



“God so loved the world that He gave His only - begotten Son,
that whoever believes in Him should not perish,
but have eternal life.”

(John 3:16)

Saint Paul the Apostle Orthodox Church

24 BURKE ROAD

FREEHOLD, NJ 07728

Nativity of Our Lord

December 25, 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

+++ We joyfully welcome all to celebrate with us the glorious feast of the Nativity in the flesh of our Lord, God and Saviour Jesus Christ. Having prepared spiritually to clothe ourselves with the grace of his coming among us, our hearts and souls sing his praises. A very happy, joyous and holy celebration with loved ones is our greeting on this day of manifest heartfelt salvation! Please be certain to be with us for the remaining two days of jubilant celebration.

+++ 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 acknowledge with deep gratitude the gift to our parish on this glorious feast candles on the altar table, sacramental table and table of preparation by our good parishioner, Robert Gorbich in blessed memory of his beloved parents, +Walter and +Mary. May the new-born Lord continue to comfort him in his loss as we pray He grant the souls of +Walter and +Mary a blessed repose and create for them Eternal Memory!

+++ We kindly ask all to make final returns on the Bake Sale as well as Candy Sale before the end of the year.

++ We sincerely thank all who offered seven day lights in response to Father's challenge in prayerful remembrance of our departed loved ones as well as in honor of those who continue their spiritual struggle for salvation.

+++ There is no fasting this coming week as we continue in the joy of the angels celebrating the Wisdom of God among us!

+++ 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, \$[REDACTED]; Candles, \$[REDACTED]; Food Coupons, \$[REDACTED]; Holyday, \$[REDACTED]; Nativity of our Lord, \$[REDACTED]; Kitchen, \$[REDACTED]; Candy, \$[REDACTED]; Flowers, \$[REDACTED], for a total of \$[REDACTED]. We express our profound gratitude to the parishioner communicants who offered their God-given treasure and labored 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 \$[REDACTED] 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 \$105,815.00. 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 \$3200.00 on this project to date!

+++ We thank our dear children who decorated and prepared the Jesse Tree in the church for this celebration. We ask the Lord to continue blessing them with joy in the Lord for Many & Blessed Years!

+++ The Clothing Drive is a permanent project in our parish. Please bring any type of clothing and fabrics along with stuffed animals and shoes 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.

+++ We ardently pray this Nativity season be spiritually productive and enriching for our parish. Come and join us regularly and faithfully 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!

Christ Is Born!

Glorify Him!

Christ is Born, Glorify Him!

*Christ is
Born!*

*Glorify
Him!*

Let heaven and earth rejoice!
Angels and Faithful,
let us celebrate the spiritual feast!
For God, born of a woman, has appeared
in the flesh to those who sit in darkness.
A cave and a manger receive Him.
Shepherds announce the wonder.
Wise men offer royal gifts.
Let us, then, from our unworthy lips
offer praise like the angels:
Glory to God in the highest
and on earth peace.
The Hope of all nations has come.
He has come and has saved us from
the bondage of evil.
Lord, glory to You!

For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulders, and His Name will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

Isaiah 9:6

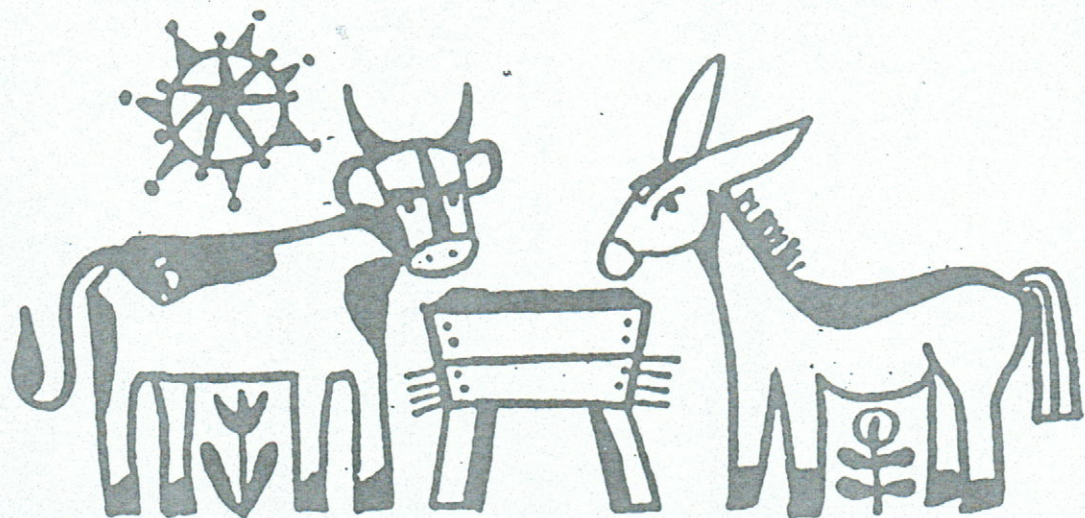
For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased!"

Luke 2:11, 14

*Scripture reading for
The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ
Galatians 4:4-7 and Matthew 2:11-12*

Follow The Donkey

An ox knows its owner and a donkey, its master's manger; but Israel does not know, my people have not understood..." Isaiah 1: 3.



Just about any icon of the Nativity of our Lord depicts the presence of a donkey and an ox. Look at any western Creche scene and you are bound to notice among the represented animals the long-eared donkey.

Although the scriptural accounts do not specifically mention their presence, it is assumed from the Old Testament references to the coming birth of the Messiah. All of nature recognizes its Creator, except for man who alone has the rational power to know and understand. Even after learning from the donkey can sinful man emerge once again human.

It is assumed that Mary was carried to her destination in Bethlehem on a donkey, since it is highly unlikely she would have walked from Nazareth. Thanks to rough and uneven terrain, detours created by the Roman road system, or the presence of bands of bandits, it is

believed that Mary and Joseph may have traveled some 90 miles. Being in an advanced stage of pregnancy, she most certainly would have used a donkey.

As far back as records go, the donkey has a distinguished relationship with biblical; people that goes far back as Abraham, the great Patriarch of faith.

Abraham traveled a great deal during his lifetime. His trek southward from Haran in present day Syria led through the entire length of Canaan, through the Negev desert to Egypt and then northward again to the Promised Land. For years, art usually pictured Abraham traveling in one of those long camel caravans that can still be seen even today in the deserts of the Near East. This, however, is not an accurate historical picture. In all probability, until Abraham reached Egypt, he might very well have traveled on foot, with no beasts of burden except perhaps a few donkeys.

