

Saint Joseph

*The Gospels do not record one
single thing that Joseph
said in his lifetime.
Still, the Church will forever
remember his actions,
which speak much louder
than any words.*

Saint Paul the Apostle Orthodox Church

24 BURKE ROAD

FREEHOLD, NJ 07728

Sunday before the Nativity

December 19, 2010

Father Robert E Lucas, Pastor; Subdeacon Daniel J. Korba and Nikitas Tsokris, Cantors Rectory 215-862-9227; Parish Center 732-780-3158

We Are A Stewardship Parish Of Time, Talent and Treasure

The mission of our parish faith community is to teach the Gospel message in the rich tradition of the Orthodox Church; to enable people to reflect the image of Jesus Christ in every day activities of life; to offer spiritual formation through changing times; and to celebrate community among Orthodox believers in our Freehold area.

We of St. Paul the Apostle Parish dedicate ourselves to maintaining the sanctity of worship and spiritual enlightenment in a family environment that reaches and involves all ages and unifies all people.

We believe in the spirit of ecumenism in which we share our faith by word and example and extend our spiritual insights to all people.

We accept the responsibility of Christian Stewardship that through generous giving we may all experience a faith communion with Christ as the Center of our lives.

We dedicate ourselves to insuring the well-being of all people so that we may truly experience the message of Christ's salutary gospel.

We are a beacon on a hill with the eyes of many upon us; that beacon is the inspired Light of Christ which must shine brightly in our lives.

It is not ourselves we preach but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts, that we in turn might make known the glory of God shining on the face of Christ. This treasure we possess in earthen vessels to make it clear that its surpassing power comes from God and not from us. We are afflicted in every way possible, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in us 2 Corinthians 4: 5 - 8.

GLAD TIDINGS

+++ Please prepare appropriately for the coming feast of the Lord's Nativity in the flesh. Friday is a day of strict fast which means no meat or dairy products that our souls and bodies eagerly hunger for his heavenly nourishment and sustenance in coming among us. Offer your fasting to our heavenly Father in petition for the spiritual growth of our parish.

+++ The Scripture Study Class meets on Tuesdays at 11:00 AM to 1:00 PM. Please come and join us by investing time in learning our precious faith so we can better enjoy and live it! The public is invited to participate with us, so invite a friend or neighbor. In preparation for this week, please read the thirteenth to sixteenth chapters of the Book of Genesis.

+++ *Prices for all the baked goods and products we have for sale will increase beginning January 1. We determined it is better to assure the high quality of our goods instead of reducing their size or using inferior products to make them. A printed listing will be provided this coming week-end at the Bake Sale. A notification letter was included with orders to all our customers.*

+++ *We sincerely thank all who worked, prepared for and secured and distributed orders for the Bake Sale this past week. May the gracious Lord continue to bless you and loved ones with good health for Many6 & Blessed Years!*

+++ For the good of the parish, please gladly assume the fasting regulations of the Church during this sacred season personally to make ourselves worthy managers of the Lord and secondly, for the growth and spiritual advancement of our parish that it grow by the grace of Christ.

+++ *The sign-up sheet for both the Web Site and Bulletin sponsors is on the bulletin board in the kitchen. Please sign up as soon as possible. Do NOT make payment until your sign-up month has arrived. This will make it easier for Father to keep track of payments. Thanks in advance to all who support the parish in this way.*

+++ We offer thanks to the Blessed Trinity for inspiring generosity in the souls of our faithful and the blessing of abundant grace in our midst with the offering received this past week-end: Tithe Offering, \$100.00; Candles, \$50.00; Food Coupons, \$50.00; Holyday, \$50.00; Nativity of our Lord, \$50.00; Kitchen, \$50.00; Candy, \$50.00, for a total of \$500.00. We express our profound gratitude to the parishioner communicants who offered their God-given treasure for the sake of the Lord and the good of our parish. God bless and reward you good and faithful souls! The attendance was 41 adults and 13 children last Sunday.

+++ *As faithful believers, we intercede and associate ourselves in prayer with the following who have prayed and offered seven day lights for their intentions: Father Lucas, Pani Lucas, Louis Pasquino, +Paul Szmaida, Debra Szmaida, George Idromenos, Kent Pasquino, Kyle Pasquino, and Pani Buletza.*

+++ We make a **PENNIES FROM HEAVEN** Canister available for our faithful to bring in pennies for our altar and its appointments. We are already in receipt of \$100.00 from this apostolate. Even your pennies can help and are a blessing to our parish.

+++ For the expansion of our much needed parochial facilities, our parish pledge support to date totals \$100.00. As we thank the Lord for inspiring generosity in the hearts of our faithful, we also thank the donors for accepting the challenge of the Lord in building up His Body. We cordially invite and look forward to receiving additional and increased pledges from all our devoted parishioners.

+++ Please be certain to see **Helen Karpiak** or a member of the Parish Council if you would like to help our parish by using **Shop Rite Food Coupons** available in \$20.00 denominations. We invite **ALL** to be caring and supportive and use Grocery Coupons for food shopping as we have gratefully realized **a goal** on this project to date!

+++ The Clothing Drive is a permanent project in our parish. Please bring any type of clothing and fabrics along with stuffed animals for the benefit of our parish. The bags can be left in the vestibule or on the front porch of the rectory. Please invite your friends and neighbors to assist us in disposing of unwanted clothing and fabrics.

