



Saint Paul the Apostle Orthodox Church

24 BURKE ROAD

FREEHOLD, NJ 07728

Sunday after the Nativity of our Lord

December 30, 2007

Father Robert E Lucas, Pastor;
Father John Cmur; Deacon Kenneth E. Ellis and
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

+++ Today we have festal anointing on the occasion of this past week's feast days. The customary greeting is "Christ Is Born!" to which we respond "Glorify Him!"

+++ 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 and the Nativity of our Lord: Tithe Offering, \$██████; Candles, \$██████; Kitchen, \$██████; Pennies From Heaven, \$██████; Candy Sales, \$██████; Nativity of our Lord, \$██████; Christian Fellowship, \$██████; Food Coupons, \$██████, for a total of \$██████0. 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 38 adults and 14 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: Bob Gorbich, Pani Lucas, Paul Szmaida, Father Lucas, Pani Buletza, Marilyn Korba, Eleanor Korba, Stella Wanca & Michael, Debra Szmaida, Marie Szmaida and Subdeacon Dan Korba Family.

+++ A typing mistake was made in last week's bulletin. We erroneously printed a donation to the Building Fund of \$5,000 when in reality it was \$██████0.

+++ The offering envelopes for the new year are available in the vestibule. Please take them in the spirit they are offered and allow them to be a sign of love and devotion to the Lord and our parish.

+++ Next Sunday is the glorious feast of the Baptism of Christ, known as Theophany because the Holy Trinity is revealed. Theophany means Manifestation of God. The solemn blessing of water will take place following the Divine Liturgy and we will be privileged to be blessed with this freshly sanctified water.

+++ 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 \$██████ 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 \$92,405.00. 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 check the Sign-Up-Sheet for the weekly Christian Fellowship for the coming weeks. Simple foods without need for preparation are the best. Marilyn Korba coordinates this vital apostolate. Please assist her in making it a success by bringing your donation early so that all are present at the worship of our God.

+++ 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 \$██████ on this project to date!

+++ The weekly sponsor list for Christian Fellowship Food for this year is available to be filled out on the table in the kitchen. We appeal to **ALL** our parishioners to participate, not just a few, so that it is equitable and the responsibility shared by **ALL**.

+++ **During this season of generous hearts, please do not forget the reason for the season and plan on a most generous gift to the new-born Child in the cave at Bethlehem. Remember it is HIS birthday, His celebration!**

+++ This Tuesday is the solemn feast of the Circumcision of our Lord as well as the simple feast of St. Basil the Great. We also celebrate the civil new year. In anticipation, the Divine Liturgy will be celebrated Monday eve at 7: 30 PM. All are invited to join us in giving thanks for the blessings we have all received this past year and in asking our God's continued blessings in the new year. Before going out for your new year's eve celebration, join us in worthy prayer.

+++ The next Pirohi Sale will take place Saturday, January 12. Preparations will be made on January 10, the Thursday before. Helping hands and orders are needed for the events to be successful.

+++ We continue to be in need of Web Site donor-sponsors. The amount is \$25.00 per month. Please see Father as soon as possible. Please use the sign up sheet on the bulletin board in the kitchen.

+++ The sign up sheet for bulletin sponsors is posted on the bulletin board in the kitchen. Please show your gratitude for the richness of learning material we receive each week by sponsoring a month.

+++ We thank the generous children of our Jesus School for preparing the decorations in the church for the past feast of the Nativity of our Lord. God bless you faithful children with good health for Many & Blessed Years!.

+++ We thank all who responded to Father's invitation to offer seven day lights before the Icon of the Nativity. God bless you devoted souls with continued good health for Many & Blessed Years!

+++ **Please think about, pray and then act on the prompting of the Holy Spirit to be generous to our parish church and the Infant of Bethlehem for his birthday.**

+++ May all glory, adoration, 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!

Web Site Address

Parish: www.stpaul-freehold.com

Father's address: fatherbob@stpaul-freehold.com



The Tongue

Death and life are in the power of the tongue; those who make it a friend shall eat its fruit
Proverbs 18: 21.

He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from trouble Proverbs 21: 23.

If a man who does not control his tongue imagines he is devout, he is self-deceived; his worship is pointless James 1: 26.

