Christmas: The Incarnation of God’s Word

Posted on December 28, 2010 by Fr. Ted

In our Orthodox hymnology, Jesus is the one who “had made godlike the fallen nature of men”. This is the significance of Christmas, the birth in the flesh of God’s Son. Georges Florovsky explains:

“With the Incarnation of the Word the first fruit of human nature is unalterably grafted into the Divine Life, and hence to all creatures the way to communion with this Life is open, the way of adoption by God. In the phrase of St Athanasius, the Word ‘became man in order to deify [ἐνιαὐτῇ ἐμαυτῷ] us in Himself,’ in order that “the sons of men might become the sons of God.” Through the “flesh-bearing God” we have become ‘Spirit-bearing men’; and thus is recovered what had been lost since the original sin, when ‘the transgression of the commandment turned man into what he was by nature,’ over which he had been elevated in his very first adoption or birth from God, coinciding with his initial creation.”

(Florovsky, Georges Creation and Redemption, pg 75)

The Gift Giving of Christmas

Posted on December 26, 2010 by Fr. Ted

“St Ambrose [teaches], Do not be afraid of giving the Lord what is yours, since He granted to you what is His (Treatise on the Gospel According to St Luke, Book 4, no 79). In becoming man, the Son of God has given to men the power to become sons of God (John 1:12) and to participate in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4), in the divine life.”

(Archbishop Dmitri (Royster), The Miracles of Christ, pg 52)
The Slaughter of the Holy Innocents

Posted on December 29, 2010 by Fr. Ted

“In chapter 2 [of St Matthew’s Gospel] Herod’s order to do away with the male infants of Bethlehem (2:16-18) is like Pharaoh’s order to do away with every male Hebrew child (Exodus 1). And if Herod orders the slaughter of Hebrew infants because he has learned of the birth of Israel’s liberator (2:2-18), in Jewish tradition Pharaoh slaughters the Hebrew children because he has learned the very same thing (Josephus, Antiquities 2.205-9; Targum Ps-Jonathan on Ex 1:15). Further, whereas Herod hears of the coming liberator from chief priests, scribes, and magi (2:1-12), Josephus (Antiquities 2.205 and 234) has Pharaoh learn of Israel’s deliverer from scribes, while Jerusalem Targum on Exodus 1:15 says that Pharaoh’s chief magicians (Jannes and Jambres, the sons of Balaam) were the sources of his information. The quotation of Hosea 11:1 in Matthew 2:15 further evokes thought of the exodus, for in its original context ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son’ concerns Israel. And then there is 2:19-22, which borrows the language of Exodus 4:19-20: just as Moses, after being told to go back to Egypt because all those seeking his life have died, takes his wife and children and returns to the land of his birth, so too with Jesus: Joseph after being told to go back to Israel because all those seeking the life of his son have died, takes his wife and child and returns to the land of his son’s birth.”

(Allison, Dale C, Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination, pgs 17-18)

The Synaxis of the Theotokos (2010)

Posted on December 25, 2010 by Fr. Ted

In the Orthodox Church it often happens that on the day after a significant feast, there is a secondary feast honoring some of the main saints of the feast. Thus the day after Theophany (January 6) is the Synaxis of St. John the Baptist (Jan 7), the day after the Meeting of the Lord (February 2) is the Feast of Sts. Simeon and Anna (Feb 3), and the day after Christmas (December 25) is the Synaxis of the Theotokos (Dec 26). I remember hearing many years ago that the Synaxis of the Theotokos may in fact be the oldest Marian Feast on the Christian calendar.
As we honor the Mother of God on the day after the Nativity, here is a meditation for us to consider how we might imitate she who is the model of a believer:

“Look at the man who likes to have his own way. His soul is never at peace. He is always discontented – this is not right, that is not as it should be. But the man who is entirely given over to the will of God can pray with a pure mind. His soul loves the Lord, and he finds everything pleasant and agreeable.

