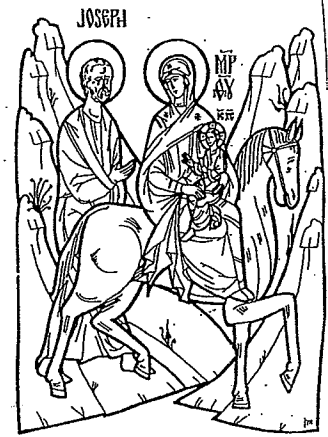


Christ is Born!



THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT



Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

3101 Clairmont Ave. Birmingham, AL 35205

Church Tel. 930-9681 / 907-9447

Visit stsymeon.com

✠ December 28, 2014 ✠

Sunday after the Nativity

Postfeast of the Nativity

St. Joseph the Betrothed, St. David the King

St. James, Brother of the Lord, Son of St. Joseph

20,000 Martyrs of Nicomedia (302) St. Symeon the Myrrhstreaming,

Founder of Simonpetra Monastery, Mt. Athos (1287)

Glorify Him!

Christ is Born! Glorify Him!

⇒ *Fast-Free Twelve Days of Christmas* - thru January 4

✠ Wed. Dec. 31 6:30pm Vespers and New Year's Eve Blessing Service

⇒ Friday, January 2 6:00pm Parish Christmas Party – At Nicholas & Macrina Wells
Bring your favorite dish, or our favorite!

Thoughts for the New Year – On Thoughts

✠ "Let us repent with all our heart and cast away not only our evil deeds, but also the wicked and unclean thoughts of our hearts and obliterate them in accordance with that which is written: 'Rend your hearts and not your garments' (Joel 2:13). Tell me: What use is it if we distribute our goods to the poor, but fail to make a break with evil and to hate sin? What use is it if, while we do not actively commit bodily sin, we mentally engage in shameful and unclean thoughts and invisibly commit sin and are governed and controlled by restrained passions of soul? I beseech you, let us cast away, together with our wealth, the habit of servitude to the evils we have mentioned. Nor let us stop at this, but let us eagerly wash away their defilement with tears of penitence."

~ St. Symeon the New Theologian

✠ "Every birth, every entrance of a new human being into the world, every life, is a miracle of miracles, a miracle that explodes all routine, for it marks the start of something unending, the start of a unique, unrepeatable human life, the beginning of a new person. And with each birth, the world is itself in some sense created anew and given as a gift to this new human being to be his life, his path, his creation."

- Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann

✠ "The passion for popularity brings such injury upon those it masters that it shipwrecks faith itself. Our Lord confirms this when He says, 'How can you have faith in Me when you receive honor from one another and do not seek for the honor that comes from the only God?' (cf. Jn. 5:44)."

~ St. Gregory Palamas

"However hard I try, I find it impossible to construct anything greater than these three words, 'Love one another' - only to the end, and without exceptions: then all is justified and life is illumined, whereas otherwise it is an abomination and a burden."

- Mother Maria of Paris (1945)

ARCHPASTORAL MESSAGE OF HIS BEATITUDE, METROPOLITAN Tikhon
FOR THE NATIVITY OF CHRIST 2014

CHRIST IS BORN ! GLORIFY HIM !

To the honorable Clergy, Venerable Monastics, and Pious Faithful of the Orthodox Church in America,

My Beloved Brethren and Blessed Children in the Lord,

I greet all of you with the joy of the most glorious Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ! As Saint Leo the Great reminds us in his sermon on the Nativity, "in adoring the birth of our Savior, we find that we are celebrating the commencement of our own lives, for the birth of Christ is the source of life for the Christian people, and the birthday of the Head is the birthday of the Body."

Indeed, we rejoice and celebrate on this great day. Yet we must never fail to recall those for whom the earthly sojourn seems to be anything but joyful -- the lost and searching and seeking, the lonely and forgotten, the sick and imprisoned and persecuted, the hungry and thirsty, and those who, like the Christ Child, "have no where to lay their heads." If the birth of Christ is the commencement and source of our lives, then it is not only our duty, but our blessed honor, to share the light of the newborn Christ with those who sit "in the valley of the shadow of death," thereby revealing the love God so richly and unconditionally pours out on all who would accept it.

Our Lord proclaimed good news to the poor, gave sight to the blind, and healed every manner of infirmity. How well we know the spiritual poverty and blindness and infirmity that fills our world today. And how crucial it is to be continuously reminded that "with God, all things are possible," (Mt 19:26) precisely because "God is with us" (Mt 1:23) and calls us to become "partakers in His divine nature." (2 Peter 1:4) Even our most seemingly insignificant expressions of love and compassion for "the least of the brethren" (Mt 25:40) make the impossible, possible and the mundane as miraculous as the divine birth we celebrate today.

