

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



25 December is the Nativity of Our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ

Matins Gospel: Matthew 1:18-25

Epistle: Galatians 4:4-7

Gospel: Matthew 2:1-12

Apolytikion of the Holy Nativity:

Thy Nativity, O Christ our God, hath shined the light of knowledge upon the world; for thereby they that worshipped the stars were instructed by a star to worship Thee, the Sun of Righteousness, and to know Thee, the Dayspring from on high. O Lord, glory be to Thee.

Kontakion of the Holy Nativity:

Today, the Virgin bears Him who is transcendent, and the earth presents the cave to Him who is beyond reach. Angels, along with shepherds glorify Him. The Magi make their way to Him by a star. For a new child has been born for us, the God before all ages.

Readings and saints for this week:

Monday, 26 December: Hebrews 2:11-18; Matthew 2:13-23
Afterfeast of the Nativity; Synaxis of the Theotokos

Tuesday, 27 December: Acts 6:8-15; 7:1-5, 47-60; Matthew 21:33-42
Afterfeast of the Nativity; Protomartyr Steven

Wednesday, 28 December: 2 Timothy 4:9-22; Luke 14:25-35
20,000 Martyrs of Nicomedia; Martyr Glycerus

Thursday, 29 December: Hebrews 2:11-18; Matthew 2:13-23
Holy Innocents; Abbot Marcellus

Friday, 30 December: Titus 1:15-16; 2:1-10; Mark 12:1-12
Great Martyr Anysia; Gideon the New

Saturday, 31 December: 1 Timothy 6:11-16; Matthew 12:15-21
Apodosis of Nativity; Righteous Melania



Evangelion

A Bulletin of Orthodox Christian Faith

25 December 2016

He Bowed the Heavens and Came Down

Today, 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.”

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 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 are they simply meant to 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 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 He is. (1:3) At the bottom 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 re-creation." 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 Light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it.** (John 1: 5)

On the Night of the Nativity

by Saint Ephrem the Syrian

Pure is the present night, in which the Pure One appeared, Who came to purify us! Let our hearing be pure, and the sight of our eyes chaste, and the feeling of the heart holy, and the speech of the mouth sincere!

The present night is the night of reconciliation; therefore, let no one be wroth against his brother and offend him!

This night gave peace to the whole world, and so, let no one threaten. This is the night of the Most Meek One; let no one be cruel!

This is the night of the Humble One; let no one be proud!

Now is the day of joy; let us not take revenge for offences! Now is the day of good will; let us not be harsh. On this day of tranquility, let us not become agitated by anger!

Today God came unto sinners; let not the righteous exalt himself over sinners!

Today the Most Rich One became poor for our sake; let the rich man invite the poor to his table!

Today we received a gift which we did not ask for; let us bestow alms to those who cry out to us and beg!

The present day has opened the door of heaven to our prayers; let us also open our door to those who ask of us forgiveness!

Today the Godhead placed upon Himself the seal of humanity, and humanity has been adorned with the seal of the Godhead!