Thus did the Most Holy Virgin submit herself to God: ‘Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to Thy word.’ And were we to say likewise – ‘Behold the servant of the Lord; be it unto me according to Thy word’ – then the Lord’s words written in the Gospels by the Holy Spirit would live in our souls, and the whole world would be filled with the love of God, and how beautiful would life be on earth. And although God’s words have been heard the length and breadth of the universe for so many centuries, people do not understand and will not accept them. But the man who lives according to God’s will will be glorified in heaven and on earth.” (St. Silouan the Athonite, pp 338-339).

**Christmas Greetings**

Posted on December 25, 2010 by Fr. Ted

Christ is born!

Glorify Him!
Some of the hymns from the Forefeast of Christmas give insight into the theological depth of the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord. They also reveal the mastery of Scripture which the ancient hymn writers had. Here are two examples taken from the Canon of Compline for the Forefeast, December 22.

1) St. Matthew mentions the Magi (Matt 2), wise men from the East who studied the stars and were brought through their search for wisdom to Bethlehem to the Christ Child. There is a truth being proclaimed that whether one studies astrology or astronomy, if one is seeking wisdom, one’s studies will lead to the knowledge of the Creator. As Psalms 19:1 says, “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork."

It wasn’t the stars that brought the Magi to Christ, but rather Christ who is God’s Wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:24), guiding the universe, whose hand and message was made visible through the movement of the stars.

The Wisdom of God summons the Magi,
Initiating them as the first fruits of the Gentiles.

He who lies in the manger of dumb beasts

Feeds them with the mystical food of the knowledge of God.

They hasten to the crib as to a banquet, journeying with gifts,
Led by the light of the star.

(Canticle 1)

A wonderfully playful image, for Christ is the wisdom of God, and thus the infant moves the stars and thus the Magi toward the Eternal God, now a little child. And the child in the manger – an animal feeding trough – feeds the Magi “with the mystical food of the knowledge of God.” What delightful poetry. Star light leads them to a mystical banquet – the knowledge of the Triune God and the Incarnate God!

One could say it was the light of Christ – the Incarnate God lying as a baby in a manger – which attracted and directed them.

2] In this hymn, the hymnographers makes a wonderful play on images using a story about King David recorded in 2 Samuel 23. David is at the cave of Adullam, and sees that Israelites enemies have occupied Bethlehem. “And David said longingly, ‘O that some one would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem which is by the gate!’” (2 Samuel 23:15) The hymnography weaves this into the Nativity hymn:

The new drink for which David thirsted of old

Is flowing from the fountain of the cave in Bethlehem

To satisfy the thirst of all,

To fulfill the yearning of Adam and David

From whose seed Christ is born in the flesh.
This poetic use of Scripture gives us the insight as to how well the ancients knew their Scriptures, and what creative use they made of them. For they saw hidden in the stories of the Old Testament, connections and insights into the new.

**Christmas (2004)**

Posted on December 22, 2010 by Fr. Ted

Sermon notes from the Feast of the Nativity of Christ (2004)

In the beginning God said: “Let there be light.”

God speaks (His Word) and the visible (Light) comes into existence.

God’s spoken Word can be seen, allows us to see, makes sight possible.

Even before anything else existed, even before anything was to be seen, God speaks light into existence. The Light of God existed before there was anything to shine on – to be seen. Even before anyone else was there to see, God’s light existed, and the ability to see pre-existed before any humans were there to see.

And today as we celebrate Christmas, we celebrate the feast of the Word of God becoming flesh - that is how John in his Gospel describes the birth of Christ. Again God’s spoken Word, just like in the beginning, at creation, is made to be seen, is Light.

God’s Word is that which is to be seen, allows us to see, makes sight possible.
God’s Word allows us to see and know God, and makes visible that which before was before invisible. For in Christmas we begin to see that God is Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Christmas is more than the sentimental story of a baby being born into poverty.

It is symbolically the same story of God saying “Let there be light”

It is in reality the story of the Word becoming visible, incarnate, physical, flesh.

It is God speaking the Word into visible existence, or the visible itself into existence.

Our God does not put us either into non-existence or into darkness.

God is the giver of life and light, of light and existence, not of darkness or non-existence.

God spoke into the non-existence and said “Let there be light” and the Word became flesh. God speaks us into being, and overcomes the darkness, and gives us the light which knows no end.