If a person is without fault in speech he is a man in the fullest sense, because he can control his entire body. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide the rest of their bodies. It is the same with ships; however large they are, and despite the fact that they are driven by fierce winds, they are directed by very small rudders on whatever course the steersman's impulse may select. The tongue is something like that. It is a small member, yet it makes great pretensions James 3: 3 - 5.

Every form of life, four-footed or winged has been tamed by mankind; the tongue no man can tame. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison James 3:7, 8.

We use it to say, "praised be the Lord and Father"; then we use it to curse men, though they are made in the likeness of God. Blessing and curse come out of the same mouth. This ought not to be my brothers! Does a spring gush forth fresh water and foul from the same outlet? James 3: 9 - 11.

The tongue defiles the entire body...and its flame is kindled by hell James 3:6.

How Can We Know God?

One of the best ways of knowing something about the enduring love of our heavenly Father is to contemplate the love of a mother for her child. Every priest has met in a hospital corridor with a young mother, all excited, crying and worried, with a poignant request for prayer for her ailing youngster. The mother is hurt deeply in seeing her child suffering. In such a scene we can readily detect how much our God loves us. This good mother reflects in a devoted way the tender love of God for each of us. What a concern our heavenly Father must have for us if we, sinful human beings are capable of such tender and devoted loving concern for one another!

It is important for us to have a correct understanding of Who our God is so that we will be able to know, to love and to serve Him in this life and to be happy with Him for all eternity. Let us look carefully at some of the attributes or characteristics of God.

GOD IS ETERNAL He always was and always will be. He is the Source of existence and life. All of us sense that death is not the end of everything. We will continue. We will survive the death of our body. In death, if we are faithful in life, we shall be united with the Eternal One, the Source of all life.

GOD IS IMMUTABLE This means our God never changes. Change is a sign of imperfection. We cannot become more perfect unless we change. God is infinitely perfect, so there is no need for Him to change. He loves us with an everlasting love. This does not and cannot change because of the way God is in His very nature.

GOD IS FULLY PRESENT EVERYWHERE The Scriptures tell us: "O where can I go from your spirit, or where can I flee from your face? If I climb the heavens, you are there. If I lie in the grave, you are there" Psalm 139: 7, 8. God is present everywhere by His almighty power. He sees and holds everything in being. He sustains our very existence. If God were to release us from His grasp for just a moment, we would fall back into nothingness!

GOD IS ALL KNOWING Nothing is hidden from God's light. He sees all and knows even the most secret thoughts of our hearts and minds. God knows every aspect of the future. God

knows who will go to heaven and who, rejecting His grace, will go to hell. However, do not think that this knowledge of God determines your eternal destiny. God has given and endowed us with full and complete freedom which He cannot violate. We may love Him or reject Him. He alone knows how we will use or abuse His precious gift of free will. We should remember it is important to ask in prayer each day for God's grace to sustain us and other believers as well.

GOD IS ALMIGHTY This means our God is absolutely free to do all He wills to do. He has freely made our world and He keeps it in existence. God has created the laws of nature but is not bound by them Himself. He can suspend them, which is what a miracle is. Ordinarily, in our prayers we do not pray for miracles but that God may arrange naturally causes to give us the answer to our prayers. Occasionally, God works miracles in the life of His Body, the Church for the benefit of man.

GOD IS MERCIFUL He listens to and forgives sinners who repent of their sins. He consistently urges us all to turn from sin and to make an about face in prayer, acts of charity for our own sins and the sins of the whole world. By responding to Christ, we become co-workers of God in the salvation of the world.

GOD IS TRUTH God can neither deceive us nor be deceived by us. He is perfect and infinitely truthful. Our salvation depends upon accepting all the truths He reveals to us in the life of His Body, our Church. For example, we may not like the idea there is a hell. But in the New Testament, there are some fourteen or fifteen references to it, so we must believe it! What is good, kind, generous and praiseworthy about us is but a shadow of the goodness and greatness of our God which is manifested in the lives of the saints and particularly in the life of the Mother of God Who is the first human being to fully and totally respond to God's freely imparted grace and which we should ourselves always sincerely attempt to seriously imitate.

Prayer Of Praise

The Mother of God was forever in dialogue with our heavenly Father. She knew how to listen, how to receive, how to let the Word bear fruit in her life. People of prayer also learn how to bask in the sunshine of God's love. They allow His love to set them free. In prayer, God is always first. That is why the prayer of praise is the most perfect prayer. It is totally God-centered. It is simply praising God for being God. Praise is the prayer of the Spirit-filled person. For what else is prayer than resting in love and trustful attentiveness in the presence of God. Prayer is not believing that God CAN; it is believing that God WILL!

