

The Confessor's Tongue for December 23, A. D. 2012

Sunday Before Nativity; Forefeast of Nativity; Holy Fathers; 10 Martyrs of Crete
In honor of St. Maximus the Confessor, whose tongue and right hand were cut off in an attempt by compromising authorities to silence his uncompromising confession of Christ's full humanity & divinity.

December 18-24: Sunday of the Holy Fathers

In the services of this week are glorified the Old Testament saints, from whose human family came our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore in the Gospel appointed for this Sunday is read the "genealogy" of Jesus Christ. Together with these on this Sunday, as well as on the Sunday of the Forefathers (see Dec. 11), are commemorated all those living in faith and all the Old Testament saints who have come to the Savior, who are listed in the Epistle reading for this Sunday.

In the church hymns for this day the Holy Church primarily sings "of the beginning fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob", "together with the Three Youths, who quench the fiery flames with the dew of the Spirit" and "the physical images of the hidden mysteries of God revealed to the world", and the prophet Daniel, who, "foretold the birth of the Christ from a virgin" and "foresaw that the cruel world would be counted among those with deep spiritual peace by the coming of Christ, having sometimes stopped the mouths of lions in the pit".

Questions at Christmas

St. John of Kronstadt

You are preparing yourselves to meet the Feast of the Nativity of Christ, you must ask yourselves: Have you preserved the spiritual birth from God which we each received in Baptism? Are you always heedful of your Divine sonship and the sacred treasure of the Spirit which you acquired in Baptism? Have you grown closer to God through faith and love, like His beloved children? Have you loved on another as befits children of God? Have you despised evil and all-destructive sin? Have you loved truth and every virtue? Have you loved immortal and eternal life prepared in a land which will not pass away and to which we are called by Him who now has come to our corrupt earth? These are questions which we must ask ourselves now and decide; not only with our minds, but above all, with our hearts and our very deeds.

Questions for the New Year

We now celebrate the Feast of Christ's birth and coming into our dark world to bring us light. "Christ is born!" we cry. "God is with us!" The reality of God's joining Himself to the human race forever in the person of Jesus Christ is worth celebrating. It changes everything for us and the whole human race.

But how has this truth changed us since last Nativity? Have we grown in grace and in the knowledge of God this past year? Have we driven sin from more of the territory of our hearts like the Hebrews were to drive the Canaanites from the Promised Land, or have we allowed it to dwell peacefully within us and even increase?

The New Year will be upon us in a week. In the light of Nativity and in the midst of the joy of the Feast, take some time to plan spiritually for the new year, to set some spiritual goals, to set in order what has fallen into disorder in your life, to respond more fully to the truth that Christ is born and God is with us. What steps can you take this year to make sure that you really do seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, so that all the other things you need may be added to you in accordance with Christ's promise? How can you improve and increase your prayer? Your presence at services? Your fasting? Your giving? Your service to your spouse, your family, your employer, your parish, and your town? How can you build yourselves up in your most holy faith through reading, contemplating, and living the Holy Scriptures? How can you be inspired by reading the lives of the saints, or instructed in the spiritual life by reading the spiritual literature of the Church?

We must give more earnest heed to these things which we have heard, lest at any time we let them slip away from us and we slip away from Christ. Take some time over the next week to plan prayerfully for your new year in Christ. *Fr. Justin Frederick*

December 25: Nativity of Our Lord in the Flesh

This week we celebrate the Great Feast of the Nativity of our Lord. We do well to keep the Feast by attending as many of the services celebrating it as we can manage: Royal Hours Monday 8:00 a.m., Vespers Liturgy (with the Old Testament Readings for the Feast) Monday morning at 10:00, Vigil Monday evening at 6:00, and the Feastday Liturgy Tuesday at 8:00.

We celebrate the Feast by greeting each other with the greeting, "Christ is born!" and the response, "Glorify Him!". We do not fast again until January 5, the Eve of Theophany. We sing the troparion (before) and kontakion (after) of the Feast in place of our usual prayers before and after meals through the Leavetaking December 31.

Nativity, Troparion, tone 4

Thy Nativity, O Christ our God / hath shone upon the world the light of wisdom. / For by it, those who worshipped the stars / were taught by a star to adore Thee, / the Sun of Righteousness, / and to know Thee, the Orient from on high. // O Lord, glory to Thee!

Nativity, Kontakion, tone 3

Today the Virgin giveth birth to the Transcendent One, / and the earth offereth a cave to the Unapproachable One! / Angels with Shepherds glorify Him! / The wise men journey with the star: // since for our sake the eternal God was born as a little child!

Archbishop Dmitri's Nativity Message for 2006

"But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the Law, to redeem them that were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption of sons" (Galatians 4:4-5).