God speaks at the beginning of creation and light comes into existence, but that isn’t enough for God, for not only does He will light into existence, He wills that His Word, His Light become flesh. The spiritual, life itself becomes increasingly incarnate and manifest, light becoming increasingly physical and human. Jesus Christ is the light of evening, the Light of the World, He is both Light and Life, and we see in Him God’s plan, will, and intention.

God’s Word evolves from Light, to life, to human flesh. And in this we understand, the Light of God is not opposed to being human, but is its intention and destiny: God’s will
and plan. God’s Word is not opposed to the flesh, but becomes incarnate – the Word becoming the flesh, and the flesh revealing the Word.

Christ is who and what God intended and intends for each of us to be.

God took on human nature – became enfleshed, incarnate so that humanity could be again united to God. Light became flesh so that God would always be visible to us.

The Word becomes flesh so that we might be able to see God not just with the eyes of our hearts but with the eyes of our flesh. So that we can once again see what God spoke from the beginning – the Light He called into being before there was any sun or stars. In Christ we can see that Light once again.

This is why the greeting “Christ is born!” contains such a powerful message. We are affirming our conviction that God has indeed entered the world, entered the darkness in order to give us light and life.

One small aside – today we also remember the Magi who came to see the newborn Christ child. These wise men use the physical light (the star) in order to search for and find the Spiritual light, which God spoke into existence on the first day of creation.

A History of Christmas

Posted on December 21, 2010 by Fr. Ted

“In AD 274 Emperor Aurelian (AD 270-275) declared Deus Sol Invictus the official deity of the Roman Empire. A temple in his honor was built in Rome, and his birthday was celebrated on December 25. Due to the association of Mithras with the Sun, his birthday was also celebrate on December 25, to convey his victory over darkness and night. The feast of the Nativity was officially added to the Christian holy days in the course of the fourth century. By recognizing the birth of Christ on December 25, the empire affirmed the triumph of Christianity over paganism and its solar monotheism, and the victory of
Christ, the ‘Sun of Righteousness’, over Mithras.”

(Kesich, Veselin, The Church in History (Vol 1, Part 1): Formation and Struggles: The Birth of the Church, AD 33-200, pg 69)

SEEKING THE HISTORICAL TRUTH OF CHRIST’S NATIVITY:

There is a hazy feeling that the ancient world was so open to tales of theophanies that it is no great surprise that Jesus attracted such assents. Yet the association of a historical man with such depth of divine description appears to be unprecedented. Dunn’s conclusion, after a search for parallels, is that “we have found nothing in pre-Christian Judaism or the wider religions of the Hellenistic world which provides sufficient explanation of the origin of the doctrine of the incarnation, no way of speaking about God, the gods, or intermediary beings which so far as we can tell would have given birth to this doctrine apart from Christianity.” (Polkinghorne, John, The Faith of a Physicist, pgs127-128)

Christmas in our Lives as Christians

The celebration of Christmas is not mostly the remembrance of a historical event, though it is that. The Nativity of Christ is also the personal salvation of each of us and the reconciliation of the entire world to God the Creator. For Christians, celebrating Christmas begins with being in Christ: we are to be one with Him, united to His death.
and resurrection so that we can die with Him and rise from the dead with Him. Christmas is among the most theological of Christian Feasts. It speaks to us about God and His relationship to us and the world. It is the feast of salvation revealing the world and humans to be capable of bearing God in themselves.

“Let us become like Christ, since Christ also became like us; let us become gods because of him, since he also because of us became human. He assumed what is worse that he might give what is better. He became poor that we through his poverty might become rich. He took the form of a slave, that we might regain freedom. He descended that we might be lifted up, he was tempted that we might be victorious, he was dishonoured to glorify is, he died to save us, he ascended to draw himself to us who lay below in the Fall of sin. Let us give everything, offer everything, to the one who gave himself as a ransom and an exchange for us.” (St Gregory of Nazianzus Festal Orations, pg 59)

American Pride and Freedom in the Light of Christ
Posted on December 18, 2010 by Fr. Ted

The Jews said to Jesus: “We are descendants of Abraham, and have never been in bondage to any one. How is it that you say, ‘You will be made free?’” (John 8:33)

Each Sunday, Christians celebrate the Day of the Lord – the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. It is a day on which we joyously celebrate being liberated from bondage and slavery to sin and death. In this celebration we also acknowledge that we were slaves – not just our ancestors, but we ourselves were slaves to our own passions, to sin, to death itself. God freed us from this bondage through Jesus Christ just as He led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt.