The angelic hosts called out to the simple shepherds: "Tarry not in the field, O ye that shepherd the nurslings of the flocks! Cry aloud and sing praises, that Christ the Lord hath been born in Bethlehem!" Let us not tarry in singing praises to our incarnate Lord, not only with our voices, but also with our unconditional acts of love and kindness and compassion. Such is the fruit of the good news proclaimed over two thousand years ago. And such is the very heart of our common ministry to incarnate Him in our hearts and our lives, and in the hearts and lives of those whom He continually prepares to encounter Him.

Please be assured of my prayers for all of you, that Our Lord will not only equip us in our common ministry as His Body, but bring our efforts to fruition. May the divine blessing that He so freely brings into the world remain with all of us now and throughout the new year to come!

With love in the New-Born Christ,



†TIKHON
Archbishop of Washington
Metropolitan of All America and Canada

THE GIFTS OF THE MAGI

By St. Innocent (Borisov), Archbishop of Kherson, translated by Maria Belaeff, from a leaflet published by the Vladimir Mother of God Convent, San Francisco.

And when they had opened their treasures they presented unto Him gifts: gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

[Mt 2:11]

† † †

Not without reason, my brethren, were there three gifts at the manger of Christ; three—no more, no less. Was this a sign of the Most Holy Trinity as the essence of the Godhead? Or, did it symbolize the triune nature of Christ's future ministry, i.e., prophetic, royal, priestly? Or was it perhaps an expression of the three parts of the nature of man, spirit,

soul, and body? We leave it up to your faith and reasoning to consider this question. Here our attention rests upon the gift-bearing magi.

One could say that these pilgrims of the Orient stood before the manger of Christ for all mankind. Their gifts represent symbolically all that we, followers of the Saviour, bring to Him. The gold signifies material gifts; the frankincense, immaterial gifts, gifts of the spirit; and the myrrh represents those gifts that are at once both spiritual and material.

There are, accordingly, persons who bring the Lord gold; there are those who bring frankincense; still others bring myrrh; lastly, some bring several gifts together. Who are these individuals? In examining this question, we shall see how we too, like the magi, can serve our Lord and Saviour.

Who brings the Lord gold?

Gold is brought by those who, for the glory of God and the benefit of their neighbor, offer anything of their labors and possessions. For example, you bring gold to the Lord if you build, renew or adorn God's temple. Your gift pleases Him, for even though He sits now on the throne of glory, for the sake of our salvation He continues at the same time to appear in the manger as well. This manger is present in church upon the table of oblation, where at every Liturgy

He is, as it were, born again so as to offer Himself anew as a sacrifice for our sins. How often He suffers want in this manger. Here, He needs both clothing and shelter, light and warmth. Therefore, if you do anything for the benefit of the church, your offering delights the Lord—as much as did the gift of the magi who brought Him gold.

How much of this gold is brought to the Lord? Oh, if we were to compare what is brought with that which is spent to answer the demands of the passions, for the satisfaction not only of our needs, but of our very whims—or even with that which is patently surrendered for the flesh and the world to consume—then it shall turn out to be the very smallest part... Before us a poor man shakes from bitter cold, hunger, and disease; we either rebuff him harshly or give him a measly pittance, and that same day we are ready to exhaust half our fortune in a senseless game, or to display our munificent squandering at some gaudy spectacle. Such is our gratitude to Him Who, *though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich.* (II Cor 8:9).

Who brings the Lord frankincense?

These are they who apply their abilities, knowledge, and

talents to the glory of God and the benefit of their neighbors; for these are immaterial gifts of greater value than gold or silver. These are gifts which God gives to men, but they also are—and should be made—men's gifts to God.

This costly frankincense is offered to the Lord by each one who, sparing not himself, serves his neighbor. Frankincense is offered to the Lord by that shepherd of the Church,

who faithfully stands alert guarding souls and hearts against the confusions and temptations of the age, who ardently proclaims the ways of the Lord, who guides those who have lost their way, comforts those in despair, instructs all. Frankincense is brought to the Lord by that mother who does not rely upon servants, who does not spend time in idleness and vain amusements, but rather devotes her time and abilities to the rearing of her children in the fear of God, to nurturing in them the habit of self-denial, the spirit of meekness, of prayer, and of love for mankind. Permeating the home, the fragrance of this frankincense is thereafter diffused everywhere by those who received in that home a pious upbringing. Frankincense is brought to the Lord by that artist who does not utilize his tal-



