

The thing is well-pleasing to God not when a man acts mercifully on account of some human consideration but because the act is good in itself and because he acts sincerely out of compassion. That is truly well-pleasing to God! The thing is perfect when a man gives alms without meanness or reluctance, without despising the recipient but with eagerness according to his ability, of deliberate choice, giving as freely as if he were receiving, doing a kindness as graciously as if a kindness were being shown to him – then it is perfect. And so a man is well-pleasing to God, doing his will, as the Apostle says, the good, the well-pleasing and the perfect thing. This is to act with knowledge.

Saint Dorotheos of Gaza



Sunday 21 December 2014 is the Sunday before the Nativity

Matins Gospel: Luke 24:36-53

Epistle: Hebrews 11:9-10; 32-40

Gospel: Matthew 1:1-25

Resurrectional Apolytikion:

Let everything in heaven rejoice, let everything on earth be glad, for the Lord has shown strength with His arm; by death He has trampled on death; He has become the first-born from the dead; from the belly of Hades He has delivered us, and granted the world His great mercy.

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Readings and saints for this week:

Monday: Hebrews 3:5-11, 17-19; Mark 9:42-50; 10:1
Great Martyr Anastasia of Rome; Martyrs Chrysogonus and Theodota

Tuesday: Hebrews 4:1-13; Mark 10:2-12
10 Martyrs of Crete; Founding of Agia Sophia

Wednesday: Hebrews 1:1-12; Luke 2:1-20
Eugenia & Companions; Eve of Nativity

Thursday: Matthew 1:18-25; Galatians 4:4-7; Matthew 2:1-12
HOLY NATIVITY; The Adoration of the Magi

Friday: Hebrews 2:11-18; Matthew 2:13-23
Synaxis of the Theotokos; Euthemios the Confessor

Saturday: 1 Timothy 6:11-16; Matthew 12:15-21
Protomartyr Steven; Theodore the Branded



Evangelion

A Bulletin of Orthodox Christian Faith

21 December 2014

He Will Save His People from their Sins

Today, on the Sunday before Christmas, the Church once again focuses our attention on the men and women who have believed in the true God and prepared the way for the coming of His Son. Today's Gospel is from Saint Matthew's account of the Genealogy of Jesus Christ and traces His human ancestry back to the Patriarch Abraham.

This Gospel might sound to us like a rather dry collection of names, but there are important reasons why St Matthew opens his Gospel with it, and why the Church reads it just before Christmas.

Firstly, we need to be reminded that Jesus Christ was truly human, something that was doubted by some of the earliest heretics. He was not simply some sort of divine being who dwelt on earth, but a human being in whom the "whole fullness of divinity dwells bodily." (Col. 2:9)

Secondly, we need to be reminded that Christ was born into a concrete human history. He is the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham and to David; He is the fulfillment of all the hopes of the people of Israel.

Thirdly, we need to remember that Jesus Christ takes all of human history on Himself, the bad as well as the good. It is not only the faithful who are included in the list of Christ's ancestors; it also includes, murderers, adulterers, sinners and pagans. Like all human history, the history of the people of Israel was rather "messy." Yet Christ takes the whole of this history upon Himself; He enters into it in order to transform it from within.



When He saw that the one in His image and likeness had fallen through transgression, Jesus bowed the heavens and came down and made His dwelling in a virgin womb without change, thereby refashioning corrupted Adam, who cried out: Glory to Your epiphany, my Redeemer and my God!

Fourth Hymn of the Lity of the Nativity

Christ is Born! Glorify Him!

As Orthodox Christians, we will greet one another on Thursday with this confident exclamation that the Eternal Word of God has taken on our human flesh and been born of the Virgin Mary. And we proclaim that He is indeed worthy of all glory.

The Church understands the Nativity of Christ to be the revelation of the hidden mystery of God. It opens our hearts and minds to realities that were previously hidden, or known only in shadows. The prophets prepared for Christ's coming, but were only given glimpses of what God was doing. As one of the hymns of the Forefeast of the Nativity says:



*The Creator, the Wisdom of God, draws near;
the mist of the prophetic promise is dispersed.
Joy clears the skies;
Truth shines;
the dark shadows are restrained;
the gate of Eden is opened;
Adam dances in Exultation;
our Creator and God wills to fashion us anew.*

We see here that the birth of Christ opens up the Old Testament to us. The prophecies of the Old Testament become clear in Christ. Mist and shadow are put aside and we see God revealed in human flesh. Not only is Scripture explained and Christ revealed, but the gate of Eden, which was shut to us because of the fall, is also opened. Through His Incarnation, Christ opens again the way to Paradise. As we sing:

Foreseeing Your coming from the Virgin, Habakkuk cried out marveling: O Deliverer, You have come from Teman, to call back Adam from his exile.

The Lord draws nigh and comes, expectation of the nations and salvation of the world. O city of Bethlehem, prepare the cave: and shepherds of the Magi, make haste.

In the strength of Your Godhead, You have been joined with mortal men through a union without confusion, O Saviour, in the likeness of the flesh of Adam; and in thus assuming human nature you bestow upon it immortality and salvation.

The Word is made manifest and assumes the material substance of our flesh; and in His ineffable providence He takes up His dwelling among us. Come, O faithful, and let us look upon His glory, the glory as of the Only-begotten Son from God the Father.

The Magi, too, sought Him, and when they found Him in the crib,
Worship instead of investigation they offered Him in silence.
Instead of empty controversies, they gave Him offerings.
You, too, seek the First-born, and if you find Him on high,
Instead of confused searching, open your treasures before Him
And offer Him your deeds.

Saint Ephrem the Syrian

The very Son of God,
older than the ages,
the invisible,
the incomprehensible,
the incorporeal,
the beginning of beginning,
the light of light,
the fountain of life and immortality,
the image of the archetype,
the immovable seal,
the perfect likeness,
the definition and word of the Father:



He it is who comes to His own image and takes our nature for the good of our nature, and unites Himself to an intelligent soul for the good of my soul, to purify like by like. He takes to Himself all that is human, except for sin.

He was conceived by the Virgin Mary, who had been first prepared in soul and body by the Spirit; His coming to birth had to be treated with honour, virginity had to receive new honour.

He comes forth as God, in the human nature He has taken, one being, made of two contrary elements, flesh and spirit. Spirit gave divinity, flesh received it.

He who makes rich is made poor; He takes on the poverty of my flesh, that I may gain the riches of His divinity.

He who is full is made empty; He is emptied for a brief space of His glory, that I may share in His fullness.

What is this wealth of goodness? What is this mystery that surrounds me?

I received the likeness of God, but failed to keep it. He takes on my flesh, to bring salvation to the image, immortality to the flesh. He enters into a second union with us, a union far more wonderful than the first.

Holiness had to be brought to man by the humanity assumed by one who was God, so that God might overcome the tyrant by force and so deliver us and lead us back to Himself through the mediation of His Son. The Son arranged this for the honour of the Father, to whom the Son is clearly obedient in all things.

The Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep, came in search of the straying sheep to the mountains and hills on which you used to offer sacrifice. When He found it, He took it on the shoulders that bore the wood of the cross, and led it back to the life of heaven.

Christ, the light of all lights, follows John, the lamp that goes before Him. The Word of God follows the voice in the wilderness; the Bridegroom follows the Bridegroom's friend, who prepares a worthy people for the Lord by cleansing them by water in preparation for the Spirit.

We need God to take our flesh and die, that we might live.

We have died with Him, that we may be purified.

We have risen again with Him, because we have died with Him.

We have been glorified with Him, because we have risen again with Him.

* Nativity Homily of Saint Gregory the Theologian