

What, then, was God to do?  
 What else could He possibly do, being God, but renew His Image in mankind, so that through it men might once more come to know Him? And how could this be done save by the coming of the very Image Himself, our Saviour Jesus Christ? Men could not have done it, for they are only made after the Image; nor could angels have done it, for they are not the images of God. The Word of God came in His own Person, because it was He alone, the Image of the Father Who could recreate man made after the Image.

Saint Athanasius the Great

**18 December is the  
 Sunday before the Nativity**

**Matins Gospel:** Luke 24:1-12

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

**Gospel:** Matthew 1:1-25

**Resurrectional Apolytikion:**

When the stone had been sealed by the Jews and the soldiers were guarding Thine immaculate Body, Thou didst arise on the third day, O Saviour, granting life unto the world. Wherefore, the powers of the Heavens cried out to Thee, O Lifegiver: Glory to Thy Resurrection, O Christ. Glory to Thy Kingdom. Glory to Thy dispensation, O only Friend of man.

**Apolytikion of the Sunday before Nativity:**

Great are the accomplishments of faith. In the fountain of flame the three Holy Youths rejoiced as though they were resting by the waters. And the Prophet Daniel showed himself to be a shepherd to the lions, as though they were sheep. Through their prayers O Christ our God, save our souls.

**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, 19 December:** 1 Timothy 5:1-10; Mark 9:42-50; 10:1  
 Martyr Boniface & Companions; Gregentius of Ethiopia

**Tuesday, 20 December:** Hebrews 10:32-38; Mark 9:33-41  
 Forefeast of the Nativity; Ignatius the God-Bearer

**Wednesday, 21 December:** 1 Timothy 5:22-25; 6:1-11; Mark 10:11-16  
 Forefeast of the Nativity; Martyr Juliana of Nicomedia

**Thursday, 22 December:** 1 Timothy 6:17-21; Mark 10:17-27  
 Forefeast of the Nativity; Great Martyr Anastasia of Rome

**Friday, 23 December:** 2 Timothy 1:1-2; 8-18; Mark 10:24-32  
 Forefeast of the Nativity; 10 Martyrs of Crete

**Saturday, 24 December:** Galatians 3:8-12; Luke 13:19-29  
 Eve of Nativity; Eugenia & Companions



# Evangelion

*A Bulletin of Orthodox Christian Faith*

Archbishopric of Good Hope

Patriarchate of Alexandria & All Africa

18 December 2016

## 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 Lily of the Nativity

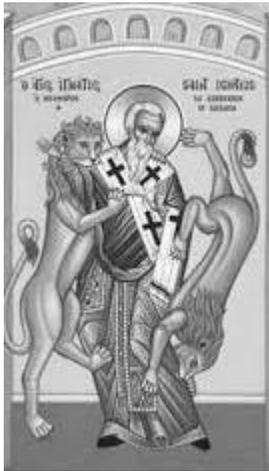
## The Royal Hours

On the eve of the Nativity (or on the Friday before it if the feast falls on a Saturday or Sunday) the Church chants what are known as the Royal Hours. In addition to psalms that are chosen for this day, these hours contain readings from Old Testament prophecies concerning Christ's birth, in addition to epistle and Gospel readings and hymnography that highlights their meaning.

If you are unable to attend the Royal Hours at your Church, you may find it helpful to read them (or parts of them) on your own, and they can be found online here:  
<http://www.agesinitiatives.com/dcs/public/dcs/p/s/2016/12/23/gh/en/se.m12.d23.gh.pdf>

*Today the Virgin comes to the cave to give birth ineffably to the pre-eternal Word. Hearing this, be of good cheer, O inhabited earth, and with the angels and the shepherds glorify Him whose will it was to be made manifest a young Child, the pre-eternal God. ...*

*Before Thy Birth, O Lord, the angelic hosts looked with trembling on this mystery and were struck with wonder: for Thou who hast adorned the vault of heaven with stars hast been well pleased to be born as a babe; and Thou who holdest all the ends of the earth in the hollow of Thy hand art laid in the manger of dumb beasts. For by such a dispensation has Thy compassion been made know, O Christ, and Thy great mercy: glory to Thee.*



### Saint Ignatius the God-Bearer

On Tuesday we commemorate Saint Ignatius the God-bearer of Antioch. He was a disciple of St John the Theologian and succeeded Evodus as bishop of Antioch where he strengthened the Church during a time of persecution. He was eventually arrested himself and early in the second century was transported to Rome to stand trial there.

During the journey St Ignatius was able to meet with local communities of Christians. He also wrote letters to these Churches and seven of them have been preserved and passed on to us. They are a moving testimony to his deep love of Christ, his care for the flock entrusted to him and a deep theology of the Church that stresses the unity of the believers who are united to their local bishop. On arrival in Rome St Ignatius declared his faith in Christ before the emperor and was martyred by being fed to the lions.



Mary's virginity and her giving birth escaped the notice of the prince of this world, as did the Lord's death — those three secrets crying to be told, but wrought in God's silence. How, then, were they revealed to the ages? A star shone in heaven brighter than all the stars. Its light was indescribable and its novelty caused amazement. The rest of the stars, along with the sun and the moon, formed a ring around it; yet it outshone them all, and there was bewilderment whence this unique novelty had arisen. As a result all magic lost its power and all witchcraft ceased. Ignorance was done away with, and the ancient kingdom was utterly destroyed, for God was revealing himself as a man, to bring newness of eternal life. What God had prepared was now beginning. Hence everything was in confusion as the destruction of death was being taken in hand.

Saint Ignatius of Antioch

## Preparing for Christ's Nativity

### The Forefeast of the Nativity

On Wednesday, five days before Christmas, the Church starts to celebrate the Forefeast of the Nativity. From this day, the liturgical hymns focus specifically on the birth of Christ as we intensify our preparation for His coming.

*Let us celebrate, O people,  
the forefeast of Christ's Nativity!  
Let us raise our minds on high,  
Going up in spirit to Bethlehem.  
With the eyes of our souls  
let us behold the Virgin  
As she hastens to the cave to give birth  
to the Lord and God of all.*

The season of Christmas is a time of celebration and everywhere around us we see celebrations of one form or another at this time of year. Yet these celebrations can easily distract us from what it is we are celebrating.

At this time of year, the Church's hymns encourage us to "go up in spirit to Bethlehem" and to behold the Virgin giving birth "with the eyes of our souls." They are calling us back to that which is most essential in life, and challenging us to make space in our lives to encounter God in the holy and awesome silence of His coming among us this Christmas.



***Be thou ready, Bethlehem,  
Eden hath opened unto all.  
Ephratha, prepare thyself, for  
now, behold, the Tree of life  
hath blossomed forth in the  
cave from the Holy Virgin. Her  
womb hath proved a true  
spiritual Paradise, wherein the  
divine and saving Tree is  
found, and as we eat thereof  
we shall all live, and shall not  
die as did Adam. For Christ is  
born now to raise the image  
that had fallen aforetime.***

Apolytikion of the Forefeast

And the Word became flesh ... in order to make us earthly beings into heavenly ones, in order to make sinners into saints; in order to raise us up from corruption into incorruption, from earth to heaven; from enslavement to sin and the devil – into the glorious freedom of children of God; from death – into immortality, in order to make us sons of God and to seat us together with Him upon the Throne as His royal children. O, boundless compassion of God! O, inexpressible wisdom of God! O, great wonder, astounding not only the human mind, but the angelic mind as well.

Saint John of Kronstadt