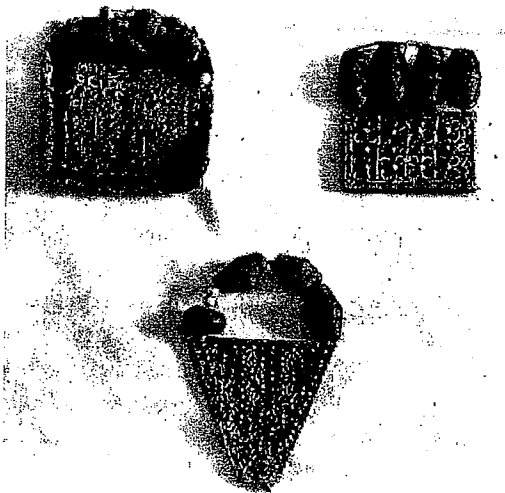
ents to pander to human lust in keeping with the spirit of the time, but rather, strives to turn all his creative powers into means of disseminating—with the refined and beautiful—what is true and good. This frankincense envelops many with its heavenly fragrance. And just as there is no-one who does not possess abilities or talents of some kind, neither is there anyone who is unable to bring the Lord frankincense by using his abilities to the glory of God and the true profit of his neighbors.

The third gift to the Lord from the magi was myrrh. This was the last gift and therefore more exalted than gold or even frankincense. What kind of gift is this, and why is it so important? Like frankincense, myrrh exudes a heavenly fragrance, but its distinguishing quality lies in its great bitterness; for this reason it represents our trials and sorrows, our tears and sufferings.

Now it is clear who brings to the Lord the gift of myrrh. They bring it who patiently bear trials in life and suffer blamelessly without giving in to bleak despair, nor fainthearted complaining, nor useless sighing; those who, in enduring their trials, are moved neither to prideful scorn towards others, nor to the desperate stifling in themselves of all human feeling, but to a lively hope in the living God—to the thought that through suffering he or she is cleansed from sins, made perfect in virtue, and, what is even more gladdening, made like unto their Saviour, Who died for them upon the Cross. Such endurance, in the spirit of faith and love, of the tribulations and sorrows of the age is also a gift to the Lord, a gift more precious than gold and of a sweeter savor even than frankincense.

May all those who suffer cruelly hear this, and may they come to fathom the advantage of their condition which is seemingly bitter, but actually not without its sweetness if only they consider their faith and the Cross of Christ. May they hasten to bring their myrrh to the Lord as a gift. Those who are satisfied in this world cannot do this; unacquainted with want, they seem to lack nothing; but they have no

myrrh. Many of those who possess frankincense—that is, exceptional talents, also cannot do this; they have no heavy trials to bear, no myrrh.



Picture and a close-up of the authentic Gifts of the Magi, at the Holy Monastery of St. Paul, in Holy Mountain

It is all with you, God's bloodless passion-bearers; you, who through no guilty act of your own—whether by the lot of your birth or by the perversity of circumstance, by human malice or by our corruptible physical nature—greet virtually every day, and also end it, with sighs; and who, it may be, this very morning greeted Christ's holy feast day with tears. Those who look upon you disdain your hardship; you yourselves, perhaps, stumble at times beneath the weight of earthly trial. But we, in the name of our Saviour, greet you with the precious likeness of His Cross! Cherish the precious myrrh which you have received as your portion; do not exchange it for frankincense, and even more guard against trading it for mere gold. And do not rob it of its heavenly fragrance by complaint or fainthearted murmuring.

What is the use of complaining? The Lord sees everything without it. Each of your tears counts with Him, each of your sighs knows its weight—and in time you shall receive for all of these a hundredfold. Amen.

† † †

Apolytikion of the Precious Gifts

Three boasted Gifts the Magi, rulers from Persia, gave to You. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh, seeing You as a babe O Christ, and faithfully worshipped You and were sanctified, venerating Your holy treasures. We all receive grace, and offer a hymn to Your Nativity, O Lord.



In human nature, pleasure has a dual character. In the soul, it is activated by dispassion and in the body, by passion. The one which our free will chooses will dominate over the other.

St. Gregory of Nyssa

On the Incarnation

by Fr. Theodore Heckman, "Diocese Alive", December, 1983

"While gentle silence enveloped all things,
And night in its swift course was now half gone,
Thine all-powerful Word leaped from Heaven,
From the Royal Throne,
Into the midst of the land..." - Wisdom of Solomon 18:14-15

From the very beginning of creation God had foreseen the Fall: the universe which He created in perfection now subject to decay, corruption, and death. So, from the beginning of the Fall, He prepared the remedy. This remedy was extraordinary: He would descend Himself into His creation. God would become man. And He would struggle with that decay, corruption and death, from within. He would even experience death, sacrificing Himself "for the life of the world." He would share the whole consequence of the fallen universe, and He would raise it up again, re-creating it, and lifting it higher than it was in the beginning.

