

12-15-19 Sunday of the Holy Forefathers
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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Until this morning, the Gospel reading assigned for each Sunday has been based on Pentecost, the Feast of Pentecost. However, today this morning, the second Sunday before Nativity, the Gospel reading leaves off its progression based on Pentecost and takes its assignment from the fact that Nativity is almost here. And the urgency that we feel, and that we are to feel, with the approach of this great feast and the unparalleled role of the Incarnation, the Incarnation of Christ, born as a babe, God become man, the role that that plays in our salvation, they are communicated to us in the Gospel reading that you heard this morning about the great banquet or the great supper. Really it should be, it's an evening service.

And we are presented with this Gospel reading of the Parable of the Invitation, the invitation to this great supper. Saint Gregory the Great says of this, "What is the time for the supper but the end of the world?" That this is what we are to be aware of in this Gospel reading with the great supper. What is this supper? What time is this supper? What does it symbolize other than the end of the world, St. Gregory tells us. It is the period in which we now live. God's meal is not called a lunch, I like that. God's meal is not called a lunch but a supper because after supper, after lunch, forgive me, there is still another meal to come. Whereas after supper, there is no remaining meal. We are called to this great banquet and everything is accomplished in its occurrence. Everything is accomplished with the Incarnation of Christ.

This is a sign, a message to us from the Church of the urgency of what is about to happen with the Nativity. Everything must now be set aside for the sake of not missing out on the greatest of the Father's gifts to us, which is his Son in human flesh. Every other gift is secondary to the Incarnation. Without the Incarnation, there is no salvation as we know it. There is no cross. There is no Resurrection. There is no partaking in the divine energies of God. No theosis, no deification, no saints shining with the uncreated light of the Transfiguration. Even Paradise and eternal life, think about it, even Paradise and eternal life take a back seat to the gift of the Incarnation. For both Paradise and immortality, Paradise and immortality were given to man before the Fall. Paradise and eternal life alone only result in being in the glorious splendor and omnipotent power of God forever as his servants, as his servants.

But when the Father gives his Son to redeem mankind, that is you and me, redeemed from the curse of the fall wherein God commanded that, "Surely you will die." And when his Son deifies human flesh in the Incarnation and makes it a communicant with the Holy Trinity through Himself, the Logos, the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, we- we are no longer called servants in his kingdom, but adopted sons and daughters of God, the Father. In St Paul to the Romans 8:14, he says, "You who are led by the Spirit of God, you are sons of God. You have not received the spirit of bondage again, which is the old covenant, the Old Testament law, but the Spirit. What have you received instead of the law of the Old Testament? You have received the spirit of adoption."

To the Ephesians, St Paul says, "Blessed be God who has given us every spiritual blessing in heaven through Christ, for ordaining us to adoption through Jesus Christ himself to the Father." Think about this as a dogma of the Church, something that we believe dogmatically, that we have to believe as Orthodox Christians. That we are called to be adopted through Christ to the Father himself, to be sons and daughters of God. Such a great feast is our celebration of the Incarnation at Nativity that in the old typikons, the Church simply refers to Nativity as Pascha, as Pascha. And what we think of as Pascha, it's Easter time, they called the Great Pascha, with Nativity being the Little Pascha or the Smaller Pascha.

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And to help prepare us for Nativity, the context within which we are to contemplate the Incarnation of Christ, is emphasized for us today and next Sunday. Those two Sundays, on the next Sunday, the Sunday of the Holy Fathers, that is the ancestors of Christ, we will focus on His family tree. The actual genealogy of Christ, which is our proof, the proof for us of His being fully human, as well as fully divine of his royal bloodline, of his priesthood, of his fulfillment of prophecy.

And yet today, the Sunday of the Holy Forefathers, the fore runners of Christ, we celebrate the love and the devotion and the zeal and the sacrifice of every man and woman, ancestor or not, who prepared mankind for receiving the Christ Child at Nativity. At Vespers last night and Matins this morning, we praised the men and women who shown forth before and during the giving of the Old Testament. We honored Adam himself, Abel, Seth, Enoch, Noah, Melchizedek, Sampson, Barak, Jephthah, Nathan, Eleazar, Josiah, Job, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron. We spoke of Joshua and Samuel, David and Solomon, Elijah and Elisha and all of the Prophets. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and all of the rest. Especially Daniel and the Three Holy Children, Zachariah, John the Baptist and all of those who proclaimed Christ before his incarnation.