+++ A donor sponsor is needed for the candles which will grace our liturgical celebrations for the coming feast of the Nativity of our Lord. The cost is \$125.00 and those interested should see Father as soon as possible.

+++ We ardently pray this Nativity Fast season be spiritually productive and enriching for our parish. Come and join us regularly in prayer and praise.

+++ We remind our faithful only those who are present for the entire Divine Liturgy should come forward to receive Communion. The entire Liturgy means "Amen" to "Amen."

+++ May all glory, adoration and worship be accorded our God in the Holy Trinity by all the faithful of our parish with one mind, one soul and one heart each day of the week!

Behold!

Once in Israel love came to us incarnate, stood in the doorway between two worlds and we were all afraid. This startling notion of the Incarnation almost seems out of character with all that we hold dear in our celebration of the Nativity of our Lord. Isn't there all the glitter that so enchants our eyes, the familiar music and carols that so amuse our ears, and all the wonderful specially prepared food that so amuses our palates. Is there not a great gathering of family and friends? And what is wrong with a little extra time off from work? Lest we forget, there are presents and what could be wrong with presents? Nothing. Nothing at all. Unless, of course, we forget that in the celebration of this glorious feast, we walk into a literal trap; the trap of the unyielding love of our heavenly Father for us. The reality of presents is the gift of the only-begotten Son of the eternal Father given us for the sake of our salvation.

All the elements that delight us so are tidings of great joy, inviting us into a divine encounter. Holydays of allsorts have their foundation in the desire for divine intervention whether it is conceived in Christian terms or not, and the Nativity of our Lord is big time divine intervention. We celebrate the ultimate in divine intrusion into the affairs of man. God is truly become one of us, like us in all things except sin. God not only comes among us, but becomes one of us! All that we do to celebrate this fact is indeed meant to be enchanting, meant to stimulate our senses and our sensibilities according to the promise of the season and not just according to the pleasures themselves. So once in Israel love came to us incarnate, stood in the doorway between two worlds and we were all afraid.

It is when we never go farther than the family, joy, food, parties, presents and decorations that we place ourselves in the midst of trouble because eventually all of that recedes and we find ourselves staring down a long, bleak winter with debts to pay and pounds to shed. Now all that is frightening though if it is the only way we commemorate the birth of the Saviour, which unfortunately in our current civilization has become the standard.

We speak, however, of a holy fear, a fear that comes from the trappings of this feast not taken seriously enough and only in its outward secular manifestations observed, understood and appreciated. All of these wondrous things are caught up in the watchword of this holy season: **Behold**. In other words, stop, pay attention, realize what is being celebrated and attend to it sincerely and seriously. Specifically, we are reminded of that which, formerly hidden from view in proud secularism, is now made visible to us. We see with the eyes of the flesh too often for too long. We remember only with eyes of the physical mind and we are led to the eyes of the heart where God has made his dwelling place among us. We behold, we

become awake again and aware again of the staggering truth that God is with us! God knows our humanity, our weakness, our deficiency, our suffering; our heavenly Father knows our suspicions, our fears our insecurities and uncertainties. God even knows the time of our death and departure from this world! Which is why among our peasant ancestors there arose a wisdom not of this world: the wood of the manger/crib is the wood of the cross! We sing that Santa knows if we have been bad or good, but it is Christ alone who understands the source of all good and fatal reality, of evil very personally. So once in Israel love came to us incarnate, stood in the doorway between two worlds and we were all afraid.

It is frightening to know and understand that our God knows there is no aspect of our humanity, including total abandonment experienced by Christ on the cross, that there is no circumstance in life that has not been visited by our heavenly Father, and that despite all of this, his relentless love still comes pouring out upon us. The love of God, made incarnate in Christ, abides with us in our wakening and our sleeping, in our holiness and in our sinfulness, in our thoughts, our words and in our every activity. So on this feast day, we awake, if we ever awake, to wonder. In a season filled with indications of a world in hibernation, we are dazzlingly aware of life-filled with the divine and thus hope, possibility and promise. Behold! Tidings of great joy!

Celebrate this feast in a divine way, in a heavenly way, worthy of the Saviour of all mankind!

The shepherds merrily rejoice
in the nativity of Christ;
They give glory with the angels.
The star shines over the One
whom the Magi adore,
And the human race is saved.
They all extol the Mother of God.

Postfestive Vespers - Nativity of our Lord

May the Holy One give you His Peace!

The Incarnation

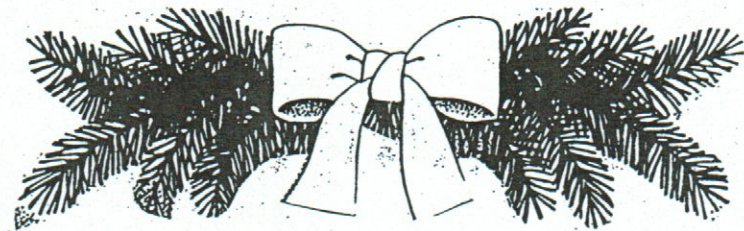
The paradox of God taking on our human nature is at the heart of our faith as Orthodox Christians

The birth of Jesus of Nazareth has always been understood within the Church to be the fulfillment of the prophecy found in the book of Isaiah: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and His name shall be Emmanuel – which means God with us" [Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23].

