

Journey to Bethlehem

Jesus Christ: Yesterday, Today, and Forever ~

Two thousand years ago in the first Advent, the week before Jesus' birth, the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph would have been traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem. What was it like reaching Bethlehem and settling into the cave? Fortunately, in the visions of Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich we have an idea. Blessed Anne was the greatest visionary on the Life of Jesus the Church has ever known. She passed away in 1823. You can find all of her visions from Angelico Press, much of them are free online as well. In this pastor's column I share some of what she saw concerning the Holy Family's travels from Nazareth to Bethlehem. In my Christmas pastor's column, I'll share some of what she saw of the birth of Jesus. Both accounts are highly abridged due to a lack of space. Enjoy.

May Our Lord Bless You,



Fr. Thomas Nathe

Taken from The Life of Christ by Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich

An angel appeared to Joseph and said that he should set out at once with Mary for Bethlehem, as it was there that her Child was to be born. The angel told him, moreover, that he should provide himself with a few necessities, but no laces nor embroidered covers, and he mentioned all the other things he was to take. Joseph was very much surprised. He was told also that, besides the ass upon which Mary was to ride, he was to take with him a little she-ass of one year which had not yet foaled. This little animal they were to let run at large, and then follow the road it would take.

I saw Joseph and Mary in their house at Nazareth; Anne [mother of Mary] too was present. Joseph informed them of the commands he had received, and they began to prepare for the journey. Anne was very much troubled about it. The Blessed Virgin had had all along an interior admonition that she should bring forth her child in Bethlehem; but in her humility she had kept silence. She knew it, also, from the Prophecies. She had all the Prophecies referring to the birth of the Messiah in her little closet at Nazareth; she read them very often and prayed for their fulfillment. She had received them from her teachers at the Temple, and by the same holy women had been instructed upon them. Her prayer was al-

ways for the coming of the Messiah. From those Prophecies she knew that the Savior would be born in Bethlehem, therefore she lovingly submitted to the Divine Will and began her journey. It was a very painful one for her, since at that season it was cold among the mountains. Mary had an inexpressible feeling that henceforth she must and could be only poor. She could possess no exterior goods, for she had all in herself. She knew that she was to be the Mother of the Son of God. She knew and she felt that, as by a woman sin had entered into the world, so now by a woman the Expiation was to be born. It was under the influence of this feeling that she had exclaimed: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord!" I understood, likewise, that Jesus was conceived of the Holy Ghost about the hour of midnight, and about midnight should be born.

The Arrival in Bethlehem

Mary and Joseph went around by the north and approached Bethlehem on the west. A short distance outside the city, about a quarter of an hour's walk brought them to a large building surrounded by courtyards and smaller houses. There were trees in front of it, and all sorts of people encamped in tents around it. This house was once the paternal home of Joseph, and ages before it had been the family mansion of David. It was at this period used as the custom house of the Roman taxes.

Joseph still had in the city a brother, who was an innkeeper. He was not his own brother, but a step-brother. Joseph did not go near him. Joseph had had five brothers, three full-brothers and two step--brothers. Joseph was five and forty years old. He was thirty years and, I think, three months older than Mary. He was thin, had a fair complexion, prominent cheekbones tinged with red, a high, open forehead, and a brownish beard.

Joseph went straight into the custom house, for all newcomers had to present themselves there and obtain a ticket for entrance at the city gate. Joseph went up to a large room in an upper story, where he was interrogated, who he was, etc., and his questioners examined long rolls of writing, numbers of which were hanging on the walls. They unrolled them and read to him his ancestry, also that of Mary. Joseph knew not before that through Joachim, Mary had descended in a straight line from David. He told the official that he possessed no real estate, that he lived by his trade and the assistance of his wife's parents. Mary also was summoned to appear before the clerk, but not upstairs. She was interrogated in a passage on the first floor, and nothing was read to her. Only those that had no establishments, that possessed no estates, had to report at their birthplace [for the census].