Beasts of burden were, at first, not too common within the northern sections of the Tigris and Euphrates Valleys. The first beasts of burden to appear there were not camels, but donkeys. It is believed that the wild donkey of the Sahara Desert of north Africa was domesticated as early as six thousand years ago, but its spread to Egypt, the Fertile Crescent and the Holy Land took sometime. When it finally did appear, it certainly made its appearance known. In the Book of Job, our God calls the donkey "swift" and describes the beast as being delightfully liberated and carefree. "To whom I have given the steppe for his home, and the salt land for his dwelling place. He scorns the tumult of the city, he bears not the shouts of the driver. He ranges the mountains as his pasture, and he searches after every green thing" Job 39: 5 - 8.

Despite its love of freedom, the donkey was quickly utilized as a transport animal by kings, merchants and ordinary people. In time, some ancient cities, like Damascus, had so many donkeys that the Assyrians called it the "the city of donkeys". One caravan leaving its gates could include up to 3,000 donkeys, but 500 or 600 were more common.

They were also valued highly in Egypt. When Abraham got to Egypt, the Pharaoh presented him with several donkeys as gifts (Genesis 12: 16). This evidences that even the donkey could be found in a king's stable, and in tombs as well! An Egyptian tomb painting found at Ben-Hasan and dating around 1900 BC shows Hebrews colorfully dressed, followed by their donkeys. A type of pure-white donkey bred in Mesopotamia, was imported by many ancient countries for ceremonial purposes. Richly saddled and bridled, they were kept by princes and kings for the convenience of their favorite wives and sometimes important guests were allowed to use them. "They ride on white donkeys, seated on saddle cloths as they go their way" Judges 5: 10.

It was not until later years that the donkey was used for pulling the plow, general riding, and for turning millstones to grind grain... As far as domesticated animals go, the donkey truly is one of the world's most useful animals. It can go long periods without water, needs a minimum amount of food for upkeep and works hard in hot weather. The milk of the female is as rich and nutritious as that of a cow or goat. In its chemical composition, it much resembles human milk.

Sometimes the donkey has been disliked for its stubbornness, but it also possesses persistence and endurance and according to the Bible, it sometimes has the ability to see things that man cannot. Sent by the King of Moab to curse the Israelites, the prophet Balaam traveled with a donkey. "But God's anger was kindled because he went, and the angel of the Lord took his stand in the way as his adversary." Though Balaam could not see the angel, the donkey did and twice turned with Balaam off the path. The third time the donkey knelt before the angel and Balaam proceeded to hit her. Suddenly God gave her the ability to talk and she protested against the injustice. And then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam and he saw the angel who defended the donkey saying, "...the donkey saw me...If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have slain you and let her live" Numbers 22: 21 - 33.

No doubt the same donkey saw Balaam change his curse into a blessing and prophecy when he predicted the coming of the Messiah and the future heavenly wonder, "A star shall come from out of Jacob and a scepter shall rise out of Israel" Numbers 24: 17.

Perhaps because of Balaam's harsh treatment of his donkey, numerous laws came into being concerning their treatment. This confirms its important role in Hebrew society. If a donkey fell under the weight of its load, it had to be helped and they also had to be rested on the Sabbath. Sadly, the very faithful donkey was reduced to second-class status when King Solomon imported thousands of horses from Egypt. By New Testament times, it was now considered humbling for a ruler to ride astride a donkey. Thus, when Jesus rode on a donkey on Palm Sunday, it was viewed as a sign of His humility. Still, in Old and New Testament times, the donkey remained a necessity in Jewish life.

As for the Nativity cave-stable, it has become legend that all the animals were briefly given the gift of speech. Just as centuries before the donkey spoke to Balaam, now the donkey speaks on the occasion of Christ's Nativity in the flesh. Just think what an exciting tale the donkey must have shared. "I, said the donkey, shaggy and brown; I carried His mother up hill and down. I carried her safely to Bethlehem town. I, said the donkey, shaggy and brown..."

The Nativity of our Lord and the Mother of God

The feast of the Nativity of our Lord which we celebrate brings to the forefront of our minds the Incarnation of Jesus Christ our Saviour, the mystery of the Word of God becoming human, as described by St. John, "And the Word became flesh, and made his dwelling among us and we saw his glory, the glory of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth" John 1: 14. An essential element of this mystery is the womb of Mary, the God-bearer, that is, the woman who carried God to birth in the flesh. This title of Mary, the God-bearer, or Birth-giver of God is *Theotokos* in Greek, and was translated in Old Slavonic as *Bohorodica*. It has always been seen as the most important title and description of the Mother of God and links her closely to the feast of Christ's Incarnation at the Annunciation and its manifestation in the Nativity of our Lord.

St. John Damascene explains why this title is so important, "it is with justice and truth that we call holy Mary *Theotokos*. For this name embraces the whole mystery of the divine dispensation. For if she who bore Him is *Theotokos*, assuredly He Who was born of her is perfect God and likewise also perfect man. The name *Theotokos* in truth signifies the one subsistence and the two natures and the two modes of generation of our Lord Jesus Christ" (De Fide Orthodoxa, III, 12). On the Church calendar, therefore, three feasts of Mary are closely connected with the Birth of the Lord: the feast of her Entrance into the Temple on November 21; the feast of the Conception by St. Anne on December 9, and the feast of the Synaxis of the God-bearer on the day following the Nativity, December 26.

The first of these feasts, celebrated on November 21, celebrates an event that is not recorded in Scripture recognized by the Church. It is mentioned only in a gospel erroneously attributed to the Apostle James, which could not be accepted in the canon of Scripture because of the improbability of some of the stories recorded there. Chapter 7 of this text records that Mary's parents brought her to live in the Temple in Jerusalem at the tender age of three. When Mary reached the third step of the altar, "she danced for joy with her feet," and along with her maiden companions, lived in the temple until the age of twelve, "nurtured like a dove and receiving food from the hands of an angel." This story is most imaginative and there was no known

Jewish custom of young virgins residing in the Jewish temple. The feast, though, became one of the twelve major feasts of the Orthodox calendar, and has been commemorated on the universal Christian calendar since 1585. The feast especially is important in Ethiopia, where Mary of Sion, that is, of Jerusalem, the city of the Temple, is the patroness of the Orthodox Church in that country.

The feast, though not historical, is important theologically for the values it teaches and imparts. Mary comes to the temple because she is "the living temple of the holy glory of Christ our God" (Vesper hymnology, Entrance of the Mother of God into the Temple). Just as the Temple in Jerusalem was the dwelling place of God, so also her womb was to become the dwelling place of the Word of God. This feast proclaims that the promise of the first covenant has now been fulfilled. Just as Mary received God into her womb, so now we go to our temples and there receive Christ in communion, and we become the dwelling place of God, as appropriately noted by St. Paul who writes that now "we are the temple of the living God" 2 Corinthians 6: 16. This mystery of God dwelling in us comes about through His Incarnation in the womb of Mary, which we celebrate at the feast of the Nativity of our Lord. The feast of Mary's Entrance into the Temple, therefore, helps explain the meaning of Christ's Birth for us and on this day we begin to sing the Canon of the Nativity at the Matins service: "Christ Is Born, let us glorify Him. Christ comes down from heaven, let us go out to meet Him. Christ lives on earth, let us exalt in joy. All you faithful, sing to the Lord, for He is glorified."