Combined with his clear affirmation of the "virginal conception" of Christ [Matthew 1:20], this title – *Emmanuel* – is Saint Matthew's way of revealing the total and utter uniqueness of Jesus of Nazareth: God in our midst. Saint Matthew is pointing toward what, in theological language, is called the *Incarnation*. This rich and decisive word could be translated as "enfleshment" or "embodiment" in direct reference to God being *enfleshed* as Jesus of Nazareth. In other words, God was "humanized" when He was conceived and born as the Messiah of Israel – Jesus [the] Christ. The classical biblical text is, of course, found in the prologue of the Gospel of Saint John: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us, full of grace and truth" [John 1:14].

Earlier in that magnificent prologue to his Gospel, Saint John revealed to us that "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" [John 1:1]. Therefore, the Word of God, Who was "in the beginning" and Who "was God" began to live a human life as Jesus of Nazareth when He was born or became incarnate in what Saint Paul called "the fullness of time" [Galatians 4:4]. "Flesh" in this context means "the fullness of human nature in its totality and completeness." This is precisely why we sing in the beautiful Nativity kontakion: "Today the Virgin gives birth to the Transcendent One, and the earth offers a cave to the Unapproachable One... since for our sake the eternal God was born as a little child!"

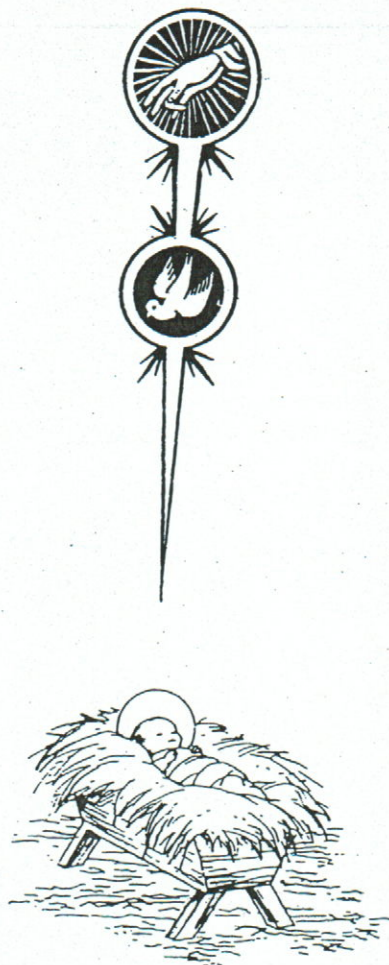
We need to be perfectly clear about what we are claiming about the Incarnation, and thus what we actually celebrate on Christmas. The Word of God is also called "the Son and Wisdom of God." He is what God (the Father) is by nature, but He is distinct as One of the Persons of the Holy Trinity. He has no beginning, since He is eternally "begotten/born" of the Father. He is eternal – "begotten of the Father before all ages," the "Light of Light, true God of true God" – as we profess in the Nicene-



Constantinopolitan Creed. He is the One Who was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary when she was "overshadowed" by the Holy Spirit according to the will of the Father [Luke 1:35]. When the Virgin Mary freely consented to her role in the Incarnation, the Word of God entered her womb and was conceived without seed. Thus, Saint Joseph the Betrothed was not involved in the conception of Jesus. For this reason, he is not shown together with the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child in the cave in the Nativity icons. This "seedless conception" was absolutely essential.

From among many examples, Saint Gregory Palamas expresses it this way: "If she had conceived by seed, He would have been neither a new man nor the sinless Savior of sinners... nor the beginning of the new life which is without any deterioration whatever. If He were of the old portion and an inheritor of the fall, He would not have been capable of bearing in Himself the fullness of pure divinity and of making His flesh an inexhaustible fountain of sanctification" [*Homily 14: On the Annunciation*].

The Person in the womb of the Virgin Mary is the eternal Word, Son, and Wisdom of God. And this is why it is perfectly logical – or rather *THEO*-logical – that she is called and venerated as the *Theotokos*. Although loosely translated as "the Mother of God," it actually means "the one who bore or gave birth to God." Jesus Christ is not a human person somehow united with the Word of God after He was born. Rather, He is the Word of God Who is born as a unique human being, in a particular place and time. Yet, does this diminish His true humanity? Is there something less real about Our Lord's human nature, as if His humanity was an illusion of sorts, an "incognito" for God to walk among us? Many early heresies succumbed to that false conclusion drawn from the Incarnation. They even rejected the whole "birthing process." But, as Saint Germanos, Patriarch of Constantinople, wrote: "God came forth from her as a complete human being, the Son of a real mother who was subject to the natural laws of childbearing" [*First Homily on the Dormition*]. If we emphasize the divinity of Christ at the expense of His humanity, then we fall into a one-sidedness that is always a characteristic of heresy –



which is why the Incarnation is a divine-human mystery with the Theotokos as the "highly favored one" who gives the Lord His humanity in all of its fullness and integrity.