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Joseph then went with Mary into Bethlehem on whose outskirts the houses stood scattered, and into the heart of the city. At the different streets they met, he left Mary and the ass standing while he went up and down in search of an inn. Mary often had to wait long before Joseph, anxious and troubled, returned. Nowhere did he find room; everywhere was he sent away. And now it began to grow dark. Joseph at last proposed going to the other side of the city, where they would surely find lodgings. They proceeded down a street, which was more of a country road than a regular street, for the houses stood scattered along the hills, and at the end of it reached a low, level space, or field. Here stood a very beautiful tree with a smooth trunk, its branches spreading out like a roof. Joseph led Mary and the beast under it, and there left them to go again in quest of an inn. He went from house to house, his friends, of whom he had spoken to Mary, unwilling to recognize him. Once during his quest, he returned to Mary, who was waiting under the tree. He wept, and she consoled him. He started afresh on his search. But whenever he brought forward the approaching delivery of his wife as a pressing reason for receiving hospitality, he was dismissed still more quickly.

Meantime it had grown dark. Mary was standing under the tree. The ass was nearby, its head turned toward the tree, at the foot of which Joseph had made a seat for Mary with the baggage. Crowds were hurrying to and fro in Bethlehem, and many of the passersby gazed curiously at Mary, as one naturally does on seeing a person standing a long time in the dark. Ah, they little dreamed that the Savior was so near! Mary was so patient, so tranquil, so full of hope. Ah, she had indeed long to wait! At last she sat down, her hands crossed on her breast, her head lowered. After a long time, Joseph returned in great dejection. I saw that he was shedding tears and, because he had failed again to find an inn, he hesitated to approach. But suddenly he bethought him of a cave outside Bethlehem used as a storing place by the shepherds when they brought their cattle to the city. Joseph had often withdrawn thither to conceal himself from his brothers and to pray. It was very likely to be deserted at that season or, if any shepherds did come, it would be easy to make friends with them. He and Mary might there find shelter for awhile, and after a little rest he would go out again on his search.

At last, they reached a hill, in this hill was the cave or vault spoken of by Joseph. Joseph opened the light wicker door and, as they entered, the she-ass ran to meet them. She had left them near Joseph's paternal house, and had run around the city to this cave. She frolicked around and leaped gaily about them, so that Mary said: "Behold! It is surely God's will that we should be here." But Joseph was worried and, in se-

cret, a little ashamed, because he had so often alluded to the good reception they would meet in Bethlehem. There was a projection above the door under which he stood the ass, and then proceeded to arrange a seat for Mary. It was quite dark, about eight o'clock when they reached this place. Joseph struck a light and went into the cave. The entrance was very narrow. Joseph cleared it out and prepared as much space in the back part as would afford room for a couch and seat for Mary, who had seated herself on a rug with her bundle for a support. The ass was then brought in, and Joseph fastened a lamp on the wall. He went also to the city where he procured some little dishes, a bundle of other things, and I think, some fruit.

When Joseph returned, he brought with him a small bundle of slender sticks beautifully bound up with reeds, and a box with a handle in which were glowing coals. These he poured out at the entrance of the cave to make a fire. He next brought the water bottle, which he had filled at the rivulet, and prepared some food. After they had eaten and Mary had lain down to rest upon her rush couch over which was spread a cover, Joseph began to prepare his own resting place at the entrance of the cave [Saint Joseph never slept in the same space as the Ever-Blessed Virgin Mary]. When this was done, he went again into the city. Previously to setting out, he had stopped up all the openings of the cave, in order to keep out the air. Then for the first time, I saw the Blessed Virgin on her knees in prayer, after which she lay down upon the carpet on her side, her head resting on her arm, her bundle serving for a pillow. Joseph had enclosed by curtains his own sleeping place. The rest of the passage, from the recess to the entrance, he cut off by hangings, and there had a kind of storeroom.

Where Mary reposed before the birth of the Child and where I beheld her elevated above the ground at the moment of her delivery, there was a similar seat of stone. The spot in which the Crib stood was a deep recess, or side vault. Near it was a second entrance into the cave, which was in the ridge of a hill that ran toward the city. Besides the real Crib Cave, there were in the same hill, but lying somewhat deeper, two other caves, in one of which the Blessed Virgin often remained hidden.

The birth of Jesus to be continued with the Christmas Pastor's Column . . .