Traditions of the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord

Your Nativity O Christ our God, has shed upon the world the light of knowledge; for through 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 on high. Glory be to You, O Lord!" Troparion, Feast of the Nativity of our Lord.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and forever. Amen.

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.

Family Activities

Place and enthrone an icon of the Nativity of our Lord in a special place in your home and discuss it with our children. Help them understand its meaning and message. Assist them in identifying each figure.

Make a family Nativity scene with your children to keep in their room or the family room.

Utilize the Troparion and Kontakion of the feast as a prayer for your meal-time and bed-time prayers on the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord and its entire octave of celebration.

Read the Nativity Divine Liturgy Gospel in St. Luke 2: 1 - 20, as well as the Epistle lesson in Galatians 4: 4 - 7. The Gospel narrative for Matins on the Nativity Feast is from St. Matthew 1: 12 - 25. Discuss their meaning and implication in today's living. Very young children may enjoy a children's version of the Nativity story.

Visit a shut-in fellow parishioner, coworker, friend or neighbor, and take along a home-made gift to share with your holyday greeting and best wishes. Be certain to greet them with our traditional spiritual Orthodox greeting: "Christ is Born!" – "Glorify Him!" Then you all have

an opportunity to explain why we do this as a living practice of our faith at the time of this feast day celebration.

Restoring the Meaning of the Feast Day

How can you participate in restoring some of the real meaning of Christ's Nativity?

- Remember first of all to refer to the feast by its proper historical Eastern name: The Nativity of our Lord.
 - Remind each other what the Nativity Feast is all about. Recount the birth of the Lord.
 - Talk over your concern with your spouse and other family members. Decide what you want out of the feast day celebration, making certain it coincides with what the Church teaches, then relay your conclusions to other family members who will be affected by your decisions. Remind them this is not a holiday as secularist Americans think, but a holy day.
 - Discuss how much money you as a family will be spending on gifts. Then give a portion of that to your parish church or to an Orthodox mission or charity.
 - Do something as a family for someone who will never know you did it. For example, secretly shovel a needy neighbor's sidewalk or provide a basket of food.
 - Give a gift of gratitude. Between now and the next holy day, talk about one thing a day with your spouse and family for which you are grateful or surprise each other and family members with notes containing these sentiments.
 - Remember to commend each other in prayer to the new born Infant of Bethlehem. Pray and sing together before the icon of the Nativity of our Lord for specific intentions, the needs of others, mentioning their names.
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Call Your Priest - When???

Before you go to the hospital or when you are sick enough to miss the worship of God at the Divine Liturgy. The sacramental Mysteries of forgiveness and healing were given to us precisely for just such times. It is your right as a communicant of the Orthodox Church to request them for your spiritual sustenance and nourishment. Ask for them!

When there is trouble or problems in your home, call your priest when things first go wrong, not as a last resort. He may be requested to provide some objective insights and suggest some corrective measures. In addition, prayer together with him in your difficulties will sustain you and your loved ones.

When a child is born, your Christian family, the Church wishes to rejoice with you and plan for the baby's entrance and reception into the Body of Christ through the sacred sacramental Mysteries of Baptism, Chrismation and the Holy Eucharist. Your priest should know when you are hospitalized so he may visit and offer a blessing for your speedy recovery and that of your new-born child.

When you plan on getting married, you should not hire a wedding coordinator, a hall, catering service, etc., then, finally, come to see the priest to make spiritual arrangements. The only arrangements that really matter are those which concern the soul, the others, while important, cannot compare with the priority we ought to recognize in the sacramental Mystery of Marriage.

Before going off to college, the military, or to another community to seek employment, we should seek the blessing of God through our priest. You do not have to go into a far country or a strange situation alone as did the Prodigal Son. Your priest can assist by preparing you with some information, introductions, prayer and the names and addresses of local Orthodox parishes.

Get to know your parish priest. He is your friend in time of need and in your joy. Know him before the going gets rough. He will be glad to know you better and assist you and as a result be better prepared to help you when the need arises. He is always eager to commend you to the care of the Lord in prayer and good wishes.