American Christians no doubt feel like the Jews in John 8 – we have never been in bondage to anyone, how can Jesus say he makes us free?

Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham, and have never been in bondage to any one. How is it that you say, ‘You will be made free?’” Jesus answered
them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, every one who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not continue in the house for ever; the son continues for ever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. (John8:31-36)

Fundamental to being a Christian is the realistic assessment of ourselves that we are in fact slaves to passion, sin and death, and that we need the intervention from God to be liberated from this slavery. Jesus Christ has in fact already liberated us from enslavement. This is what we celebrate in the Eucharistic (Thanksgiving) Liturgy of the Church. It is the celebration of our willingness to be slaves of God rather than of ourselves.

For Americans, we should be able to relate to the connection between Christ and freedom. And not just because of our historical fight for independence, but because slavery was a huge part of our own history. Here is a story from the life of former slave and abolitionist Harriet Tubman, who truly understood what deliverance from slavery meant. (Taken from the NY TIMES “Mose’s Last Exit” by Adam Goodheart):

“Tubman was back in Auburn by Christmas Day, 1860, having conveyed the Ennals family safely to Canada. (Abolitionists often noted the irony of Americans fleeing the “land of liberty” to seek freedom under Queen Victoria’s sheltering scepter.) Her secret missions ended with the approach of war.

But one night in the midst of the secession crisis, while staying at the house of another black leader, a vision came to Tubman in a dream that all of America’s slaves were soon to be liberated – a vision so powerful that she rose from bed singing. Her host tried in vain to quiet her; perhaps their grandchildren would live to see the day of jubilee, he said, but they themselves surely would not. “I tell you, sir, you’ll see it, and you’ll see it soon,” she retorted, and sang again: ‘My people are free! My people are free.”

The Israelites moved from slavery in Egypt to the promised land, which in turn is the prototype for the Christian understanding of Christ leading us from death to life and earth to heaven. American slaves had to escape “the land of the free” to get to Canada which was under the Queen of England’s rule in order to be free of slavery!
Christmas is a great celebration for us because on this day we celebrate the birth of the great liberator of humankind. We now can live as free men and women – exercising self control, self denial, fasting, asceticism, and love for others. No longer do we have to live in subjugation to our passions and cravings and self centeredness. We are free to be full human beings capable of loving, forgiving, sharing, practicing altruism rather than merely being products of or controlled by passions, reactions, genes, emotions, instincts, survival, self preservation or evolution.

At Christmas we celebrate the Nativity of our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ – so it should be a day of rejoicing and celebration. And we should use the day to help lift others from enslavement to poverty, suffering and need, just as Christ in His love freed us from our own impoverishment and slavery.

**Why did God become human?**

Why did God become human?

Simple answer: To destroy death.

God is eternal – without beginning or end – and thus doesn’t die. (Despite the claims that God is dead!) He can avoid death – doesn’t really have to deal with it or wrestle with it. He can if He chooses totally ignore it as it has nothing to do with His existence.

But His human creations are mortal and subject to death. God feels the sting of death through the Humans He loves.
Humans are not eternal beings – we have a beginning and so cannot be eternal. God can’t bestow eternity on beings that have a beginning and of which it must be said there was a time when humans did not exist.

God can however bestow immortality upon His creatures. He can overcome the limitations of death.

He could prohibit death, but humans chose death, and God doesn’t prohibit free choice or its consequences. The God who is love does however save His creatures from sin and death and thus from human consequences.

Christmas: the incarnation of the Word of God. The Word become flesh is Jesus Christ, the God incarnate. Humanity is thus lifted up by God to divinity through the union of God with humanity in Jesus Christ.

God becomes human in order to die so that He can destroy death and enable humans to become divine and live in life everlasting. Only by becoming mortal can God defeat death – not prohibit it, or simply avoid it or banish it – but actually take it on and trample it down and triumph over it.

The incarnation and the death of Christ are thus necessary for the resurrection and defeat of the final enemy: death.