The second feast we celebrate is the Feast of the Conception of the Mother of God by St. Anna, that is, when she conceived Mary in her womb according to the promise of God. This feast is observed on December 9 and is also described in the noncanonical gospel of James. Here an angel appears to Anna and tells her, "Anna, Anna, the Lord has heard your prayer. You shall conceive and bear, and your offspring shall be spoken of in the whole world" 4: 1. The Orthodox Church thus emphasizes the removal of the barrenness of St. Anna, who was childless. This prefigures the feast of the Nativity, the Birth of our Lord, Who came to "shed upon the world" lying in the barrenness of ignorance and darkness, "the light of knowledge." The Church recognizes the sinlessness of Mary and her blessedness proclaimed by the angel at the time of the Annunciation, "...blessed are you among women..." Luke 1: 28. The Church also looks forward to this victory over sin and in one of the hymns of the feast, the angel address Anna, "No longer will you be on earth as fruitless soil, that is childless, for you have produced on earth, Mary, who will bring forth the tree of Life, Jesus....According to His will, He delivered the human race from all shame when He

became man out of His compassionate mercy." Vesper Hymn, Feast of the Conception of the Mother of God by St. Anna

At many of the great feasts, such as that of the Nativity of our Lord, the Church recalls and remembers on the following day, those souls intimately connected with the mystery being celebrated. The title of the second day of the Nativity of our Lord celebration is "*Synaxis*", that is, an assembly or gathering together, collecting into one, of all the glory, honor and respect the Church can muster for the person most closely associated with and responsible for the feast becoming reality and possibility. That is why on December 26, we celebrate what may be the oldest feast day of Mary, the Synaxis of the Birthgiver of God. There is a special *Kontakion* and hymnology for this glorious feast day, associated as it is with Christ's Birth. In fact, each of the feasts of Mary enlightens and makes plainer the mystery of Christ among us.

The feast of her Entrance into the Temple tells us that we are now God's temples because Christ has come and lived in our midst. His coming, has taken away the barrenness of sin. The feast of the Synaxis tells us that Christ is born eternally of the Father, but now is born in time as a human being of a virgin Mother. Mary is then called the "mystical vine which produces the 'Grape of life,'" Christ our God. This is an image of communion in which we partake of the wine, the product of grapes, and, by the power of the Holy Spirit now becomes the life-creating blood of Jesus our Lord. The Nativity of Christ our God at a particular time in history, about two thousand years ago, is only the beginning of our union with God, our restoration to Him, our Creator. This union continues in the mystery of the Eucharist, in which we partake of the Body and Blood of Christ as food for our soul and body, so that, like Mary, we become God-bearers. It will be completed only in the future kingdom, when God will be present again among His people in an even closer union than that in the original created paradise.



Wrestling With God

Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him until daybreak Genesis 32: 24.

In this blessed event, God is wrestling with Jacob more than Jacob is interested in wrestling with God. The "man" referred to here is the Son of Man – the Angel of the Covenant. It was God in human form, pressing down on Jacob to press his old familiar, empty vapid life from him. And by daybreak God has prevailed for Jacob's "hip was wrenched" Genesis 32: 25. As Jacob fell from away from his old life, he fell into the protective and embracing arms of God, clinging to Him, but also wrestling until His blessing was imparted. His blessing was that of a new advanced and elevated way of life, so he rose from the earthly to the heavenly, from the merely human to the divine, the natural to the supernatural, from man's simple way to God's exalted exemplary way. From that morning forward, he was a weak and broken man from a human perspective, but God was with him without question. And the Lord's heavenly voice proclaimed, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome" Genesis 32: 28.

This ought to be a typical scene in the life of everyone who has been transformed in baptism and struggles in daily life to imitate Christ. If God has called us to His highest and best, each of us will have a time of crisis, when all our resources will fail and when we face either ruin or something better than we have ever dreamed. But before we can receive the blessings of heaven, before we can merit the eternal stamp of approval, we must rely on God's infinite help in grace. He will not let us down. He will uphold His truth in us if we ask for it. He will push, inspire and direct us in the direction of salvation. We must be willing to let go of our own ideas about Christ, about the Church and about salvation until we reflect the mind and soul of Christ. We must surrender completely to Him so that our concepts are expunged. We must cease from our own wisdom, strength, and righteousness because His exceeds beyond imagination all we can hope for. We must, in reality be "crucified with Christ" Galatians 2: 20, and yet found to be alive in Him.

Our God knows how to lead us to the point of crisis and He knows how to lead us through it. If we want success, if we want victory, if we desire to be united with Him, if we genuinely are seeking after the salvation of our soul, His will must overshadow ours. We have to give up our misperceived notions about salvation and assume His truth and authentically live it.

Is God leading you in this way? Is this the meaning of your mysterious trial, your difficult circumstances, your impossible situation, or that trying place in which you are wedged and cannot seem to move past without Him? Do you have questions about the nature of the Church, your relationship to it as Christ's Body of salvation? Do you remember things about

Christ which someone taught you, but you now find questionable and in error, opposed to the reality of the Lord? Were you living a pretentious fable? Do you want unquestionable victory in your spiritual life? Do you want more of Christ so you can win the struggle?

Then turn to the God of Jacob! Throw yourself helplessly at His feet. Die in His loving arms to your own misconceptions and the errors others have taught you. Die in His living arms to your own strength and so called wisdom. Then rise like Jacob into His strength, totality and sufficiency. There is no way out of your difficult and narrow situation except at the top. Genuine Orthodox believers deserve triumphal victory. You must win deliverance by rising higher, coming into a new experience with God that is genuinely and authentically Orthodox. And may it bring you into all that it is meant to be by the revelation of the "Mighty one of Jacob" Isaiah 60: 16!

Wrestle now with God. Struggle to live His truth, not your own. Permit His grace to permeate your life. Be transformed so you are victorious, so that you are aligned with Him and not in opposition to Him. Be known as one who truly wrestles with God daily and who honestly desires His truth to permeate your life, to guide your existence and to lead you to paradise. It is only truth that can save and Christ identifies Himself as the "...way, the truth and the life" John 14: 6, so that in the life of His Body, our blessed Church, disposed through sacramental grace, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free" John 8: 32.

*He is the image of the invisible God,
The first born of all creatures.
In Him everything in heaven and on earth
Was created,
Things visible and invisible,
Whether Thrones or Dominations,
Principalities or Powers;
All were created through Him, and for Him.
He is before all else that is.
In Him everything continues in being.*

...Colossians 1:15-17

Born Of The Virgin Mary

The Jesus Who lived for thirty years in Nazareth in Galilee, is the eternal Son of God conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary "which is proclaimed by the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. It was taught by the Fathers of the Church and addressed by the Councils, according to which Jesus Christ, eternal Son of God is born in the world of His Mother's substance. The Church, then, professes and proclaims that Jesus Christ was soon conceived and born of a daughter of Adam, and descendant of Abraham and of David, the Virgin Mary.