In calling upon your priest, remember also pray for him, that he be strengthened by the continuing grace of the Holy Spirit in responding to your spiritual needs. Pray the Lord will continue to guide him in seriously attempting to lead you to salvation in Christ.

WISDOM! BE ATTENTIVE

Before the dawn of time, He was begotten of the Father without a mother. Now on earth He becomes a man without a father, being virgin-born from you, O Mother of God. Therefore a star announces the good news to wise men, while the angels and shepherds sing the glory of your giving birth, O woman full of grace! Kontakion, Feast of the Synaxis of the Mother of God.

O my soul, extol the Most Holy Virgin Mother of God who is more worthy of honor than the angels of heaven. O Virgin, it would be better for us to keep an awesome and reverent silence of love than to try singing songs composed with such depth of feeling; but O Mother, grant us the power to accomplish whatever is your desire Hymn Instead of It is Truly Proper, Feast of the Synaxis of the Mother of God.

O first martyr and apostle of Christ, you fought the good fight. You exposed the perversion of the persecutors, for when you were killed by stoning at the hands of wicked men you received a crown from the right hand on high, while you cried out to God, saying: "O Lord, do not charge this sin against them." Troparion, Feast of St. Stephen Protomartyr.

Yesterday the Master came to us as a man and today His servant departs from life. Yesterday the King was born as a man, and today his servant is stoned to death. For the sake of Christ, holy Stephen became the first martyr Kontakion, Feast of St. Stephen Protomartyr.

O Joseph, announce to David, ancestor of Christ, the good news of these wonders you have seen: A Virgin giving birth to a Child. With the shepherds you have glorified Him, with the Wise Men you have worshipped Him, and an angel appeared to you. Ask Christ our God, to save our souls. Troparion, Sunday after the Nativity of our Lord.

Today, David, beloved of God, is filled with joy; Joseph and James offer hymns of praise, their joy is the crown of relationship with Christ. They sing praise to Him Who was wondrously born; and they cry out: O Merciful Lord, save those who honor you." Kontakion, Sunday after the Nativity of Our Lord.

WISDOM! BE ATTENTIVE

O Jesus, enthroned on high together with Your eternal Father and divine Spirit; You condescended to be born on earth of a maiden and virgin mother. On the eighth day, You were circumcised. Praised be your most noble decision; praised be your plan of salvation; praised be Your condescension. O Lord, You alone love mankind! Troparion, Feast of the Circumcision of our Lord.

The Lord of all endures circumcision and His goodness purifies the sins of men and grants salvation to the world today. Therefore, Basil the priest and torchbearer of the Creator, the divine mystic of Christ, rejoices on high Kontakion, Feast of the Circumcision of our Lord.

The Saviour condescended and accepted for the sake of mankind to be wrapped in swaddling clothes. For His mother, He was eight days old, and for His Father, He was eternal. He did not disdain circumcision in the flesh. O you faithful, let us cry out to Him: "You are our God; have mercy on us!" Vesper Hymn, Feast of the Circumcision of our Lord.

The most merciful God did not disdain circumcision. He offered Himself instead as a symbol and example of salvation to all. He made the Law, and yet submitted Himself to its commands and to what the prophets had foretold of Him. O our God Who hold all things in Your hands and yet were wrapped in swaddling clothes; O Lord, glory be to You! Vesper Hymn, Feast of the Circumcision of our Lord.

Your voice resounds throughout the world which has accepted the lessons so well taught by you. You have given explanation of divine truths, you have clarified the nature of created things, and you have made a rule of life for men. By your royal priesthood, O venerable father Basil, intercede with Christ to save our souls Troparion, Feast of St. Basil the Great.

Father Basil, you have acquired the virtues of the saints; the humility of Moses, the zeal of Elias, the faith of Peter, the divine intuition of John, and like Paul you did not cease to repeat: "Who is weak and I am not weak? Who stumbles and I do not burn?" Since you are in the company of all the saints, intercede for the salvation of our souls Vesper Hymn, Feast of St. Basil the Great.

Shadow Over The Nativity Of Our Lord

The feast of the Nativity of our Lord is time for happiness, sweet joy, a time for making music in our souls, a time for heart warming words and gift-giving in the spirit of Jesus Christ. But yet gaudy lights twinkle in the trees, Santa Claus chuckles around the world as if he knew some beautiful secret and a million bells ring out their continuous but simplistic chorus, "Merry Christmas."