We confess the Incarnation while preserving the mystery: "A mystery took place which remains a mystery to this day, and it shall never cease to be a mystery," wrote Basil of Seleucia. It is this paradox of God becoming human that is at the center of our Orthodox Christian faith. In the face of the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, we *see* and *encounter* God incarnate. We want to hold onto this mystery as we prepare to celebrate the Feast. We will hear it sung and chanted in endless variations as we participate in the liturgical services. If we are moved by "baby Jesus," we want to remember that He is actually *Emmanuel* – "*God with us.*" ■

CAESARS

The Roman Empire was ruled by a series of leaders called "Caesars." This title started as a family name, as Julius Caesar attempted to become the emperor of Rome. At the time, Rome was a republic, and the political leaders, fearing a takeover by Caesar, assassinated him. Here are a few of the emperors who are mentioned in biblical accounts.

AUGUSTUS (OCTAVIAN)

The nephew of Julius Caesar, Augustus, became the first emperor of Rome in 27 B.C.—A.D. 14. He was emperor when Jesus was born. He is mentioned in Luke 2:1.

TIBERIUS

The adopted son of Augustus took power in A.D. 14 and reigned during the ministry and crucifixion of Christ. (See Luke 3:1)

GAIUS (CALIGULA)—A.D. 37–41

The young Caligula started his rule well, but is believed to have become insane. He was eventually murdered by the officers of his own guard.

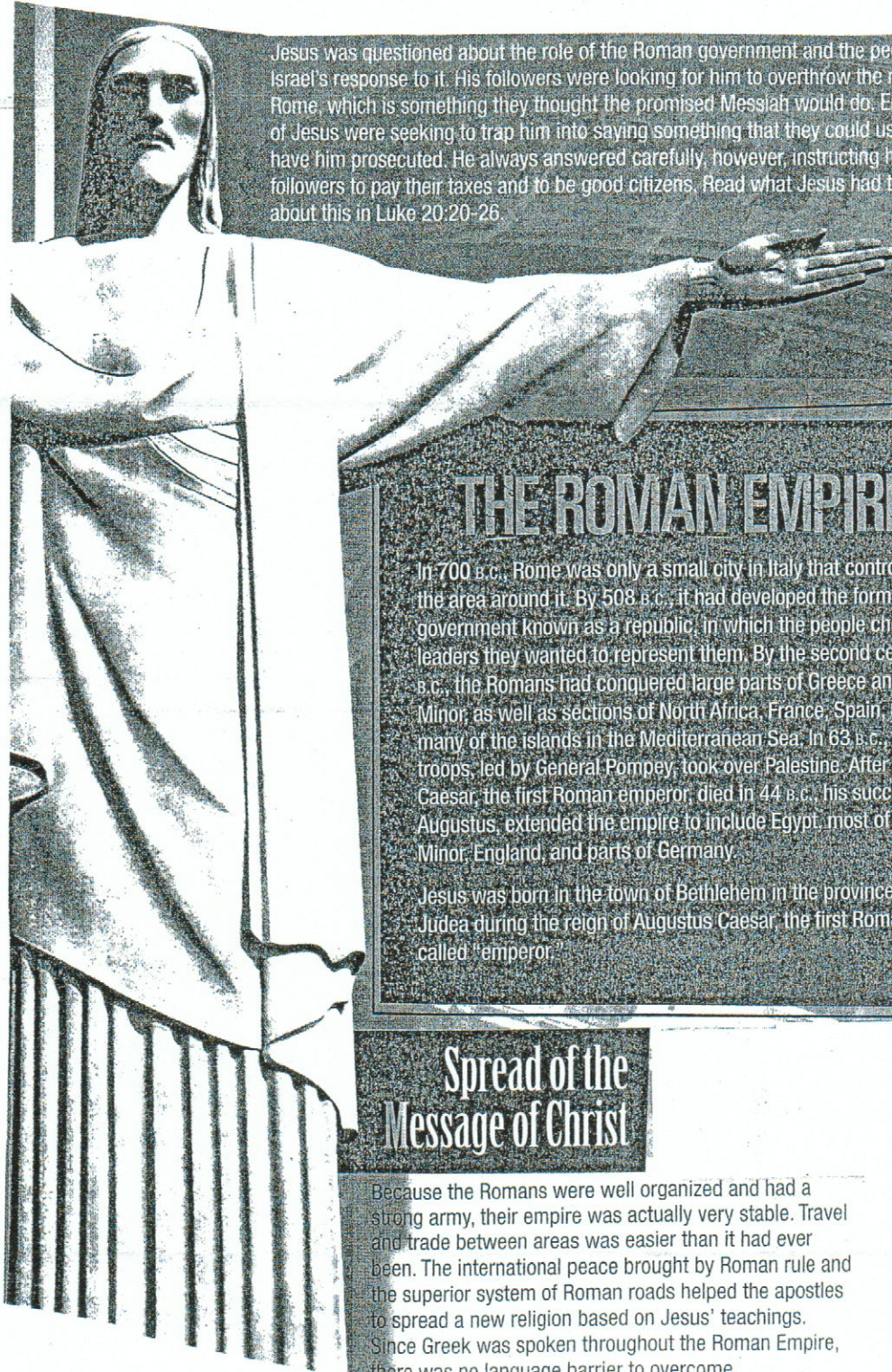
CLAUDIUS—A.D. 41–54

(See Acts 11:28; 18:2) He was considered an unlikely candidate to become emperor because he reportedly had disabilities. However, he proved to be an able public administrator and builder of public works.