St. Luke's Gospel states that Mary conceived the Son of God through the power of the Holy Spirit, "not knowing man" Luke 1: 34; Matthew 1: 18, 24, 25. Mary was therefore a virgin before the birth of Christ, and she remained a virgin in giving birth and after the birth. That is the truth presented by the New Testament texts and which is expressed by the Fifth Ecumenical Council at Constantinople in 553 which speaks of Mary as "ever virgin," and also that the Mother of God, Mary, conceived her son through the power of the Holy Spirit without human intervention, and in giving birth to Him, her virginity remained incorrupt and even after the birth her virginity remained intact.

Mary's Consent

This faith is repeated in the teaching of the Apostle. We read, for example, in the Letter of St. Paul to the Galatians, "When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his son, born of a woman...so that we might receive adoption as sons" Galatians 4: 4, 5. The event is linked to the conception and birth of Jesus and are contained in the first chapters of SS. Matthew & Luke, generally called the "infancy narratives," and it is to them that reference must be made.

Particularly well known is St. Luke's text, because it is frequently read. The passage describes the Annunciation to Mary which took place six months after the announcement of the future birth of St. John the Baptist (Luke 1: 5 – 25).

"...the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary" Luke 1: 26. The angel greeted her with the words, "Hail, Mary, "which became

the Church's prayer, the angelic salutation. Mary was disturbed by the angel's greeting. "She was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a Son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High'... Then Mary said to the angel: 'How can this be, since I have no husband?' And the angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the Child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God'" Luke 1: 29 – 35.

The angel, in making the announcement, represents as a sign the un hoped for maternity of Elizabeth, a relative of Mary, who had conceived a son in her old age, and adds, "With God nothing is impossible." Then Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your will" Luke 1: 37, 38.

Motherhood and Virginity

This text of St. Luke's gospel is the basis of the Church's teaching on the motherhood and virginity of Mary, from whom was born Christ, made man by the power of the Holy Spirit. The first moment of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God is identified with the miraculous conception which took place by the power of the Holy Spirit when Mary uttered her "yes": "Be it done to me according to your word" Luke 1: 38.

St. Matthew's Gospel completes St. Luke's narrative by describing certain circumstances which preceded the birth of Jesus. We read, "Now the birth of Jesus took place in this way. When Mary, his mother had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a man unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to send her away quietly.

"But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a Son and you shall call His name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins'" Matthew 1: 18 – 21.

As is evident, both texts of the revelation of God to us are in agreement on the fundamental facts: Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and was born of

the Virgin Mary and are complementary in clarifying the circumstances of this extraordinary happening. St. Luke in reference to Mary, St. Matthew, in reference to Joseph.

To identify the source of the infancy narrative one must go back to St. Luke's remark, "Mary kept all these things pondering them in her heart" Luke 2: 19. St. Luke states this twice, after the departure of the shepherds from Bethlehem and after the finding of Jesus in the temple (confer Luke 2: 51). The evangelist himself provides us with the elements to identify in the Mother of Jesus one of the sources of the information used by him in writing his narrative.

Mary, who, "kept these things in her heart," Luke 2: 19, could bear witness after Christ's death and Resurrection, in regard to what concerned her role as Mother, precisely in the apostolic period when the New Testament texts were being composed and written and when the early Christian tradition had its origin.. The gospel witness to the virginal conception of Jesus on the part of Mary is of great theological importance. In fact, it constitutes a particular sign of the divine origin of Mary's Son. The fact that Jesus does not have an earthly father because generated without human intervention sets out clearly the truth He is the Son of God, so much so that even when He assumes human nature His Father remains exclusively God.

The revelation of the intervention of the Holy Spirit in the conception of Jesus indicates the beginning of the history of the man of the new spiritual generation which has a strictly supernatural character (confer 1 Corinthians 15: 45 – 49). In this way the Triune God is communicated to the creature through the Holy Spirit. It is the mystery to which may be applied the words of the Psalmist, "Send forth your Spirit, and they are created, and you renew the face of the earth" Psalms 103: 30.

Man Recreated

In the economy of this self-communication of God to the creature, the virginal conception of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, is a central and culminating event. It initiates the new creation. In this way God enters decisively into history to activate man's supernatural destiny, or the predestination of all things in Christ. It is the definitive expression of God's salvific love for man.

In the realization of the plan of salvation there is always a necessary participation on the part of the creature. Thus in the conception of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, Mary participated in a decisive way. Enlightened interiorly by the angel's message about her vocation as mother and the preservation of her virginity, Mary expresses her will and her consent and agrees to become the humble instrument of the power of the Most High. The action of the Holy Spirit insures that in Mary motherhood and virginity are simultaneously present in a way which, although incomprehensible to the human mind, enters fully within the scope of God's predilection and omnipotence.

Perpetual Virginity

Isaiah's great prophecy is fulfilled in Mary, "...a virgin shall conceive and bear a son" Isaiah 7; 14; Matthew 1: 22, 23. Her virginity, an Old Testament sign of poverty and availability to God's disposal and plan, becomes the sphere of the exceptional action of God Who chooses Mary to be Mother of the Messiah.

The exceptional character of Mary is seen also in the genealogies contained in the gospels of St. Luke & Matthew. In accordance with Jewish custom, Matthew's gospel begins with the genealogy of Jesus, read on the Sunday prior to the Nativity of our Lord (Matthew 1: 2 – 17), and starting from Abraham, listing the generations in the male line. St. Matthew, in fact, is concerned to make evident, through the legal paternity of Jesus, the descent of Jesus from Abraham and David, and consequently, the legitimacy of His claim to be the Messiah.

However, at the end of the listing of the ancestors of Christ, we read, "Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ" Matthew 1: 16. By emphasizing the motherhood of Mary, the evangelist implicitly underlines the truth of the virginal birth; Jesus, as man, did not have a human father.

According to St. Luke's gospel the genealogy of Jesus (Luke 2: 23 – 28), is in ascending order: From Jesus through His ancestors, it goes back to Adam. The Evangelist wished to show the link between Jesus and the whole human race. Mary, as God's collaborator is giving human nature to His eternal Son, becomes the instrument that linked Jesus with the whole of humanity.