Everyone speaks of the story of the Magi whose camels rocked westward for months upon months on the trail of the newly shown star. We conjure up thoughts of angels dipping earthward from their lofty heavenly abode, their compelling music floating on the winter sky; of astounded shepherds who heard the great and good news. We speak of the gentle beasts of burden in the cave that night along with its occupants; of lovely and pure Mary, the Birthgiver of God, and the patient but faithful Joseph; of the Child – God's awesome gift to man on that glorious Nativity of our Lord in the flesh.

We follow the old tradition, striking everywhere a note of joy during this sacred season. But in this time of rejoicing and rightful celebration and exchanging of gifts, unless we are rather perceptive, and thoughtful, we may forget something. We can very easily forget about Herod! We like to recall the angels and shepherds, the Wise Men and the star; but we must also realistically recognize the presence of Herod.

Evil Persists

Herod belongs to the divine drama of Christ's Nativity. He isn't at the center right as is the Infant of Bethlehem, nor does he show up as clearly as the questing Magi who took some two years to finally reach the Prince of Peace. But he stands dramatically over the joyful scene, brooding and ugly, nevertheless. His dark shadow falls over the cave, in fact it falls far across the entire land like a black finger pointing at those who feel his evil power. Because we don't see him unless we really think about it, just like the insinuating devil in our lives, he is ignored by most souls. Out of sight, out of mind we readily agree. But his stealthy influence is cleverly inserted into our thinking about this sublime holyday just as it was at the original occurrence.

In our moment of ecstasy over the thought of God's face being revealed in a baby's smile, our memories tend to flee the grim reality of the deadly prince. But soon the Infant will hurry toward Egypt, out of his reach, hugged close to a trembling mother's terrified heart, while the prowling minions of the Roman ruler hunt for him. Being realistic, we can never look lightly upon Herod. We can say that he never would have been remembered in history save for his attack on the Christ Child, but we must truthfully admit that God's only begotten Son had to flee from him under the protective darkness of night. Perhaps Herod isn't very tall in man's historical mind, but at that agonizing moment he was monstrously big and threatening. He enters human salvation history as realistically as does his successor years later, Pontius Pilate, who is recorded in the Creed because of his diabolically infamous and nefarious deeds.

What faithful soul has not trembled under the thought of Herod's account of destruction of innocent male children? And what was the occasion for this madness but the peaceful birth of the Prince of Peace? There was no peace in the heart and soul of this mass murderer! The Infant comes to impart and ennoble life and Herod seeks to destroy it! Our God gave life to Adam and Even in paradise, but the dirty devil is successful in destroying this gift.

The Herods of the centuries since then still cannot abide what they perceive as competition. Fear gnaws at their hearts when the name of a suspected opponent is brought up. Herod was a caricature of a man; he ruled by sheer force with the power and approbation of imperial Rome supporting him. An innocent Prince of Peace would only threaten his ugly doctrine and ultimately bring it to naught. He knew only one way to meet an enemy and that was by the sword. Consequently, doom was spelled out for those innocent little ones who lay in his path. His philosophy was that it would be better to snuff out thousands of lives unopposed to him than to permit One to live who might erroneously endanger his self-perceived, but uncertain power.

Vigilance Necessary

So at the time of the Nativity of our Lord we ring bells, make music and share gifts and all this is good, even praiseworthy. We need to do this, not only because it gives expression to the faith we have in the birth of our Saviour in the flesh, not only because it uplifts our souls, but because it is proper to commemorate the stooping down of our heavenly Father to our needy

world and sharing himself with us in so intimate a way. But in the midst of merriment we must be vigilant for the satanic figure of Herod. He does not like our joy and inspired by the father of all lies labors to divert us from rightful celebration if we non-thinkingly permit him his way. He presages difficulty and trouble for our soul if we approach the Birth of Christ as only a holiday like the fourth of July. If we rightfully are jubilant for the coming of the Messiah among us, the devil cringes because it predicts trouble for his reign among us. All the talk of peace and hope and happiness, all the warmhearted meaningful greetings; these convey values easily continuing to live in the hearts of man all year, everyday and the selfish force of satanic power certainly does not take well to this sort of reality. He would prefer we feel good about celebrating simply some sort of winter feast with all its worldly and temporal connotations. In other words, feel good, gather together, celebrate, but not because of Christ and the opportunity of salvation given man.