God actually defeats death in the resurrection of His Son. God destroys the power of death and frees all humanity for all eternity from the death grip of sin.

The Incarnation – God takes on not only human flesh to save it, but also takes on death to destroy it. For in the eternal kingdom of Heaven death is destroyed not simply defeated (Revelation 20:14, 21:4).

Hebrews 2:14-15 - Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has
the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage.

Hebrews 2:9-10 - But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering.

2 Timothy 1:10 - and now has manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

Philippians 2:5-8 - Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross

Romans 6:9-10 - For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God.

1 Corinthians 15:20-26 - But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

1 Corinthians 15:54-57 - When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” "O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.
Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. ... Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.”

Christmas: The Coming Kingdom of God

 Posted on December 15, 2010 by Fr. Ted

“Thus, right at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus contradicted all human judgments and all nationalistic expectations of the kingdom of God. The kingdom is given to the poor, not the rich; the feeble, not the mighty; to little children humble enough to accept it, not to soldiers who boast that they can obtain it by their own prowess. In our Lord’s own day it was not the Pharisees who entered the kingdom, who thought they were rich, so rich in merit that they thanked God for their attainments; nor the Zealots who dreamed of establishing the kingdom by blood and sword; but publicans and prostitutes, the rejects of human society, who knew they were so poor they could offer nothing and achieve nothing. All they could do was to cry to God for mercy; and he heard their cry.”

(Stott, John R W, *The Message of THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT (Matthew 5-7)*, pg 40)
In America the “Christmas season” begins with consumer shopping – Black Friday and Cyber Monday. The news about the season and throughout the season is all about how much money people are spending, borrowing, consuming and how happy or worried retailers are.

St. John Chrysostom writing in 387AD makes his own interesting comparisons and analogies of Christian economics and consumerism when he talks about the Christian life in terms of buying and selling. For Chrysostom Christian consumerism and “retail trade” however have to do with giving charitably to the poor which according to the scriptures makes God a debtor to us. Writing about repentance, Chrysostom says on the final Judgment Day, we will not be able to bribe God to give us a favorable judgment – His judgment will be just. But then St. John mentions that we improve our standing before God through financial means – giving to the poor and needy.

“The same with God: you cannot persuade the Judge during the time of the tribunal. ... He is not corrupted by money; and His righteous judgment is awesome and unpersuadable. Here, therefore, let us beg and win Him over; here, with all our strength, let us frequently supplicate Him; but not with money. Or, better yet, to tell the truth, the Lover of Man is persuaded with money, although He does not accept it Himself but through the poor. Give money to the poor and you have appeased the Judge. And I say these things out of concern for you, because repentance without almsgiving is a corpse and is without wings. Repentance cannot fly high without the wing of almsgiving. ... Today, therefore, the marketplace of almsgiving is open,
because we see the captives and the poor; we see all who walk around in the marketplace; we see those who cry out; we see those who weep; we see those who sigh. Before us is a marvelous festival, and the festival has no other purpose, and the merchant has no other thought, than to purchase the merchandise cheaply and to sell it expensively. Is this not the purpose of every merchant? ...