HOLIDAY GREETINGS

To you, our faithful and good parishioners, who like the Wise Men at the time of the Lord's Birth, were filled with joy and faith, who after encountering the Infant of Bethlehem, went away filled with an enduring faith and remained, in spite of Herod's opposition, loyal believers, our prayer is that you remain receptive to Christ and permit Him a continuing place in the manger of your hearts. May your lives be enriched by our worship of God today. Our thoughts turn to the first Nativity of our Lord in Bethlehem so long ago and to you, our beloved spiritual children. As the shepherds saw the glory of the angelic throng and praised God for the story they heard in word and song, so may you find reason for praising God anew, that in this blessed season we realize and live the eternal truth that Christ is Born for all of us. May the radiance of the star of the East brighten your life on this festal celebration and throughout the year. May it inspire an inner spiritual beauty so others follow its brightness. My prayer for you my dear parishioners is that the Infant of Bethlehem fill your hearts with gladness, your home with good cheer, your family life with sanctity and your whole life with His choice blessings. A blessed and holy celebration to all!

WISDOM! BE ATTENTIVE

Your Nativity, O Christ our God, has shed upon the world the light of knowledge; for though it, those who worshipped the stars have learned from a star to worship You, the Sun of Justice, and to recognize You as the Orient from high, Glory be to You, O Lord! Troparion, Feast of the Nativity of our Lord.

Today, the Virgin gives birth to perfect Essence, and the earth offers a cave to the Inaccessible. The angels sing His glory with the shepherds; the wise men journey with the star, for there is born for us an Infant Child, God Eternal Kontakion, Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord.

Rejoice, O Bethlehem, and make ready, O Ephrata! Behold the 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 arms of the Virgin Kontakion, preparation for the feast of the Nativity of our Lord.

Come, let us rejoice in the Lord! Let us proclaim the present mystery by which the separation has been broken and the flaming sword withheld: now shall the Cherubim let us all come to the tree of life. As for me, I am returning to the bliss of paradise from where I had been driven by original sin Vesper Hymn, Feast of the Nativity of our Lord.

Behold, the image of the Father and His immutable Eternity has taken the form of a servant! He has come down to us from a Mother all-pure and yet He has remain unchanged; He has remained true God as He was before, and has taken on Himself what He had not been, becoming Man out of his love for man. Wherefore, let us raise our voices in hymns singing: "O God, born of a Virgin, have mercy on us!" Vesper Hymn, Feast of the Nativity of our Lord.

Let all the earth worship and sing praise to You, sing praise to Your Name Prokimenon, Feast of the Nativity of our Lord.

"He shall be called Emmanuel, which means "God with us!" Matthew 1: 23.

Based on our Lord's own startling and astounding words, "If I had not come..." John 15: 22, there was a remarkable card published for the Nativity holy day entitled, "If Christ had not come." It spoke of a dream or perhaps, nightmare of a world into which Jesus had never come. Homes would have, of course, none of the common decorations we now associate with the feast day. But more importantly, there was no church with a golden dome atop which might appear the cross of salvation. In the library would be no text of the life of Christ or that of the history of the Body of Christ, His Church.

There would be no consoling words of comfort for the living or the dead except those found in the Old Testament which ends with the book of Malachi. There would be no Beatitudes, no bodily or spiritual sustenance on the Body and Blood of the Saviour, no forgiveness of sin, no glorious celebration of His Nativity or Resurrection, no possibility of salvation through the sacramental Mystery of baptism. There would be no gospel of good news, no promise of hope fulfilled and no salvation for the soul. But there would be much weeping and crying in bitter despair.

At the death of a loved one, there could be no message of comfort, no assuring words of the glorious Resurrection, and no thought of a consoling mansion awaiting us in heaven. There would be only a "dust to dust" ceremony and "ashes to ashes" repeated over again amid a long farewell. If Christ had not come, man would continually burst into tears, weeping bitterly in his sorrowful delusion.

How grateful we are on this feast that we can sing, "O come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant, O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem..." Let us be glad and rejoice because He is come. Let us remember the proclamation of the angelic visitor: "I bring you good news of great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour is born to you; he is Christ the Lord." Luke 2: 10, 11.

Because He is among us, because He is with us, because He is now in us by the awesome gift of the Eucharist, we can truly rejoice and celebrate. May the love of our hearts and souls go out to all who do not know Him, who have no genuine experience of Him, who cannot therefore celebrate the blessed feast of the His Nativity. Let us glorify Him from the depth of our hearts as the feast day greeting expects and directs. Let us sing His praises in worship and song. Let us show our gratitude for His coming among us by the style of life we live. Does our lifestyle give evidence He is come and lives in our midst?

"Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not be saddened this day for rejoicing in the Lord must be your strength" Nehemiah 8: 10.

*Behold, I Bring You
Good Tidings of Great Joy*

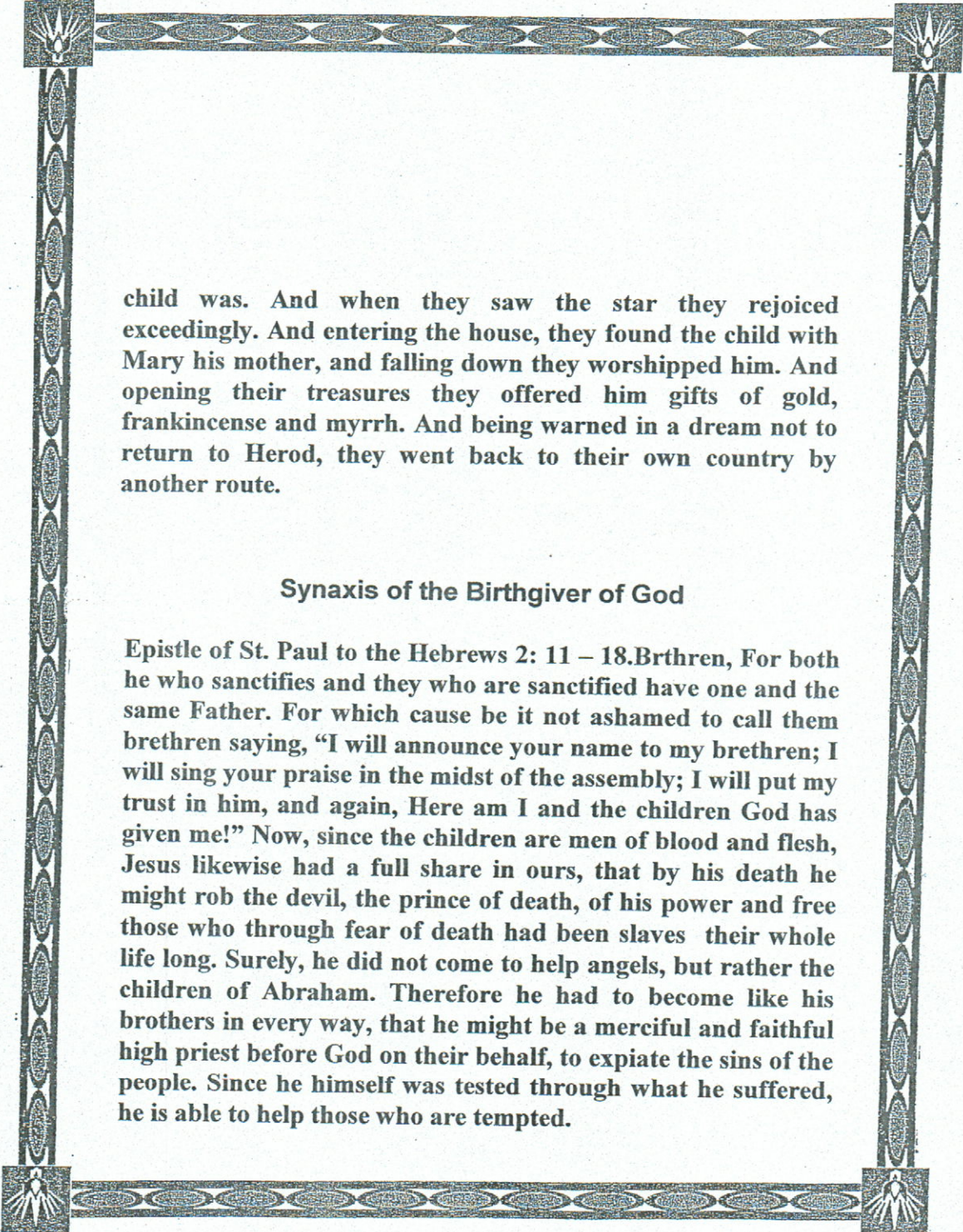
Glad tidings herald
the Christ child's birth—
"Joy to the world"
and "peace on earth,"
"Glory to God,"
let all men rejoice
And hearken once more
to the angel's voice.
It matters not who
or what you are,
All can behold
the Christmas star,
For the star that shone
is shining still
In the hearts of those
of peace and goodwill.