In this brief passage taken from the Christmas Epistle, by directing our attention to the Incarnation, the Apostle Paul sums up the joy of the Nativity Season, the joy of our Faith. "God is with us," we triumphantly sing during the Christmas Eve Vigil; we rejoice that in the Person of Jesus Christ, God became Man to enlighten, sanctify, and reconcile us to Himself, to bestow on us dignity befitting His children. "But as many as received Him (Christ), to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His Name" (John 1:12). In Christ, as children of God our joy is complete, inexpressible and full of glory (John 16:24; 1 Peter 1:8). As with the "peace from above" for which we pray repeatedly during each divine service, Christian joy "passeth all understanding" (Philippians 4:7); it is impossible to comprehend except through experience, as it proceeds from an intimate relationship with God. Our joy in the Lord – the joy of Christmas – is mixed with great hope even in the midst of adversity for 'God being with us' empowers one to place everything into perspective, to understand profoundly every facet of human existence – triumphs and tragedies – as given meaning and possibilities through the Incarnate Lord. Christ, after foretelling His death and that which was to befall the disciples, told them, "...in the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16: 33). People know about tribulation; they know, as well, superficial happiness which is fleeting and unfulfilling. What they ultimately need and desire most is that which we experience profoundly at this time of year: authentic Christian joy which, early on, enabled the Church to be victorious in the world (Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*), and which has been the basis of Her mission ever since.

It is my personal prayer that our lives will be characterized continually by this most precious fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Whatever the present circumstances of our lives may we now relate to them in light of the joy of the Kingdom revealed through God's Son. This blessed season is one of rejoicing, forgiveness and love. God becoming Man demands an incarnate response from His followers. Faith in Christ must lead to a complete change of will and of attitude toward life itself in light of the Savior's appearance, to a life so transparent to His presence that it could be said, "...nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, Who loved me, and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount, sums up the kind of Godly existence – incarnate response – that is possible for His disciples in this world. St. Basil the Great, emulating his Lord, accomplishes something similar in the form of a prayer: "...rear the infants; train the young; support the aged; encourage the fainthearted; gather together the scattered and lead back those who wander astray, and join them to Thy Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. Free those who are vexed by unclean spirits; travel with those that journey by land, by sea, and by air; protect the widows; defend the orphans; deliver the captives; heal the sick. And those that are under trial, in the mines, in exile, in bitter bondage, in every tribulation, necessity, and danger, do thou remember, O God..." These words will be

chanted numerous times during Nativity and Theophany. As we recite them now and in the months ahead during Lent let us remember that the faithful constitute Christ's Body in this world; we are His mouthpiece, arms and legs to a society longing to see evidence of a Savior. That for which we pray we have a responsibility to accomplish: "...training, supporting, encouraging, reuniting, leading, protecting, defending, delivering, healing, and remembering..." "By (these things) shall all men know that ye are my disciples..." (John 13:35).

My recent visits to parishes in the Diocese have been a comfort to me as I see such efforts being made by its members. There is much yet to achieve in terms of evangelism, education and charity, and certainly our ongoing endeavors in these areas are in constant need of improvement. The "success" of our mission, however, is being felt by our struggles to remain faithful to that vision of God and man revealed in and through Christ. I am constantly amazed by the challenges to that vision, put forth by both Christians and non-Christians. In the name of Christian love diverse lifestyles are now described as acceptable and in some cases are "blessed" by various churches; quasi-evangelists can be found whose message varies little from that of professional motivational speakers; salvation is often preached in legalistic terms, rather than as a natural result of a living relationship with God through the Incarnate Lord; Christ's divinity is denied not only by members of other religions but is seriously questioned by numerous Christians; and the meaning, the far reaching effect, of this most radiant season is trivialized by believers themselves – lost – not merely by the excessive emphasis on gifts and overindulgent celebrations, but through a false dichotomy present in the minds of many between the feast of the Nativity and the family. "Christmas is for families," "Christmas is for children," we hear repeatedly. The evidence of such widespread, limited sentiment was revealed powerfully in 2005 when many non-Orthodox Churches were closed on Sunday, December 25 because it was accepted and taken for granted that most members would stay at home to be with their loved ones. It seems that, religiously speaking, confusion reigns in the minds and hearts of millions of people, even amongst Christ's followers. Yet, with the simple declaration, "God is with us," we proclaim the end to such bewilderment and ignorance, and the joy of knowing the truth which sets us free. With the birth of Christ we affirm the coming of a Savior sent to unite rather than divide; to forgive rather than judge; to enlighten, not confound; to heal and bind, not destroy.

Brothers and sisters in Christ let us thank God for the gift of His Son. Through our actions and words may we be found worthy of His love. Let us look deeply into our hearts, taking stock of the only appropriate response to such a gift, a life dedicated to emulating our Lord. The blessings of this Nativity Season be upon all of you.

Upcoming Events 2012-2013

- 25 December: Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord
- 27 December: Open House at the Rectory.
- 21 January: Feast of St. Maximus with John Granger.

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!