God has such a festival before us; buy righteousness at a small price so you can resell it in the future at a great price, if someone can call repayment retail-trade. Here, righteousness is purchased at a small price, with one insignificant morsel of bread, with a cheap piece of clothing, with a glass of cold water. ‘He who gives one glass of cold water, truly I say to you,’ says the Teacher of spiritual commerce, ‘will not lose his reward’ (Mt 10:42). One glass of cold water brings a reward; clothes and money, which are given for beneficence, do not grant a reward? On the contrary, they bring a reward and, indeed, a big one. Therefore, why did He call to mind a glass of cold water? Almsgiving, He says, costs nothing; for cold water you neither spend firewood nor consume anything else. If beneficence has such grace wherever the gift is inexpensive, how great a reward should someone expect from the Righteous Judge, when He gives clothes abundantly, when He provides with money, when He gives other surplus goods? As long as the virtues are found before us and are sold cheaply, let us take form the Munificent One, let us grasp, let us purchase. ‘You who thirst,’ He says, ‘Come to the water; and all who do not have money, go and purchase’ (Is 55:1). As long as the festival lasts, let us buy alms, or, better yet, let us purchase salvation through almsgiving. You clothe Christ when you clothe the poor. ... Whoever has mercy upon the poor lends to God. Let us lend to God almsgiving so we may receive from Him clemency in exchange. Oh, how wise is this statement! ‘Whoever has mercy upon the poor lends to God’ (Prv 19:17). ... Since God borrows from us, then, He is our debtor. How do you want to have Him, as a judge or debtor? The debtor is ashamed before his lender; the judge does not put to shame the one who borrows.” (ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM ON REPENTANCE AND ALMSGIVING, pp 103-105)
Chrysostom might agree that Christmas is an excellent shopping season for Christians – time to purchase gifts for the poor and needy while simultaneously buying favor with God. He sees the marketplace as a festival – it is of course filled with poor, the needy and the destitute – but what we should have eyes to see is how it is through these same folk that we make God our debtor through charitable giving; each opportunity to give charitably thus adds to the festival of salvation – that heavenly banquet to which we have been invited.

**Jesus the God-man**

Posted on December 12, 2010 by Fr. Ted

While American Christians tend to focus sentimentally on the human elements of the Christmas story, ancient Christianity traditionally focused more on Christ’s Nativity story being the incarnation of God the Word. Thus the story of the birth of Christ was read theologically as the literal way to read the Gospel lesson. Theodoret of Cyrus (d. 457AD) commented:

“St Paul writes, ‘With a view to recognizing the mystery of the God and Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:2-3).’ He brought out the mystery of the dispensation common to the Father and the Son; and he said all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ, since through him will be revealed to all people in the future life the purpose of the dispensation.” (Hill, Robert Charles, Theodoret of Cyrus: Commentary on the Letters of St Paul, Vol 2, pg 91)
“Hidden” in the birth of Jesus Christ is the fact that He is God. Of course, the incarnation is a revelation of God, but it also reveals that God is so much more different than we commonly think. For the Christmas story reveals God as Trinity, and God who is able to become human in order to redeem His creation. In more recent times St. Nicholai Velimirovic (d. 1956 AD) wrote:

This means that man experiences and finds out about the fundamental eternal truth of life and the world only with the help of the God-man, in the God-man. And it means something else: man learns the complete truth about man, about the purpose and meaning of his existence only through the God-man. Only in him, in the all-merciful Lord Jesus, does man, tormented by earthly tragedies, find the God who can truly give meaning to suffering, the Comforter who can truly give comfort in every misfortune and sorrow, the Defender who can truly defend from every evil, the Saviour who can truly save from death and sin, the Teacher who can truly teach eternal Truth and Justice. The first truth of Orthodoxy is that man does not exist for the sake of man or, more fully, for the sake of the God-man. In Him alone is an understanding of man’s being possible; in Him alone is a justification for man's existence possible. Everything that does not have that Person is not Orthodox. Everything that does not have the God-mans’ Justice, Truth, Love, and Eternity is not Orthodox. Everything that wants to carry out the God-man's Gospel in this world through the methods of the kingdoms of this world, is not Orthodox, but implies enslavement to the third temptation of the devil.” (Bishop Nikolai Velimirovich, The Struggle for Faith, pgs 96-100)

Daily Concerns – Missing Christ at Christmas
Posted on December 10, 2010 by Fr. Ted

Sermon from 16 December 1990  Sunday of the Forefathers


Have you ever wondered how it was possible for the Jews, God’s chosen people, to miss the coming of the Messiah? God chose the Jews to be His own people, he rescued them countless times from
military defeat, from slavery, exile, and from their own sins. God sent His Holy Spirit upon certain men and women among the Jews to lead, guide and teach them about how to live and about His coming Messiah. He chose men and women to serve as prophets, priests, kings and judges, to shape and direct the people so that they could recognize the Messiah and their own destiny as God’s elect people in the world. They were chosen to be the light to the world and the salt of the earth. Yet these same Jews on countless occasions failed God, and did not faithfully fulfill their vocation. In fact, in their greatest moment of all, when God stood in their midst, the Jews did not recognize who Jesus was. They rejected their God and crucified the Messiah.