The glorious Nativity in the flesh of our Lord, God and Saviour Jesus Christ

Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians 4: 4 – 7. Brethren: But when the fullness of time came, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law, that he might redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his son into our hearts, crying, "Abba, Father." So that he is no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, an heir of God through Jesus Christ.

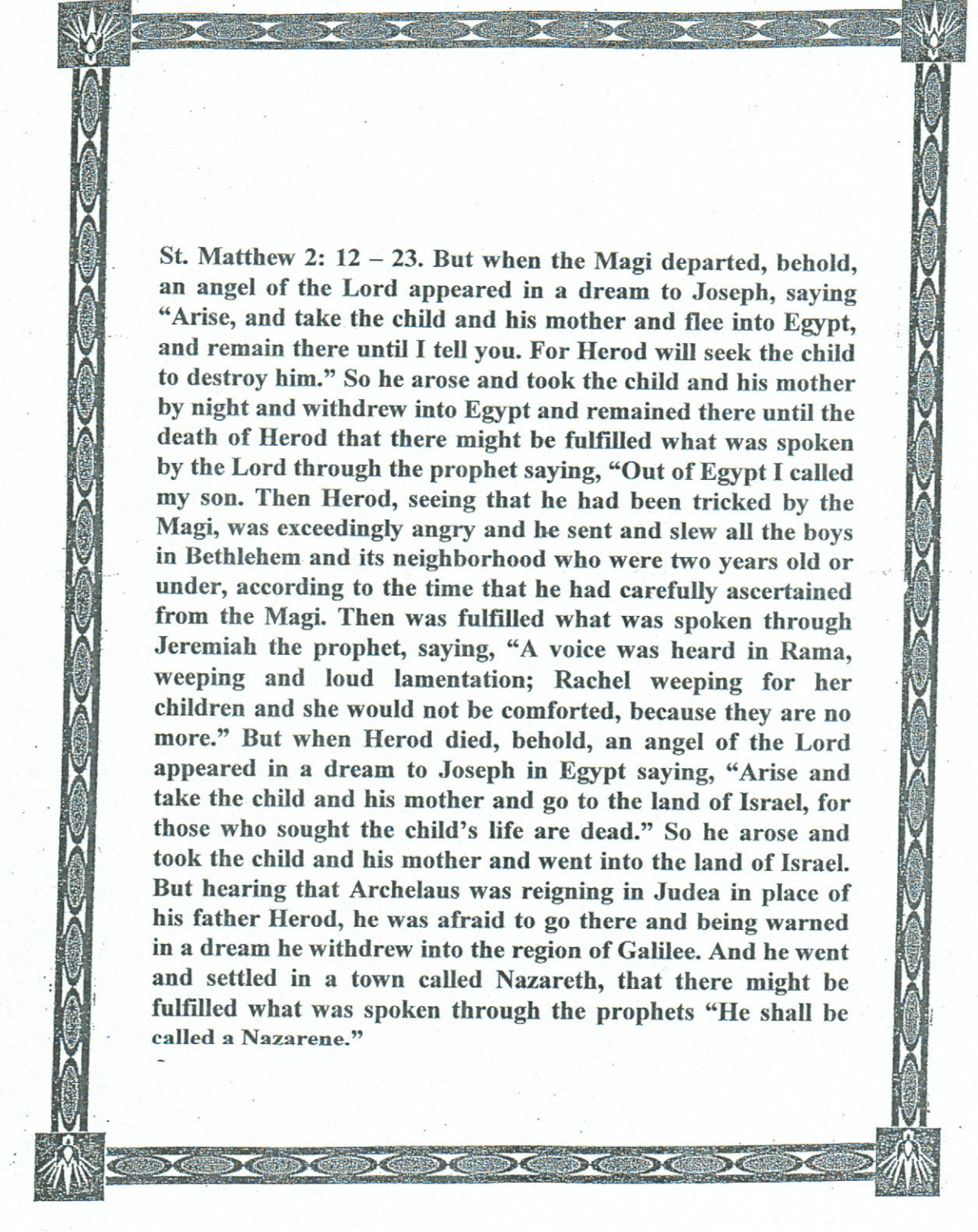
St. Mathew 2: 1 – 12. Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, there came Magi from the east to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is the new born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east and have come to worship him." But when King Herod heard this, he was troubled and so was all Jerusalem with him. And gathering together all the chief priests and Scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. And they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written through the prophet, 'And you, Bethlehem of the land of Judah, are by no means least among the princes of Judah, for from you shall come forth a leader who shall rule my people, Israel.'" Then Herod summoned the Magi secretly, and carefully ascertained from them the time when the star appeared to them. And sending them to Bethlehem, he said, "Go and make careful inquiry concerning the child and when you have found him, bring me word that I too may go and worship him." Now they, having heard the king, went their way. And behold, the star that they had seen in the east went before them until it came and stood over the place where the



child was. And when they saw the star they rejoiced exceedingly. And entering the house, they found the child with Mary his mother, and falling down they worshipped him. And opening their treasures they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.