We sang to the holy women who were, "Made strong in the days of old by the might of Your strength, Oh Lord." Hannah, Judith, Debra, Huldah, Joelle, Esther, Sarah, Miriam, Rachel, Rebecca and Ruth. We sing of all the righteous of the Old Covenant times, men and women, Hebrews and non- Hebrews who found life in God. And as the Epistle this morning proclaimed, "will appear with Him in His glory," when Christ who is our life, appears. When Christ, who is our life, appears, when he appears, he has already appeared in his Nativity, in the Incarnation, and he is going to appear again. And in this short passage from the Epistle, the whole emphasis of celebrating the community of forerunners becomes personal for each of us.

Think about this. For on one hand, we are only two weeks away from the Nativity and are obviously awaiting the appearance of Christ, the babe, born in the manger to celebrate it again.

Right now, all of Christendom around the world revolves around the past, yet timeless appearance of baby Jesus. And yet simultaneously, all of Christendom awaits his appearance at the end of the world, as well. So, the Gospel invites us to anticipate the Feast of the Nativity and the Epistle invites us to continue anticipating His second coming in glory and power.

To be a Christian is to live in anticipation, for we, too, are fore runners of Christ. Think about this, we too, us right here, are forerunners of Christ. We too, preach a message of anticipation to the world. We too, have the opportunity to love, to give devotion and zeal and sacrifice for the sake of Jesus, our Savior, the Messiah, who was incarnate as a child and who's coming again as King we foretell. Who came as a child, but who's coming again as a King in glory? We, the Christians foretell to the world.

In the hymns of the Canon of Preparation, which we'll be singing at Vespers next week, which is the little Holy Week of Nativity, we sing words like these, "Christ our judge commands us to be vigilant. We wait expectantly for his visitation. For he comes to be born of a Virgin, and yet at your second coming, Oh Christ, number me with the sheep at Your right hand, for You took up Your abode in the flesh to save us. At Your first coming to us, Oh Christ, You desired to save the race of Adam. When You come again to judge us, show mercy on those who have honored You at Your Nativity."

As Christians, we live out our lives between the two comings of Christ. He came first to be sacrificed and he returns again to reign in glory. This reality is at the center of our lives if we are attentive in our faith, it is also at the center of our worship and it encapsulates everything that we believe and everything that

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we do. Even here in the temple our living between the two comings of Christ is at the center of our worship. If you look to the iconostasis behind me, framing the faithful's view of the Holy Altar, we have the two comings of Christ. On the left, we have the Nativity, His birth, His incarnation portrayed in the icon of the Theotokos, with Christ as a child in her arms. And on the right, we have Christ, the God-man who comes again to judge and to reign, to reign as our King.

As Fr. Thomas Hopko puts it in one of his essays on the Nativity, he says, "Jesus is born to bring God's kingdom. He dies to prove his kingship. He rises to establish his reign and he comes again in glory to share it, to share it with his people. In the Kingdom of God, there are no subjects. All of us rule with the risen Messiah. He came and he is coming again for this purpose and this purpose alone, to share his kingdom and his rule."

When we stop and we contemplate that for a little bit, just to think about it, to pray about it, it makes it so obvious how we are to be responding to God constantly with glorifying Him, with gratitude, with love towards him. For when the theologians and the saints stop and think about, "Why is God doing everything that he has done? And why is His son being incarnate as a child?" And we find that it comes in as simple as a statement as He does all of these things in order to share His kingdom and His rule with us, his adopted sons and daughters. What can possibly restrain us from loving God as such a King, one who shares everything with those who are rightly His subjects, not His peers.

Even the exclusiveness of His title, Son, He shares with us, for He joins us by the spirit of adoption to His own Father, as the father's sons and daughters. And this is no earthly King. This is a heavenly King. It is not wealth and fame and other passing glories that He offers to us. He is our Creator; He is our God. We are from dust of the earth and He is calling us to the life and the glory eternal of the Divine. He offers us a share in everything that He has and everything that He is.

St. John of Damascus, in writing hymns for the Feast of the Transfiguration, gives us the following words. They are used among many churches as pre-communion prayers in certain traditions and they summarize perfectly what this Sunday of the Holy Forefathers is all about. St. John of Damascus: "You O Lord, have taken me captive with longing for You, and have transformed me with Your divine love. Burn up my sins with the fire of Your adopting spirit and count me worthy to take my fill of delight in You. That dancing with joy, I may magnify Your two comings into the world as a babe to save us and as a King to rule."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.