Why?

Today’s scripture lessons offer us two reasons why God’s people fail in their God-given vocation. In today’s epistle reading we learn how sin prevents people from fulfilling their vocation. The Lord Jesus also told us a parable about how the concerns for daily living blind people to God’s activity and calling in the world.

These two factors – pre-occupation with daily concerns and sinfulness prevented the Jews of old from living for God’s Kingdom, and will prevent us today from doing the same.

How do daily concerns and sinfulness prevent us from doing God’s will?

First, let us look at the effects of sinfulness on our lives and our ability to live for God’s Kingdom.

St. Paul in his letter to the Church at Colossae said that we must put to death everything in ourselves that prevents us from doing God’s will. Here are his words as recorded in the Amplified Bible:

*So when Christ Who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. So kill the evil desire lurking in you – those animal impulses and all that is earthly in you that is employed in sin: sexual vice, impurity, sensual appetites, unholy desires, and all greed and covetousness, for that is idolatry....... Put away and rid yourselves completely of all these things: anger, rage, bad feeling towards others, curses and slander and foulmouthed abuse and shameful utterances from your lips. Do not lie to one another.... (3:5,8)*
“What Paul is saying is, ‘Put to death every part of your self which is against God and keeps you from fulfilling His will.’” (Wm. Barclay). We must kill in ourselves our own self-centeredness and selfishness. Because it is our sinful selfishness and sinful self-centeredness which prevents us from seeking and doing God’s will. This is why the Lord Jesus calls us to repentance from the first time he spoke to us. He invites us to break free from our bondage to sinful self-centeredness and to turn to God.

But what happened when Christ called people to repentance and pointed out their sinfulness?

Yes, they became angry and wanted to kill him. They totally missed the invitation to God’s Kingdom and the Great Messianic Banquet because they wanted to continue in their sinful and self-centered ways. They were not willing to die to their sinful desires through repentance. Instead, they defiantly killed the one who could save them from themselves. Their sinfulness got the upper hand and they tried to destroy the Kingdom of God.

Now there is a second reason given in the scripture as to why the Jews rejected their God. The first was the sinfulness and selfishness we just spoke of. The second reason comes from the first but is more subtle in its work in us. In the Parable of the Great Banquet, Jesus told us how concern for daily affairs caused Israel to reject God’s will and His Kingdom.

When the Master issued His invitation to the Great Banquet, what did the people say?

They all alike began to offer excuses for why they would not come – one just bought land and wanted to go see it, another bought a team of oxen and wanted to try them out, and another said he had just gotten married so he could not come. Each person had a reason as to why he could not enter into the Grand Banquet of the Master.

Those excuses continue with us today. One says, “We just bought a house and are busy moving, fixing things up and getting settled in, therefore we don’t have time for God’s Kingdom right now.” Another says, “My job is very demanding, and I have to work a lot of overtime and then I need my free time to relax and work around the house, I don’t have time for God’s Kingdom.” And the third one says, “I have a lot of family
commitments, visiting in-laws, helping my children, there just aren’t enough hours in the day, so I don’t have time for God’s Kingdom right now.”

These excuses are more subtle, for they aren’t sinful exactly, and they aren’t lies. But concern with daily affairs also caused the Jews to completely miss our Messiah, God’s Son in the flesh. We must get to the point where our lives are so centered on and connected with the Kingdom of God that our homes, jobs and families become the very points at which we are preparing ourselves for the Kingdom rather then excuses for why we have no time for God.

Today’s Scripture Lessons are not meant to blame the Jews for spiritual failure. They are given to us for our edification so that we can learn how to live. We cannot change what people in the past did, but we can learn to change our own behavior. My friends, let us put off our old and sinful selves, so that we can clearly see God’s Kingdom in our midst. Let us repent of sins so that we can be healed by Christ and reunited to God. Let us openly denounce sin and selfishness whenever it is exposed in our lives. In this way we will be able to see God’s Kingdom and love God’s Son and we will overcome the evil one.

