

A Little Child, God Before the Ages

A sermon on Matthew 2:1-12 preached by Nathan Nettleton, 6 January 2025

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Acknowledgement & Explanation

For tonight's sermon, I'm going to do something I used to do a bit for these special occasion services, but which I don't think I've done for about 10 years. And that is, I'm going to preach a paraphrased version of an ancient sermon from one of the great preachers of the past. So tonight's sermon is an abridged, paraphrased and adapted version of a sermon titled the *First Kontakia on the Life of Christ*, by the great sixth-century poet and singer, St Romanos the Melodist.

And before I launch into it, I want to explain something. Romanos the Melodist was known for a particular style of sung or chanted sermons, and this is one of them. Now maybe Samara could pull off something close to the original style of sung delivery, but I don't think I can, so I'm not going to try.

But what you should know is that it probably doesn't make sense to try to understand it the way you might a normal sermon. It is perhaps better to listen to it the way you might listen to a song, not trying to make sense of every line and follow the development of an argument, but listening more with your heart, letting the images and feelings and rhythm of it wash through you. Try to surrender to the vibe of the thing, and see what it does to you, rather than trying to find specific take-away teachings in it.

So, with that said, and thanks to Romanos the Melodist, here we go.

Sermon

Today is the culmination of our festival of the Nativity of our Lord.

Arise! Shine! For the light has come.

Today is the epiphany, the revelation, the enlightenment.

The Virgin has given birth

to the one who is above all being.

The earth offers a cave

to the one whom no one can approach.

Angels with shepherds give glory,

and magi journey with a star,

for to us there has been born

a little Child, God before the ages.

The key of Bethlehem has opened the gates of Eden,

come, let us see.

In a secret revealed we have found delight.

Come, let us receive the joys of Paradise

within the cave.

Like welcome rains on a parched land,

like a new spring welling up

where our ancestors longed to drink,

this baby born to the virgin

has quenched forever our ancient thirst.

For this, let us hurry to this place where there has burst forth

a little Child, God before the ages.

The mother's eternal Father

has willingly become her Son.

The saviour of infants

is laid as an infant in the hay.
As she who bore him gazes upon him, she says,
“Tell me, my Child, how were you sown,
or how were you planted in me?
High King, how do you come as a homeless stranger?
Maker of heaven, why have you come to those who wander the earth?
See, there is no place of welcome in the inn,
no place to lay your newborn head, not even a fox hole.
I sheltered in the cave where willingly you made your dwelling,
a little Child, God before the ages.”

As she asked such questions in secret
she heard the magi approach, seeking the child.
At once, she called to them, “Who are you?”
They answered her, “And you, who are you,
that you have borne such a Child,
that you have become mother and nurse
of a son without father?
On seeing his star we understood that there had appeared
a little Child, God before the ages.

When Mary heard these amazing words,
she bowed low and worshipped the offspring of her womb
and with tears, she said, “My Child,
great is all that you have done for me in my poverty;
for see, magi are outside seeking you.
The kings of the East
seek your face,
and the rich among your people beg to see you,
for truly your people are those
to whom you have been made known as
a little Child, God before the ages.

“So, since they are your people, my Child,
bid them come under your roof,
that they may see the wealth in our poverty.
Nod and let them enter.
Though we have nothing, we have everything,
for I hold you as a treasure that the kings have come to see,
for kings and magi know that you have appeared
a little Child, God before the ages.”

Jesus, our Messiah and true God,
wordlessly spoke to his mother’s mind
saying, “Invite in those I have drawn here,
for it is my eternal Word which gave light
to those who were seeking me.
To the eye it is a star,
but to the hungry mind it is a magnetic force.

It accompanied the magi, serving in my name,
drawing them on to the place where there has been born
a little Child, God before the ages.

“Therefore now welcome those who have welcomed me,
for I am in their hearts

as surely as I am in your arms;

I did not leave you

and yet I came with them.”

And so, the mother opens the door

and receives the company of the magi.

She opened the door, she from whom was born the door,

a little Child, God before the ages.

The magi at once hurried into the room

and, seeing the Christ, they trembled.