Not only at the Birth of Christ did the cruel and bitter shadow of Herod strike across the scene; it thrust out against the Saviour throughout his entire earthly ministry. Opposition nagged at him like a prophetic note of doom in the entire gospel narrative. The devil would not let him alone! He met him at the manger, stalked him through Judea and Galilee, hounded him to Golgotha. The devil sneered at his every good deed and made attempts, many times successfully, to twist and turn the minds of men against him. He laughed to derision his every kind of sign and wonder, his every gentle touch. Herod could not abide the look of God which Jesus showed mankind. Herod continues today warring against new Christs, his faithful priests, bishops and deacons as well as ordinary faithful believers.

Side-Stepping

Sometimes we have a way of side-stepping the plain and strong messages of Christ and over emphasizing his milder words. We underscore his positive statements, but we forget that half of his parables end on a negative note. He was ever aware of the fierce thrust of evil against him. He kept talking about his coming death, about his earthly life ending up on the Cross. He answered even the superficial Peter himself when he took exception to this open truth, "Get behind me satan!" Matthew 4: 10. He was not fooled, even if some of his followers were. He knew about the glory of goodness, but He also knew better than anyone, the stubborn almost persistent drive of evil.

Too many Orthodox Christians have tried to do with Christianity what they try to do with the feast of the Nativity of our Lord and that is to make it all wonder and light with no disturbing sequences. Shut the ugly light from the picture. Take the picture from the mind. Dwell on beauty alone. God is in his heaven and all is right with the world! There is so much right with the world, an infant's smile, a mother's glance, a good man's prayer, a godly life and a faithful soul. But sometimes there is much wrong with it too. Otherwise Christ would not have had to come among us.

It would take quite a collection of thick books to record all the good things that happen on our planet which are inspired by correct living and faith practice in Jesus Christ, but it would take an immeasurably large volume to tell of all those events which pierce the heart of man and God. Those who hate the Saviour spread like the sprawling branches of a huge green-bay tree. The world spirit exists and exerts its evil will on deluded masses and its fierce wings race through the heavens; its iron feet roar in the earth and a million cries rise to heaven to be soothed in the bleak nights of their souls' wanderings.

Certainly it is not all light and expansive peace and serenity, even when we pause to look into the Bethlehem star. And all our glossing over the hard grim facts in the revelation of Scripture really change nothing. We cannot water down the celebration of the birth of Christ. The facts remain as Herod continually stalks our festivities and attempts to introduce detours in our celebration which must always be centered and focused on and with the Christ Child, because apart from him, separated from him we only have a devil-focused celebration. While deluding ourselves we celebrate rightly a holiday of value. It is our fidelity to the Lord in the cave in the manner at Bethlehem which authenticates where our hearts and soul belong, We cannot take the devil and the example of Herod out of existence. Wishful lighthearted thinking will not make him go away. When we open our eyes once again, he is still standing over our faith, our hopes, our optimism.

Realism Needed

It is unfortunately true that too many Orthodox Christians want a God they can use, abuse and misuse. Often God is thought of as a cosmic bellboy; with prayer pushing the button and putting him into our type of perceived needed action. Who wants a God that expects we utterly do his will? We like to hear, "Come to me, all you that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest" Matthew 11: 28, but we must also listen to the reality of "If the world hates

you, know that it first hated me” John 15: 18, “In the world you will have tribulation” John 16: 33. Along with “He who endures to the end shall be saved” Matthew 10: 22.

What do we really desire for our religious profession of faith? What kind of spiritual life is necessary? Simply a soothed conscience, a good time, feeling good about ourselves? Continued benediction in spite of refusal to give all of ourselves to our Maker? Do we want forgiveness while we refuse to make amends? Do we want plenty here on earth? Or do we want to be freed and given victory over the pangs of hell? Where does man find triumph in life? The account of the early Church will turn everyone’s thoughts towards Christ. Did early Christians have it easy? They might even have considered the question ridiculous and ludicrous! They were fighting for their earthly lives, for the life of their soul. How many lost their earthly physical life but remained stalwart with the values of the soul?

The Apostles all died miserable deaths except St. John the beloved disciple. St. Stephen whose feast is celebrated in close conjunction with that of the Nativity of our Lord reminds us we must pay a price to belong to Christ. He sealed his profession of faith in blood by stoning.