Synaxis of the Birthgiver of God

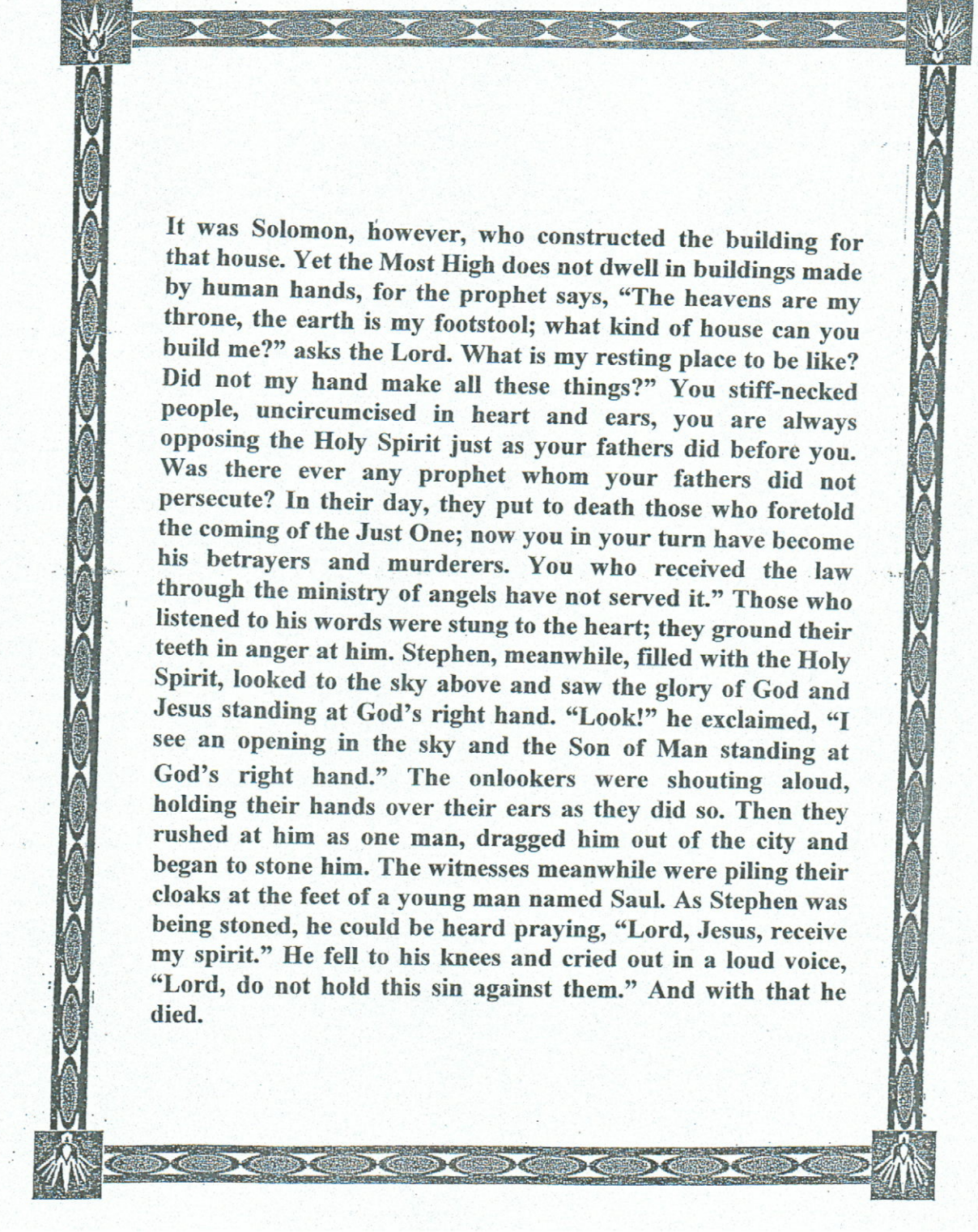
Epistle of St. Paul to the Hebrews 2: 11 – 18. Brethren, For both he who sanctifies and they who are sanctified have one and the same Father. For which cause be it not ashamed to call them brethren saying, "I will announce your name to my brethren; I will sing your praise in the midst of the assembly; I will put my trust in him, and again, Here am I and the children God has given me!" Now, since the children are men of blood and flesh, Jesus likewise had a full share in ours, that by his death he might rob the devil, the prince of death, of his power and free those who through fear of death had been slaves their whole life long. Surely, he did not come to help angels, but rather the children of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers in every way, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest before God on their behalf, to expiate the sins of the people. Since he himself was tested through what he suffered, he is able to help those who are tempted.



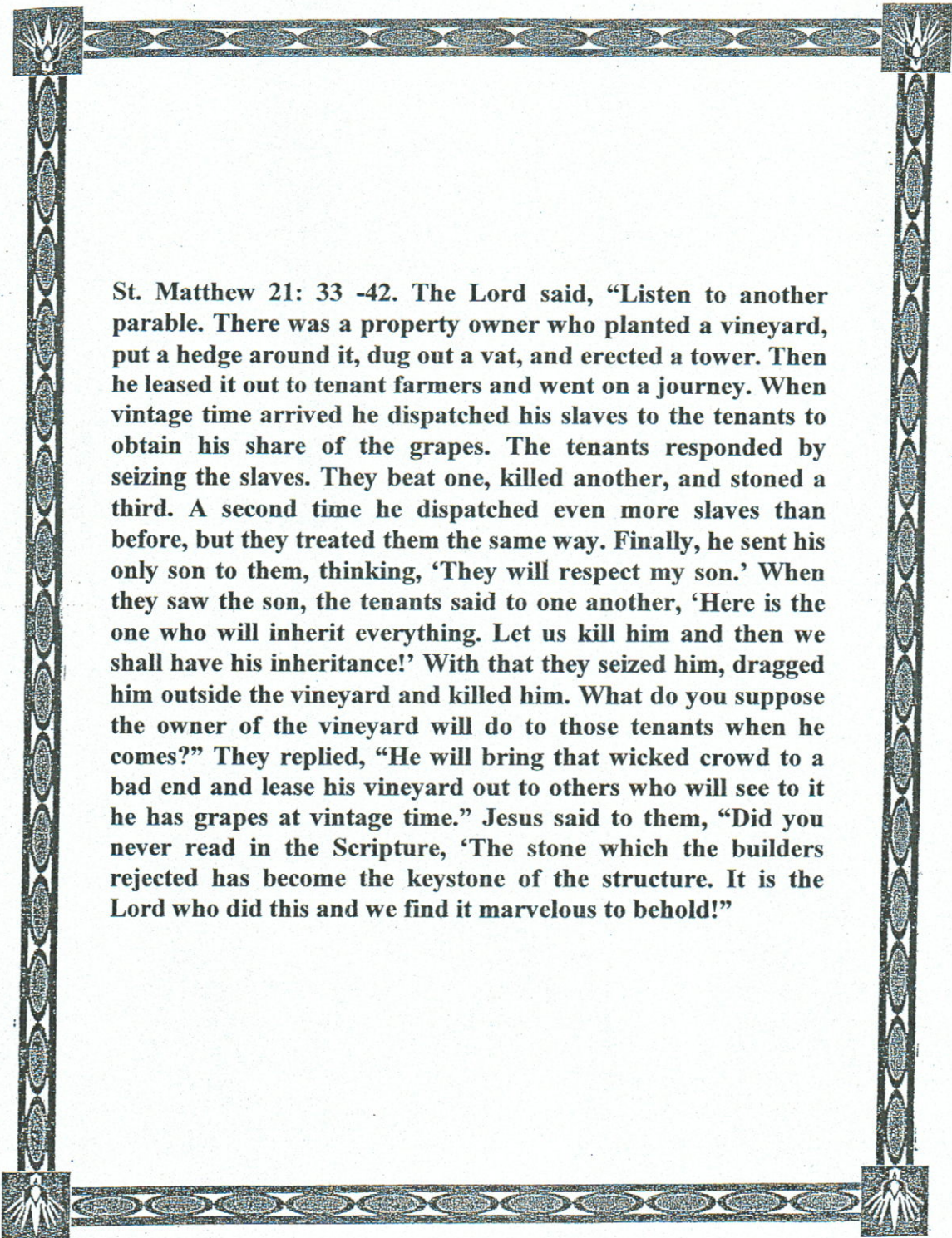
St. Matthew 2: 12 – 23. But when the Magi departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph, saying “Arise, and take the child and his mother and flee into Egypt, and remain there until I tell you. For Herod will seek the child to destroy him.” So he arose and took the child and his mother by night and withdrew into Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod that there might be fulfilled what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet saying, “Out of Egypt I called my son. Then Herod, seeing that he had been tricked by the Magi, was exceedingly angry and he sent and slew all the boys in Bethlehem and its neighborhood who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had carefully ascertained from the Magi. Then was fulfilled what was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet, saying, “A voice was heard in Rama, weeping and loud lamentation; Rachel weeping for her children and she would not be comforted, because they are no more.” But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt saying, “Arise and take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.” So he arose and took the child and his mother and went into the land of Israel. But hearing that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there and being warned in a dream he withdrew into the region of Galilee. And he went and settled in a town called Nazareth, that there might be fulfilled what was spoken through the prophets “He shall be called a Nazarene.”

