

What shall we offer you, O Christ, because you have appeared on earth as a man for our sakes? For each of the creatures made by you offers you its thanks: the Angels their hymn; the heavens the Star; the Shepherds their wonder; the Magi their gifts; the earth the Cave; the desert the Manger; but we a Virgin Mother. God before the ages, have mercy on us.

Vespers of the Nativity



20 December 2015 is the Sunday before the Nativity of Christ

Matins Gospel: John 20:1-10

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

Gospel: Matthew 1:1-25

Resurrectional Apolytikion:

Having learned the joyful proclamation of the Resurrection from the Angel, and having cast off the ancestral condemnation, the women disciples of the Lord spake to the Apostles exultantly: Death is despoiled and Christ God is risen, granting great mercy to the world.

Seasonal Kontakion:

On this day the Virgin cometh to the cave to give birth to God the Word ineffably, Who was before all the ages. Dance for joy, O earth, on hearing the gladsome tidings; with the Angels and the shepherds now glorify Him Who is willing to be gazed on as a young Child Who before the ages is God.

Readings and saints for this week:

Monday: Hebrews 8:7-13; Mark 9:42-50; 10:1
Forefeast of the Nativity; Martyr Juliana of Nicomedia

Tuesday: Hebrews 9:8-23; Mark 10:2-12
Great Martyr Anastasia of Rome; Martyrs Chrysogonus & Theodota

Wednesday: Hebrews 10:1-18; Mark 10:11-16
10 Martyrs of Crete; Founding of Agia Sophia

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

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

Saturday: 1 Timothy 6:11-16; Matthew 12:15-21
Synaxis of the Theotokos; Euthemios the Confessor



Evangelion

A Bulletin of Orthodox Christian Faith

20 December 2015

Today the Virgin Comes to the Cave

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. Likewise, the focus on the Old Testament figures and prophecies in the days before Christmas could sound like a mere focus on historical details that seem rather removed from our lives.

It is striking, however, that the liturgical texts of the Church do not speak of the great events of our salvation in the past tense, but rather in the present tense. Christmas is not simply an historic event, but something that is real and present here and now. Therefore, the liturgical texts constantly emphasise the word "today":

"Today the Virgin comes to the cave." "Today the Virgin gives birth." "Today heaven and earth have been made new"

This "today" cuts across the centuries, making the events of the past present to us in a way that is more than mere historical remembrance. Christ's coming is ever-new. But, like those Old Testament figures who waited for him with eager expectation, so we need to open our hearts to Him. He comes to us, but we will only experience His presence to the extent that we make space for Him in our lives and eagerly seek His Coming.



Behold, the time of our salvation has drawn near.

O Cave, make ready!

The Virgin is drawing near to give birth.

Vespers of the Forefeast of the Nativity

The Icon of the Nativity

The faith of the Church is expressed in the icons of the various feasts as well as in the liturgical texts of the Church. Icons are not simply decorations, nor do they merely depict an historical event in a naturalistic way. Rather, they are an expression of the Church's faith, and an invitation to us to enter into that faith in a deeper way.



In the icon of Christ's Nativity we see familiar figures from the Gospel accounts, such as the angels, shepherds and wise men who come greet Christ's birth in a manger and worship Him. We also see elements from tradition, such as the midwives in the bottom left corner, who come to bathe the Infant Christ, thus showing that He is truly human with human needs like any other newborn baby. We see the ox and the donkey, who are not mentioned in the New Testament, but whose presence in the icon points us to the Prophet Isaiah's words about the people who do not recognize the Messiah, and challenges us about whether we truly recognize this Child

for who is. (1:3) In the bottom right hand corner we see Saint Joseph being tempted by the devil to doubt the Virgin Birth and we are reminded that the temptation to doubt is an ever-present reality.

But there is also a deeper symbolism in the icon that may not be immediately apparent. It occurs against the backdrop of the wilderness, reminding us of how the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness. This reminds us both that Christ was rejected by society and found refuge in the wilderness, and also that our world itself is a wilderness without God.

We also see that Christ's birth takes place against the backdrop of a cave, whose darkness symbolizes the darkness of our world. Just as in the icon of the Resurrection Christ descends into hell in order to free those whom it holds captive, so in the icon of the Nativity we see His birth breaking into the darkness of our world in order to liberate it and transform it. In the liturgical texts for the Nativity we sing: "Torch-bearer of Light, the flesh of God beneath the earth dissipates the darkness of Hades." The Nativity thus anticipates the Resurrection.

The icon shows us the fundamental truths of the Christian faith, showing that God has fully assumed our humanity and, through this, has conquered death and the power of death. But the icon also shows us the effect of this event on the natural world. For, as Saint Gregory the Theologian tells us, the Nativity of Christ is "not a festival of creation but a festival of recreation." Through the Incarnation of Christ the whole of creation is renewed and acquires a new meaning, and so in the icon we see different representatives of the created world. They bring glory to the Incarnate God and, through their transfigured state, show forth the radiant light of His victory over death.

The Nativity according to the flesh of our Lord and God and Saviour, Jesus Christ

On Friday we celebrate the Light of Christ which has shone into our world. In the Creed we confess our faith in Jesus Christ who, "for our sake and our salvation, came down from heaven, was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man."

At the heart of our faith is the belief that Jesus Christ assumed our human nature in order to heal it. As human beings we are created in God's Image, but through the entrance of sin into the world, the Image of God in us had become distorted and darkened. We had lost the power to save ourselves.

Because of His great love for us, God could not just leave us in such a state. Instead, in the Incarnation, He entered into the very depths of our human reality, taking our nature upon Himself and becoming like us in all things except sin.

The Nativity does not stand alone but is linked to, and will find its fulfillment in the victory of Christ's death and resurrection. Moreover, we also have to do our part in responding to His love. In the Incarnation, He has opened the way, becoming one of us so that we will be able to share in His divine life. For, as various Fathers say, "Jesus Christ became human so that human beings may become God."



Your Nativity, O Christ our God, made the light of knowledge dawn on the world; for through it those who adored the stars were taught by a star to worship You, the Sun of righteousness, and to know You, the dawn from above. Lord, glory to You.

Apolytikion for the Nativity



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