

The Nativity of Christ



Above: In the icon of the Nativity, Joseph appears as a dejected figure, isolated from Mary and Jesus and full of doubt. Joseph's position is partly a warning about the alienating effects of doubt. But the fact that his struggle is honestly recognized and given space in the icon tells us that doubt can also be an important aspect in the journey of faith.

In contrast to the homely stable of Western paintings, Eastern icons show the birth of Christ in a rocky cave. This agrees with early church tradition, but it also makes a dramatic theological point: that Christ, 'though he was in the form of God... emptied himself, taking the form of a slave'. The darkness of the cave (which already points us forward to the tomb of Christ), his swaddling clothes, the manger in which he lies, the exhausted posture of Mary—all speak of the humility of the eternal God in becoming a vulnerable human being. The feast is celebrated on 25th December.

*Today the Virgin gives birth to him who is above all being,
and the earth offers a cave to him 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.*

Hymn of Romanos the Melodist, 'On the Nativity', 6th century

*At his birth we duly kept festival... With the star we ran, with the
Magi we worshipped, with the shepherds we were enlightened, with
the angels we glorified him, with Simeon we took him up in our
arms, and with Anna the aged and chaste we made our responsive
confession. And thanks be to him who came to his own in the guise
of a stranger, because he glorified the stranger.*

Gregory of Nazianzus (329–389), 'Oration on the Feast of Lights'

Right: The Nativity, c.1500. At the centre of the icon, the Christ-child lies in the manger; in the darkness of the cave, as 'the light shining in the darkness'. The angel at top right bends down to tell the good news to a Bethlehem shepherd. The magi approach on swift horses from the centre left, while below we see the child being washed by two midwives, as a final emphasis of his humanity.