NERO

Took power in A.D. 54 after his mother allegedly killed his father, Claudius. He is known for two things: (1) the Roman public believed that he had set fire to Rome in A.D. 64; and (2) Nero tried to blame the fire on the followers of Christ, which eventually began the Roman policy of persecuting Christians. He is referred to but not explicitly named in Acts 25:10–12; 27:24; and 2 Timothy 4:16–17.





Jesus was questioned about the role of the Roman government and the people of Israel's response to it. His followers were looking for him to overthrow the rule of Rome, which is something they thought the promised Messiah would do. Enemies of Jesus were seeking to trap him into saying something that they could use to have him prosecuted. He always answered carefully, however, instructing his followers to pay their taxes and to be good citizens. Read what Jesus had to say about this in Luke 20:20-26.

THE ROMAN EMPIRE

In 700 B.C., Rome was only a small city in Italy that controlled the area around it. By 508 B.C., it had developed the form of government known as a republic, in which the people chose the leaders they wanted to represent them. By the second century B.C., the Romans had conquered large parts of Greece and Asia Minor, as well as sections of North Africa, France, Spain, and many of the islands in the Mediterranean Sea. In 63 B.C., Roman troops, led by General Pompey, took over Palestine. After Julius Caesar, the first Roman emperor, died in 44 B.C., his successor, Augustus, extended the empire to include Egypt, most of Asia Minor, England, and parts of Germany.

Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in the province of Judea during the reign of Augustus Caesar, the first Roman ruler called "emperor."

Spread of the Message of Christ

Because the Romans were well organized and had a strong army, their empire was actually very stable. Travel and trade between areas was easier than it had ever been. The international peace brought by Roman rule and the superior system of Roman roads helped the apostles to spread a new religion based on Jesus' teachings. Since Greek was spoken throughout the Roman Empire, there was no language barrier to overcome.

Wisdom Of
The



Byzantine
Fathers

No one can explain the mystery of his birth nor is it possible to explain St. John Chrysostom.

His birth in the flesh was in time, but his divine Sonship was before time. The one was from a virgin mother, the other from God the Father. He assumed visible flesh to demonstrate his invisible divinity Chromatius.

He gave to Joseph the honor of giving a name to the Saviour and called him to exhibit a father's care toward the child St John Chrysostom.

Jesus' birth does not diminish his incorruptibility Origen.

The typological analogies between Adam's rib and Joseph's dread and between the conceptions of Elizabeth and Mary are explored. The Nativity is best understood in relation to the coming salvation and its prophetic expectation, which had been already promised by the Lord speaking through Isaiah St. John Chrysostom.

Wisdom! Be Attentive

Through faith, O Christ, You justified the patriarchs, for through them, You made a commitment to a Church with gentiles. These saint are glorified because from them descends the Virgin who gave You birth. Through their prayers, O Christ our God, have mercy on us Troparion, Sunday of the Holy Forefathers, the Patriarchs.

You did not worship a man-made image, O thrice-blessed youths! Protected by a power beyond description, you were glorified in the test of fire. From the searing flames you cried out to God, saying; "Hasten to help us, O merciful Lord, for in your greatness, You can do whatever You will Kontakion of the Three Holy Youths.

Blessed are You, and praiseworthy, O Lord, the God of our fathers and glorious forever is your Name Prokimenon, Sunday of the Holy Forefathers, the Patriarchs.

Great are the deeds performed with faith by three youths rejoicing in the flaming furnace as if they stood in refreshing waters; and Daniel the Prophet faced lions as though they were sheep. Through their prayers, O Christ our God, save our souls Troparion, Sunday of the Holy Fathers.

Rejoice, O Bethlehem and make ready O Ephrata! Behold a Virgin is on her way to give birth to the Great Shepherd she carries in her womb. The God-bearing forefathers will rejoice at his sight and together with the shepherds, they will glorify him in the Virgin's arms Kontakion, Preparation for the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord.

At that time, since Mary was of the house of David, she registered with the venerable Joseph in Bethlehem. She was with child, having conceived virginally. Her time was come, and they could find no room in the inn, but the cave seemed a joyful palace for the Queen. Christ is to be born to renew the likeness that had been lost of old Troparion, Vigil of the Nativity of our Lord.

Today the Virgin is on her way to the cave where she will give birth in a manner beyond understanding to the Word who is eternal. Rejoice, therefore, universe, when you hear it heralded together with the angels and the shepherds, glorify him who chose to be seen as a new-born Child, while remaining God for all eternity Kontakion, Vigil of the Nativity of our Lord.

THE
·LORD'S·COMING·



How Long, O Lord?

December 19

Hope in the Messiah was sustained over a total of forty-two generations! "Thus the total number of generations from Abraham to David is fourteen generations; from David to the Babylonian exile, fourteen generations; from the Babylonian exile to the Messiah, fourteen more generations" Matthew 1: 17.

A never-ending kingdom of freedom, peace, and prosperity, a promise so compelling that Abraham embarked on a journey of faith. Other generations had to face periods of suffering, deprivation and exile. We hear God's people pleading, 'How long, O Lord must we wait?'

