddenly inexplicably popular, and not because of me. Others I know report the same thing: for the first time in a long while, people are beginning to take faith seriously again. Actual religion — the thing that was supposed to die a slow death at the hands of reason — is emerging slowly from the shadows as the new paganism takes hold.

But as Spengler himself warned, there is no guarantee that a 'second religiousness' will be an entirely benevolent thing. Knowing what we do of human history, in fact, we can pretty much guarantee that it won't. There have always been two kinds of religion, or perhaps two ways of responding to religious teachings. There is the internal or mystical response, and then there is the worldly or political one. In Christian terminology, we might call these the way of the world and the way of the kingdom. Christ taught that the path home to God — which is the path to the true self — is a narrow one, and that few ever find it. He also explained that God was to be found not in the clouds or in the stars, but in every human heart. The Christian Way, as its first followers referred to it, is in other words a path of internal transformation — what the Orthodox call the 'unseen warfare' that goes on in the heart every minute. The battle between the way of God and the way of the

world: every religion I know of teaches some version of this.

Being human, though, we like to take these teachings and overlay them onto the world. In Christian history, this has often taken the form of crusading — sometimes literally — to transform the kingdom of Man into the kingdom of God by force. Unfortunately, since the people doing the crusading have not first fought their own unseen war to transform themselves, they end up falling into a neat little trap set by the devil, and transforming the Church into an instrument of repression, or simply a vehicle for worldly political activism. This can apply equally to liberal Christians who want to remake the Church in the rainbow flag-bedecked image of the 'social justice' Left, and to conservative Christians who want Jesus to lead their battle to defend 'faith, flag and family' against the woke libs.

Currently, this trend is manifesting most obviously in the form of a 'cultural Christianity' promoted by anti-woke public figures on the right. In this reading, the Christian Way is a weapon which can, in the words of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, [writing](#) as a recent convert, 'fortify us against our menacing foes.' Ironically, this spiritual-warfare-as-civilisational-warfare attitude is most obvious at present in the rise of the violent Islamism which so frightens Hirsi Ali, and with good reason. The nervousness with which Europeans have been shopping in their Christmas markets this month is testament to the reality of the violence which some people think that God will help them justify.

If all of this is part of the second religiousness, it won't work: or at least, it won't take us any closer to God. Religion, despite the many calcified failures of its history, is not at root a weapon in anybody's culture war. Religion and culture reign in separate domains. A faith wielded as a stick with which to beat the 'cultural Marxists' will end up being as empty as the consumer void it seeks to challenge, and potentially as toxic. C. S. Lewis had already spotted the trap more than 60 years ago:

Religions devised for a social purpose, like Roman emperor-worship or modern attempts to 'sell Christianity as a means of saving civilisation', do not come to much. The little knots of Friends who turn their backs on the 'World' are those who really transform it.

What Lewis is describing is Christ's narrow way: the path of the Desert Fathers rather than that of Emperor Constantine. The divine irony is that it is only by walking away from the world that we have any chance of changing it.

The future, though, like the past, will probably offer up both paths. We should expect a second religiousness to lead to new Desert Father-like movements, away from the world and into the wilderness, and at the same time give us more openly religious conflict in the public sphere. The two have always been related. The original [Desert Fathers](#), back in the fourth century, fled to become hermits in the sands of Egypt in part to escape the newly civilised version of the Christian faith, which had recently become the official religion of the Roman Empire. Christianity and Empire have never mixed well. When God came to Earth, after all, He turned up as a barefoot carpenter, not a proconsul, and he had nothing at all to say about politics, despite living at a time of deep political ferment in an occupied nation. He had bigger fish to fry. I think we should assume He knew what he was doing.

communities, our heritage, our assumptions, our ecosystems: everything is under strain, under attack or straining at the seams. What is the cause? It is mass immigration? Is it post-modern relativism? Is it the woke Left? Is it the far-Right? And what is the solution? Is it a robust defence of 'enlightenment values'? Is it writing free speech into law? Is it border control? Is it even more YouTube videos?

I think that all of this is just a form of temporary displacement activity. I think the real story is that our religious sensibility is slowly revealing itself to us again, emerging blinking into the light; our instincts are trying to return to their source. On some level we perhaps know this, but we are holding it off as long as possible, because to turn around and look into the light would be to accept that our whole culture has been trailing down a dead-end road since the Enlightenment. We can't look at that fact, so we look at absolutely everything else instead. But the confrontation can't be put off forever.

The biggest lie my culture told me was that matter was dead, along with God, and that humans could reason their way to freedom. Reason has its uses — it is a gift we are given, and we should wield it, like technology, as wisely as we can. But at root, humans are fundamentally spiritual animals. The future is not atheists in space. The future, like the past, will be religious. Even the the rationalists and the soldiers-of-Enlightenment are wobbling on the ground from which they once scoffed so proudly at the babushkas and the saints. It may be that the new gyre is beginning, quietly, to turn.

Our crumbling culture can be so hard to navigate. Religion can be hard to navigate too. But maybe Christmas can help us understand what it is, and what part of us it services. Religion is not, as atheists often assume and I once assumed too, a set of beliefs to be adhered to, or arguments to be made and defended. It is an experience to be immersed in. The orthopraxy reveals the orthodoxy. Fasting makes no sense until you fast. Praying is meaningless, even embarrassing, until you start to pray. If the Christian path is straight and narrow, we can do nothing but try to walk it, even if we keep falling off. God makes no sense until you start to talk to him. Then, strangely enough, all sorts of other things start to make sense too. It is hard, if not impossible to explain, and yet it is the simplest thing in the world. We have always done it. We always will.

I remember the first time I tentatively stepped into an Orthodox church to attend a Divine Liturgy. I had no idea what to do, or what to expect, or whether I even really wanted to be there. From the outside, to the Western mind, it all looks intimidatingly Byzantine — not to mention extremely long. But something happens when you stand, immersed in it all. You come to feel as if you are being carried down a great timeless river to an almost unfathomable destination that you could never reach on your own. But of course, you are not on your own. Not now. You will never be on your own again. You have come home.

Upcoming Events 2023

24 December: Nativity Vigil, 6:00 p.m.
25 December: Nativity Liturgy, 8:00 a.m.
30 December: Nativity Monastery Feast Day, 10:00 a.m. ([register on-line at https://www.nativitymonastery.com/](https://www.nativitymonastery.com/))

GLORY BE TO GOD FOR ALL THINGS!

Western culture seems to be visibly collapsing before our eyes. Our nations, our family structures, our