And the mother enquired of them, saying

“Tell us what has happened to you,

how a star travelled before you,

lighting your way and guiding you.

Where have you come from,

how did you discern that there had appeared

a little Child, God before the ages?”

To her question, the visitors from the East replied,

“We come from the land of Iraq.

It was there by the great rivers

that we first saw the spark from your Child rising into the sky,

and we have followed it through country after country,

through nations unknown,

among tongues incomprehensible.

We wandered through the earth

from Bagdad to Jerusalem,

and searched high and low with the lamp of the star

seeking out where there had been born

a little Child, God before the ages.

Mary, it is told, said to the faithful magi,

“So, your journey took you through Jerusalem,

that city which slays prophets?

How did you pass unharmed

through the city that is so hostile to all?

How did you avoid Herod,

who breathes out murder, not justice?”

But they answered her, “Virgin mother,

we did not avoid him, we deceived him.

We met them all and asked where there had been born

a little Child, God before the ages.”

When the Mother of God heard this from them, she asked them,
“What did King Herod and the Pharisees ask you?”
They replied, “Both Herod and your religious leaders
asked us the same question:
‘At what time exactly did this star first appear?’
But when they knew, it was as though they did not care,
for they had no desire to see the one
of whom they had sought to learn
because, for those who seek, there must be seen
a little Child, God before the ages.

“They thought us mad, the fools,
and asked, ‘From where have you come and when?
And how have you journeyed by unseen paths?’
But we in turn asked them what they already knew,
‘How did you in ancient times journey
through the sea and the great wilderness which you crossed?
The One who guided you to safety from the land of slavery
now guides those who come to him from beyond desert and sea.
Then the guide was a pillar of fire, and now a star which shows
a little Child, God before the ages.’”

Then, for you, Moses carried a staff ahead of you —
a lamp shining with the knowledge of God.
For us, everywhere the star traveled on ahead.
Back then, the manna nourished you, and a rock gave drink:
as for us, hope of Messiah has fed us to the full.
Tasting the Messiah’s first fruits,
we could not linger in Iraq.
We made up our minds to travel the trackless road,
yearning to see, to worship, and to honour
a little Child, God before the ages.”

These things were spoken by the wise magi,
and were attested to by the holy Virgin.
And what both had said was confirmed by the infant himself.
And with their story finished,
the magi produced gifts in their hands
and worshipped the one who is the Gift of all gifts.
To the infant Messiah
they gave gold and myrrh and incense
and begged, “Accept our triple gift,
as you do the ‘Holy Holy Holy’,
the thrice Holy hymn of the seraphim.
Embrace them through her who gave you birth,
and through whom you have been born for us,
a little Child, God before the ages.”

When Mary saw the magi offering their gifts in worship,
and the star shining upon him,
and the shepherds praising him,
she prayed to the Maker and Creator of all these things, saying,
“My Child, accept this trinity of gifts,
and grant to me who gave you birth, three requests.
I pray to you for the seasons,
and for the fruits of the earth,
and for those who dwell on it.
Reconcile all in yourself,
for through me you have been born
 a little Child, God before the ages.

“For I am not only your mother, compassionate Saviour.
It is not in vain that I suckle the creator of milk.
No, it is for the sake of all the world that I pray to you.
You have honoured me among women,
and made me the mouthpiece of all my race.
May my prayers be a mighty protection
for all your world.
May all who have been cast out and cast down,
all who have been scandalised and condemned,
all who have no place to lay their heads or call home,
may they look to me, and pray with me,
and find their way back,
for through me, you have been born
 a little Child, God before the ages.

“Save the world, O Saviour.
For this you have come.
Set your whole universe aright.
For this you have shone
on me your mother, and on the magi and on all creation.
For see, the magi, to whom you have shown the light of your face,
fall down before you and offer wonderful gifts.
And we will need them,
since now we must flee and the road ahead is hard.
The road to the promised land of life and love
passes first by the refugee road to Egypt.
So I flee with you and for you,
and I pray that all of my race, all humanity,
may flee with us, with you and for you,
my Guide, my Son, my Maker, my Redeemer, my Epiphany,
 a little Child, God before the ages.”