And of course, we experience this ardent pleading in our own time, in our own lives. We have our own dark nights of the soul, periods of depression, sometimes stretching into dismal years. We experience lost children, lost friends, lost causes, lost youth, lost health. We grieve with those who lose their jobs and livelihood, who lose loved ones to death squads, terrorists and dictators. We grieve with Palestinians, Jews, and refugees from Central America. We cry about the conditions those without a soul wish to impose on our nation. Our soul is in anguish because increasingly many wish to re-establish and rewrite the history of our nation so that the Creator is removed from its important story. We look upon so many who do not recognize their dignity and labor not for salvation but temporary earthly success. How long, O Lord?

Then, in the midst of our darkness, our self-imposed alienation and despair, you come to birth in our lives. O Lord, our God, you touch us and reveal yourself as a loving parent pruning us, molding us, fashioning us as soft clay in your tender hands.

And you sent your Son, the Messiah, to become our brother, our friend, our Saviour, to lead us back to the Garden of Paradise, into your exalted presence. But are we equipped to recognize him when He comes?

God's Absence

December 20

At this sacred time, we are drawn to the truth of Isaiah's inspired observation, "Truly with you God is hidden, the God of Israel, the Saviour!...Israel, you are saved by the Lord, saved forever!" Isaiah 45: 15, 17. Now we are inspired to remember that the Lord's presence is often so much like absence that only one who has learned quiet and serenity of soul with on-going prayer would ever recognize him in the empty air that neighbors every man. Nor would that supposedly empty feeling in the heart ever lead the non-interior person to break through the emptiness to that forever fullness which is always surrounded by the protective shield of the seeming void.

The fullness of experience in God comes clothed in the disguise of absence, and only ardent prayer can see beyond the disguise to the Lord whose nearness is as close as man's feeling of his absence. Absence and nearness in God are complementary terms in the sense that it is most difficult to distinguish one from the other. Furthermore, a feeling of nearness can mean that God has become my own emotional euphoria so desperately needed at a particular time of stress.

In the end it is not our feelings that matter, since emotions change and are altered by life's circumstances and never remain constant. Faith is the vital standard bearer and the constant that our God is near no matter how we feel. It is for this reason St. Paul says, there remain faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love. Love flows from faith and hope and not from our feelings, however great and exalted they might be at a particular time. Faith, hope and love: a little, almost miniscule trinity that makes us one with our heavenly Father and assures us of his continuing presence in our daily living. This trinity alone makes it happen as we allow it to grow into a burning and consuming flame.

From the quiet, unchanging and inalterable faith with which we respond to God's first shown love in preparation for the full manifestation of his presence among us, grows a recognition that He loves to be among us because we are genuinely his. The larger question is: Do we sense we belong to him alone?

The Hands Of Jesus

December 21

People live in darkness all around us – the darkness and despair of those addicted to drugs and alcohol, of women and children who are victims of violence, of those imprisoned and tortured, of the poor who watch their children die. And of course, we cannot forget about those who freely choose to exist in the darkness of sin, separated by choice from the light of the manger in Bethlehem and its overhead star. All these need to hear, “All this is the work of the kindness of our God; he, the Dayspring, shall visit us in his mercy to shine on those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” Luke 1: 78, 79.

How often we like to think we are in the light of Christ, but more often than not, it is we who should sense ourselves in the outside darkness. How many suffer while we celebrate the Nativity of our Lord with wonderful food and fellowship in warm homes.

How is Jesus born for us, the suffering ones? How is He the light of our darkness? Perhaps through us, as we allow God’s grace to be stirred up within us we come to the recognition of our Lord appealing to our sensibilities: “I have no hands but yours.” How often do we see ourselves being the hands by which Jesus touches the lives of the poor, the persecuted, those in despair? What about those who are bereft of faith, of choosing to express Christ’s love to those who need affirmation and struggle to remain loyal and faithful to the Saviour?

The stable of Jesus’ birth reminds us that He is a different kind of king – one born in poverty, one who comes to serve and not to be served. It is this kind of Messiah we are called to follow: to serve others, be a bright light for others. Do we take comfort and courage in the article of faith that Jesus is “Emmanuel” – “God with us” – to guide our feet into the path of peace? Look to be blessed and dispatched by the infant hands of the Prince of Peace for service to others!

God's Coyness

December 22

One of the most frequent experiences of the person who prays is the feeling that our God should be more present to him, more real, because, after all the time and effort one expends, or better yet, invests in trying to pray! "They ought always to pray and not lose heart" Luke 18: 1. But our heavenly Father, exquisitely coy lover that He is, never lets prayer become an end in itself or a mere vehicle by which we think we can capture him, or pin him down. There is no magic formula, nor ritual that guarantees an instant God-experience. Every experience of God is a gift from God and He will not be tangibly present on demand. We cannot reduce our God to the gumball that appears at the bottom of the machine after we place our coin in the proper repository and by rote turn the handle.

What all this amounts to is our God is God and his will is his own. We approach him from human limitation and often, desperation. On the other hand, the truthful reality is that He himself has taught us through Jesus Christ, his incarnate Son, that anything legitimate and upright we pray for will be given us and that we should pray in faith always and never lose heart. And so we continue to pray in faith and wonder why our heavenly Father does not come and satisfy our longing or him, the one and only really true gift we need.