**Remembering Christ in the Christmas Season**

Posted on December 6, 2010 by Fr. Ted

“You Yourself have come to me, wretched and good-for-nothing servant that I am; my Lord has come to me, His enemy and apostate; my Master has come and has bestowed His love of mankind upon me. Listen, my soul: God has come to us; Our Lord has visited us. For my sake He was born of the Virgin Mary, He Who is born of the Father before all time. For my sake He was wrapped in swaddling clothes, He who covers heaven with the clouds and vests Himself with robes of light. For my sake He was placed in the lowly manger, He Whose throne is the heavens and Whose feet rest upon earth. For my sake He was fed with His mother’s milk, He Who feeds all creatures. For my sake He was held in His mother’s arms, He Who is borne by Cherubim and holds all creatures in His embrace. For my sake He was circumcised according to the law, He Who is maker of the Law. For my sake, He Who is unseen became visible and lived
among men, He Who is my God. My God became one like me, like a man; the Word became flesh, and my Lord, the Lord of Glory, took for my sake the form of a servant and lived upon the earth and walked upon the earth, He Who is the King of Heaven.” (St Tychon, *A Treasury of Russian Spirituality*, pg 216)

Feast of the Entry of the Theotokos into the Temple (1993)

Posted on November 22, 2010 by Fr. Ted

Sermon from November 21, 1993

The Feast of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

Now it happened as they went (As Jesus was travelling) that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus’ feet and heard His word (listened to him speak). But Martha was distracted (overwhelmed) with much serving, and she approached Him and said, “Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me.” And Jesus answered and said to her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:38-42, 11:27-28)

We have a good lesson today to prepare ourselves for the upcoming Thanksgiving-Christmas cycle that the US is in. It is a good lesson about keeping our priorities straight, and of recognizing what really is happening in our lives as we begin this all-consumptive American season.

First, I would just like to comment to you about Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is a day set aside by the United States to offer thanks to God for the bounties He has so richly poured upon us. It remembers the Pilgrim forefathers of this nation and their thanks to God offered in the midst of some very harsh and trying times. This notion of Thanksgiving Day as a day dedicated to offering thanks to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit is sometimes forgotten. Today Thanksgiving is touted as the “traditional” beginning of the Christmas shopping season. We would all do well to humbly think back to the purpose of the Day and use it to give thanks to God.
Since the Christmas Fast has already begun, can we Orthodox celebrate thanksgiving? My answer to you is absolutely yes! We can offer special prayers of thanksgiving on that day whether or not we eat meat, whether we feast or fast! We can remember the words of St. Paul in 1 Timothy 4:3-4 that food was created by God “to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving…” Let us remember the original intent of the day and give thanks to God. After all, to be a Christian is to be a person filled with thanks to God for all He has done for us. What we eat or don’t eat on that day will have little to do with the gratefulness with which we are to approach God. It is after all the condition of the heart by which God judges us not what is in our stomach is half empty or half full.

Let us give thanks to the Lord this Thursday as is appropriate for us as Christian people. Remember Martha and Mary in today’s Gospel lesson. Martha was distracted and stressed out by the amount of work she had to do and so she totally missed who the guest was sitting in her house. She was angry at Mary for not being hospitable, but Mary at least recognized Jesus as the Messiah, and sat to listen to His word. Martha was so busy serving that she commits an ultimate act of inhospitality in asking her guest Jesus to resolve her familial dispute. Our Lord tells Martha true hospitality consists in paying attention to the guest, not in putting yourself into an uproar nor in domestic performance. If the guest is a prophet, then correct hospitality is to listen to his word!

Jesus nicely turns the point from one of providing someone a service to receiving a gift from someone. Jesus as the giver of God’s grace has something to give to each of us, if only we would stop and listen to what He says.

This year at Thanksgiving and Christmas, take time to remember who the honored guest is. And if you are in any doubt, I will tell you it is God, not uncle Joe.

How will you offer thanks to God this thanksgiving?

How will you welcome the Lord Jesus Christ this Christmas?
There will be chance to keep the feasts in your homes. There will also be the chance to assemble here at the Liturgy and other services to give thanks to God, and to listen to His Word. Remember that which is truly important. Receive the Lord into your homes and hearts as He would want to be received, not as you are want to receive Him.

It is the final line in the Gospel lesson today that tells us how the Lord Jesus wants to be received.

“Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!”