St. Stephen Protomartyr

Acts of the Apostles 6: 8: -15 and 7: 1 – 5, 47 - 60. In those days, the Stephen already spoken of was a man filled with grace and power, who worked great wonders and signs among the people. Certain members of the so-called "Synagogue of Roman Freedmen," that is, Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia and Asia, undertook to take Stephen in debate, but they proved no match for the wisdom and spirit with which he spoke. They persuaded some men to make the charge that they heard him speaking blasphemies against Moses and God, and in this way they incited the people, the elders and the Scribes. All together they confronted him, seized him, and led him off to the Sanhedrin. There they brought in false witnesses who said, "This man never stops making statements against the holy place and the law. We have heard him claim that Jesus the Nazarene will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses handed down to us. The members of the Sanhedrin who sat there stared at him intently. Throughout, Stephen's face seemed like that of an angel. The high priests asked if the charges were true. To this Stephen replied "My brothers! Fathers! Listen to me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was still in Mesopotamia and before he settled in Haran. God said to him, leave your country and your kinfolk and go to the land I will show you. So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After the death of his father, God made him move from there to this land where you now dwell. God did not give him any of it as his heritage, not even a foot of land, but he promised to give it to him and descendants after him as a possession – although he had no child.



It was Solomon, however, who constructed the building for that house. Yet the Most High does not dwell in buildings made by human hands, for the prophet says, "The heavens are my throne, the earth is my footstool; what kind of house can you build me?" asks the Lord. What is my resting place to be like? Did not my hand make all these things?" You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are always opposing the Holy Spirit just as your fathers did before you. Was there ever any prophet whom your fathers did not persecute? In their day, they put to death those who foretold the coming of the Just One; now you in your turn have become his betrayers and murderers. You who received the law through the ministry of angels have not served it." Those who listened to his words were stung to the heart; they ground their teeth in anger at him. Stephen, meanwhile, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked to the sky above and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at God's right hand. "Look!" he exclaimed, "I see an opening in the sky and the Son of Man standing at God's right hand." The onlookers were shouting aloud, holding their hands over their ears as they did so. Then they rushed at him as one man, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. The witnesses meanwhile were piling their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul. As Stephen was being stoned, he could be heard praying, "Lord, Jesus, receive my spirit." He fell to his knees and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And with that he died.



St. Matthew 21: 33 -42. The Lord said, "Listen to another parable. There was a property owner who planted a vineyard, put a hedge around it, dug out a vat, and erected a tower. Then he leased it out to tenant farmers and went on a journey. When vintage time arrived he dispatched his slaves to the tenants to obtain his share of the grapes. The tenants responded by seizing the slaves. They beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. A second time he dispatched even more slaves than before, but they treated them the same way. Finally, he sent his only son to them, thinking, 'They will respect my son.' When they saw the son, the tenants said to one another, 'Here is the one who will inherit everything. Let us kill him and then we shall have his inheritance!' With that they seized him, dragged him outside the vineyard and killed him. What do you suppose the owner of the vineyard will do to those tenants when he comes?" They replied, "He will bring that wicked crowd to a bad end and lease his vineyard out to others who will see to it he has grapes at vintage time." Jesus said to them, "Did you never read in the Scripture, 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the keystone of the structure. It is the Lord who did this and we find it marvelous to behold!'"

"FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD . . ."

Once again, we are celebrating the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord, commonly referred to as "CHRISTMAS." As the lyrics of a popular Christmas song tell us, "It's the most wonderful time of the year." Decorations illumine our homes and towns. Joyful sounds of music fill the air. Young and old alike eagerly anticipate all of the fanfare that surrounds our beloved celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ.

But have you ever thought of what it would be like to live in a world without Christmas? Indeed, what if Jesus Christ had NOT been born in Bethlehem that "cold winter's night" so long ago? What if the angelic choir did not herald this momentous event? What if there was no brilliant star in the sky, and what if there were no Wise Men to follow it? The impact of this would be far reaching, extending far beyond the elimination of a "holiday" from our calendar. What would we have to look forward to if Christ had not been born? The "people who sat in great darkness" that the Prophet Isaiah wrote about would still be sitting there! Our lives would be meaningless and without purpose. The yoke of sin would weigh heavy on all of us and the specter of death would loom ominously over our lives. Yes it would be a dreary world in which we would find ourselves. In short, we would simply live to die – a death that would be final and irreversible.

Alas, Christ WAS born! He lived among us and taught us through His words and example. He brought us the greatest "Christmas present" of all: THE GIFT OF SALVATION. As we greet each other this year, saying "CHRIST IS BORN", may we truly realize the significance of these words!