The only genuine solution that satisfies the believing soul is that God is Lover of mankind and as such intensifies our longing and love by his responsive care. He often draws near only to withdraw when we begin to think we finally have succeeded on our own in having him draw near to us. It is genuine faith that replaces emotional experience with an authentic kind of experience, more real and more permanent than any transient feeling God might give us from time to time. Like real and enduring love, faith remains when falling in love is over. It is God alone who keeps our faith and love continually strong. Let us be careful we match up, through grace, the first shown love God exhibits to those who remain constant in their commitment. The coming of the Saviour in human flesh is a renewal and affirmation of God's never-ending love for believers.

Healing Time

December 23

Christ cares enough to be born in the flesh into our earthly Bethlehem, to live in our land and weep over our cities, and then finally to die and rise again, raising us to his divine dignity "When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him" Matthew 2: 24. So the glorious moment of his Incarnation is to be made evident. The time of the Nativity of our Lord quickly approaches and that crippled, hurt, maimed and injured part of us needs his presence. Everything in us witnesses to our belief that this feast is for healing and that He comes to restore and heal and make whole.

If we can celebrate the glorious reality of a pure and eternal Spirit assuming human dignity, if we can trust enough to see him walk out on the water, to get involved in our daily needfulness, of washing our feet and anointing people, of breaking bread and working miracles, even the most profound of all, providing for divine nourishment in our alienated sinfulness, we can certainly be assured his salutary presence will touch our blindness, overcome the crippled parts of our life and if genuinely invited, will make a manger for himself in our heart and soul.

Like Joseph, the foster-father, we must do as the Lord commands us. We must respond to fulfilling his will which is our salvation. His enfleshment portrays sincerely the grave seriousness with which our God as Creator approaches his choice creation. If we wish transformation, we must cooperate in our own human way to be made useful to his purpose. If we will not permit ourselves to be used by God, He is prevented from infringing on the integrity of our free will. If we recognize the length to which our Creator goes to redeem, to save, to reclaim us for himself, we will reform our thinking and then offer our lives for his glory. We will earnestly be eager to remain in his presence. Pray then, to be grateful this coming feast of the Nativity of our Lord in the flesh, grateful for life and light and limb and laughter in body and soul. Join faithfully in singing his praises!

Divine Child In Me

December 24

As I approach the manger of the new-born Prince of Peace lying in rest, make the night of my life, Lord Jesus Christ radiant with brightness and solace of your birth. Refresh my tired heart with a new vision of your eternal glory. Make me share in your divinity, you who so eagerly share in my humanity. Be my Master that I may be your faithful servant. Teach me how to be mild with myself as well as others, how to bear lightly my daily burden, how to carry my treasured cross. Permit me to see how your passion has already begun with all the limitations the unlimited God assumes in coming among us! Be the lamp of my life, O Lamb of God!

As I approach your manger, teach me to yield peacefully to the mystery of your will. Grant me the wisdom to be firm without rigidity, forthright without harshness, forceful without ferocity. Fill me with the gentleness of a devoted child, the meekness of the lambs surrounding you.

Divine Child in me, pull me back when I become too involved in the values of this age. Inscribe me into your book of salvation. Let me share in your privation and suffering that your glory abounds. Let me adore you forever as the Lamb slain for me and all people, who are alone worthy to receive glory, honor and praise.

As an Infant Child, you ushered in a new age and completed creation, born in a crude stable, rough, dirty, foul-smelling for my sake. The ox and the donkey eagerly greeted you. The lowliest of places was selected so that union with humanity would be total, so that no broken soul could feel itself excluded from the self-emptying majesty undertaken by a magnanimously loving God.

How like my soul is the stable, filled with strange unsatisfied longings, with guilt and animal-like impulses, tormented by anxiety, inadequacy and pain. I am uplifted if the Holy One is born in such a place, the Saviour can also be born in me. I am not excluded.

Nativity in the Flesh of our Lord, God and Saviour Jesus Christ

"I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth" Psalms 34: 1. With your entrance into the world, I have reason for joy and happiness. Make us vehicles of your gifts to the world. Now that the Son of God has come among us, I am affirmed and strengthened in my faith response to your enduring first-shown love manifested so plainly to us.

We desire to be men and women of deep abiding faith. We want to be heralds of hope and now we have concrete reasons for our expectations. Because we cannot stand alone, you come among us and provide a compelling example. You grant us the assistance of spiritual directors that we may learn to pray. We can consult experts in discernment to understand your revelation to us. We have the inspiration of your Body and Bride, the Church, to know when we sin and to have our sins forgiven, we kneel before you in the sacramental Mystery of Reconciliation in the presence of your priest to assure absolution as we heartfully repent and earnestly replace virtue for vice.

"You open your hand..." Psalms 145:16, so that we can be people of deep and abiding faith and true workers for justice in the world. The innocence of the Infant of Bethlehem compels us to take notice of your devoted concern. We all wish to be fulfilled and happy in the Lord, but what we desire is not our own happiness for fulfillment, we need the joy of soul that is found and rooted in Christ, the new born Prince of Peace, for it is He alone who introduces the enduring peace and joy of heaven.