To be Christian means to stand up to evil and be mocked, be hurt, be mobbed by the majority around us. It means that never will the spirit of Herod and the devil dominate the soul of the believer.

God’s Spirit

Herod’s shadow fell upon the lives of early Christians and even modern day followers of Christ in various parts of the world. Even here in this free country, our faith is being attacked and influenced by worldly values, particularly on this feast of the Lord’s birth.. But however powerful the spirit of Herod can become, Scripture speaks loudly and teaches us of another Spirit, far more powerful, far more omnipotent.

It is only in the Holy Spirit that perfect joy can be found. We cannot manufacture it by our imagination. Thus it is not surprising that music rises from the prison cell, lame men leap with raptured hearts at pauper’s words. Shouts of victory make their way from under the lash and angels leave heaven to free imprisoned men. Earthquakes chastise the jailing of Christ’s followers just as surely as they did at his crucifixion. The spirit of the early Church is the spirit

of the Nativity of our Lord, simply because it was a realistic outlook that evil continues to thrive because receptive hearts choose it instead of the virtue of Christ. They forget it must be subdued by hearts bronzed in faith committed to the new born Infant of Bethlehem.

Favoring both the devil and the first victory of Herod is that we refuse to believe they exist. They are real and deadly enemies. Herod does not lose his energy from age to age. But then, too, Christ is real. God is real. And the Holy Spirit is real and living, waiting for us to cooperate with his feely proffered grace, appropriate it for ourselves so it may thrive successfully in us to embroil ourselves in conflict with the evil proddings of Herod.

The joy of the Nativity of our Lord is that an Eternal King is born in flesh in a manger, in a tavern keeper's barn on a lonely and dark back alley in the city of bread. Herod prowls restlessly in his grandiose palace, disturbed beyond reckoning by a rumor based on a modicum of truth. His legions clatter in the streets. One word falling from the lips of the ruler and they will destroy whomever he wills. Herod continues to assault and attack the reality of Christ's birth as is evident plainly in our nation. He desires we not recognize this Saviour, that we merely celebrate this august feast as a winter festival with garlands, happy thoughts and bright ribbons.

But the angels will continue to sing, the Magi will bring their gifts and seek after him. Shepherds will rejoice and even visit a second time because heavenly truth has been revealed to them and they cannot contain their gratitude. Our heavenly Father has bestowed on us the sublime dignity of this feast to banish the thousands of Herods in every form that follow the first mad king. They too will fall, as long as the true spirit of the Nativity of our Lord lives in our hearts, as long as we gladly offer our hearts and souls as inviting receptive mangers to the true Prince of Peace who lies in Bethlehem's manger today!



The Nativity

A scene so peaceful in the night,
The starry sky is soft and bright,
A stream of light shines from a Star,
To guide the Wise Men from afar.
A stable's where the Christ Child lay,
Asleep so precious on the hay.
Mary and Joseph are close by,
With angels singing from on high.
The shepherds kneel down to adore
The Babe Who comes to bless the poor.
A King has gold to give this day,
A drummer boy, a song to play.
As God's Own Son has come to earth,
May we behold His wondrous birth!

THE JORDAN: THE BEGINNING OF THE GOSPEL

The Feast Day of Theophany marks the day when our Lord stepped out of thirty years of obscurity to reveal Himself as the Son of God, and to embark upon a divine mission that would end three years later with His Crucifixion and Resurrection. This was the “starting point” for all of the parables, the healings and the miracles that would form the living Gospel of Jesus Christ. Saint Cyril of Jerusalem writes: “The beginning of the world – water; the beginning of the Gospel – the Jordan.” When Christ came forward to be baptized in this ancient river’s waters, the mystery of the Holy Trinity was revealed to the world. As the troparion for the Feast teaches us: “. . . the voice of the Father bore witness to You, calling You His Beloved Son, and the Spirit in the form of a dove confirmed to truthfulness of His Word.” It is no wonder that the Feast of Theophany is also called the “Feast of Illumination,” for it was on this special day that mankind was enlightened by this mysterious event.

The Feast Day of Theophany reminds us that Christ came to take the sins of the world upon Himself. Just as He “died” (the immersion in the Jordan) and “rose” again (coming out of the waters of the Jordan), so, too, must we “die” to our old, sinful ways and “rise” again, cleansed, renewed and reborn. Indeed, on this blessed day, our Savior points out the way to our salvation.

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