On this feast day, as the fulfillment of the prophets begins, teach us to genuinely pray and offer thanksgiving that the peace of our heavenly Father which is so much greater than we can even understand, inhabits us fully and totally, will guard our hearts and thinking so that your everlasting joy will grow in us daily.

On this blessed feast day, we ask you Lord to listen us, the poorest of your servants. We do not approach begging because you have given us the new dignity of friends. We recognize you as the source of everything we are and have. In confidence we can ask that the poor petitions of others before us are satisfied and fulfilled. When they are satisfied, we ask then for your attention because now you will be with us forever.

In the meantime, remember our frailty and desperate need. We are more vulnerable to temptation, more apt to turn elsewhere for what you alone can provide. Make us always

understand the measure of our love for you is the measure of our love for others because our devotion teaches me you are more than big and great enough to pay attention to us all, the famished of body and the famished of spirit as well. "O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek, you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed" Psalms 10: 17, 18.

How can we be assured our prayer is authentic and sincere? The age-old question rises anew on the feast day. And today as always there is but one answer and it not necessarily in the prayer itself, but in what happens in association with our prayer. Anyone can be "turned on" in prayer from time to time, especially in group prayer. But only the authentic disciple of prayer can be charitable. Again it is the love that is the measure of anything in the spiritual life. If we love God, we will keep his two greatest commandments and no one will be deceived about whether we do or not. We cannot fake it the way we can fake our piety or prayer.

On this exalted feast day, we should not worry as much about our prayer life as we do our daily living. Continue in the spirit of our God gifting us with his love. We should not be turning inwards that we end up selfish and self-preoccupied. But we ought to be worried about charity and if we are allowing ourselves to be used by our heavenly Father to extend his charity in the world around us. Then we will know our prayer life is leading us into intimacy with the values of the manger in the cave at Bethlehem.

We can pray in the spirit of St. Stephen Protomartyr, whose exalted deeds and faith the Church celebrates in conjunction with the joy of this holy day. "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" Acts of the Apostles 7: 59. We can remember that when we stand close enough to death, it is not death anymore; it is new life, yet those of us with earth eyes still call it death. There is no death for those caught up in the spirit of our heavenly Father, only a mere moment of passing over, a moment of folding up our earthly tent, a hard, painful, giving-up moment of transition, but nevertheless a translation of this life for everlasting life, the purpose for which the Prince of Peace comes among us.

God of Life, it is in our moments of not letting of the world's allurements that we truly experience death and all the while is precisely this life that you planned for us!

God of Life, dip us deeply into the mystery of letting go, of folding our tents to sin and separation, so that as your earthen vessels, we can bear the exalted beauty of the breaking and hold onto the fullness of life. It is in the meager outer appearance of the earthly manger that we are misled to remain comfortable; teach us to accept and live beyond its limitations.

Prayer to God the Son

St. Antiochus

Only begotten Son, Word of the Father, Jesus Christ, who alone are perfect; according to the greatness of your mercy, do not abandon me, your servant, but ever rest in my heart and soul.

O Sweet Jesus, Good Shepherd from your very Nativity among the sheep of the stable, deliver me from the attacks of the wolf/devil.

Do not allow me to become prey of satan's evil intention, even though I have within me the seed of eternal destruction and damnation.

Instead, O Lord, Jesus Christ, adorable God, holy King, Prince of Peace, while I sleep, protect me by the grace of your Holy Spirit through whom you sanctified your disciples. With your angels, always invite me to approach you and worship you and grant me the grace of ready response as did the shepherds. Enlighten my mind by the light of the holy Gospel, my soul by help of your cross which you bore in passion from your birth, my heart by the purity of your teaching.

Protect my body by your sacred passion, my senses by your humility, and awaken me in due time for your glorification.

For you, above all, are adorable, together with your eternal Father and life-giving Holy Spirit, now and ever and forever. Amen.

THE RIGHTEOUS JOSEPH: AN UNSUNG HERO

When we speak of the Nativity of our Lord, we often find ourselves concentrating on the role the Virgin Mary played in this story of mankind's salvation. In doing so, we are sometimes guilty of not recognizing the importance of the Righteous Joseph in this mysterious and miraculous event.

What do we know about Joseph? The Gospels tell us that he was of the lineage of King David, which explains the necessity of his journey to Bethlehem for the census ordered by the Emperor Augustus Caesar. Church Tradition tells us that Joseph was quite advanced in age when he was betrothed to the Theotokos - a mere teenager at the time. It is also our tradition that Joseph was a widower with children from his previous marriage, thus explaining the scriptural references to the brothers and sisters of Jesus. When Joseph discovered that Mary was with child he could have, according to Jewish law, had her stoned to death for her "sin" of adultery. God, however, revealed His divine plan to Joseph in a dream, telling him: *"Do not be afraid to take to you Mary for your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit."* (Matt 1:20) From that moment, Joseph devoted his life to protecting the Virgin and her yet-to-be born Son. After Christ's birth in Bethlehem, Joseph safely delivered them from the wrath of King Herod, taking them first to Egypt and ultimately settling in Nazareth. We know from the Gospel of St. Luke that Joseph was still alive when Christ was taken to Jerusalem when He was 12 years old. It is believed that he died soon after this, never being part of Christ's earthly ministry. The fact that Jesus commended His Blessed Mother to the care of the Apostle John as He hung on the Cross underscores this.