Higher even than the realm of angels (which is very high, indeed) - to the very Throne of the Godhead. The whole history of humanity before the birth of Jesus Christ was a preparation for this extraordinary event. But this preparation is seen most clearly and directly in Hebrew Scriptures. The Old Testament is a preparation which has been fulfilled in the New. Thus we can look at each important event in the History of Israel as a preview or foreshadowing of that which was fulfilled by Christ. The following examples are but a few of these:

The Flood; Noah and the Ark
The turbulence of sin; Christ and the Church

The chosen people of Israel - Old Israel
The elect, the Church - New Israel

Cain's slaying of Abel
Humanity's slaying of Christ

Melchisedek brings forth bread and wine
Christ institutes the Holy Eucharist

Barren Sarah bears a son Isaac
Barren Anna bears Mary the Virgin

Twelve sons of Jacob, the Twelve Tribes
The Twelve Apostles

The flight into Egypt
Deliverance from sin and death by Christ

Moses the deliverer
Christ the Savior

Passover
Pascha - the Resurrection of Christ

The Paschal lamb
Christ, the Lamb of God

The wanderings of the Chosen People
The Church until the Judgement

Entering the Promised Land
Christ's entrance into Paradise,
bringing His People

The waters of the rock - the dewy fleece
Holy Baptism

The manna
The Holy Eucharist

The Law given on Mt. Sinai
The Sermon on the Mount
and Holy Pentecost

David the King of Israel
Christ, the Son of David, the Eternal King

Assumption of Elias into Heaven
The Ascension of Christ

Raising of the Shunamite's son
Raising of Lazarus

Jonah in the whale three days
Christ in the grave three days

The Three Holy Youths in the furnace
Christ's harrowing of hell

The old Eve
Mary the Ever-Virgin, the New Eve

The old Adam
Christ, the new Adam

"The celebration of Christ's Birth," says St. Gregory the Theologian, "is not a festival of creation, but a festival of re-creation." The whole universe acquires a new meaning, new life. The joy, the beauty, the wonder of Christmas is the inexpressible excitement of finding a new world. Everything old, incomplete, yearning for perfection has now become new, complete, fulfilled. Ofcourse, this does not all take place at the moment of Incarnation. Christ's Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension are necessary. But the Birth in Bethlehem initiated the New Creation.

The Tropar (principle hymn of an event) of the Feast of Our Lord's Birth speaks of the transformation from an imperfect worship to that of perfection:

THY NATIVITY, O CHRIST OUR GOD,
HAS SHONE TO THE WORLD THE LIGHT OF WISDOM

The original text read: "has risen upon the world as the light of wisdom..." The Birth of Christ is identified with the rising of the sun. Since the most ancient times, men have looked to the rising of the sun with awe and a sense of reverence. This was not only because of the natural beauty of the sunrise, but also because men knew intuitively that life on earth is totally dependent on the warmth and energy from the sun. And if the daily sunrise was a proper moment for reverence and worship, even more was the annual "birth of the sun" at the winter solstice a time for universal worship. The Holy Fathers wisely set the date for Our Lord's Nativity on the exact date of the pagan festival not just to counteract a pagan celebration, but to transform that imperfect worship into perfection. The true Sun of Righteousness is Christ Jesus, God in the flesh, perfect God and perfect man, the fulfillment of all the deepest yearnings of humanity.

FOR BY IT (the Nativity) THOSE WHO WORSHIPPED THE STARS
WERE TAUGHT BY A STAR, TO ADORE THEE,
THE SUN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

The transformation of the world from the old to new includes the transformation of worship as the highest activity of man. The unusual Star of Bethlehem had to be followed by those whose primary study was the stars. This was the most unique celestial event in the history of astronomy - and it led to the humble manger where a little baby, the Light of the World, was lying. The uncreated Divine Light which the Apostles were to see on Mount Tabor was there, beneath the Star of Bethlehem, bringing Heaven down to earth, reuniting again these two realms which had been separated by the Fall.

AND TO KNOW THEE, THE ORIENT FROM ON HIGH
O LORD, GLORY TO THEE!

As the physical light, the sun, rises each day from the East, so the spiritual Light, the radiance of God Himself, leaps to the earth in the midst of the dark night. And the Light begins to shine in the darkness, and no amount of darkness can overcome (John 1:5). Christ is the "sun which knows no setting" illumining all men and all creation. He is Light of Light which makes possible the true knowledge of God. Early Christians called Baptism Illumination, since it was the initiation into this radiant knowledge of God. All former knowledge, all former worship is obsolete. All that is false is abolished. All that which was dim and hazy is now seen clearly in the perfect light of the Day-Spring from on High.

(Concluded next week)

Remember Your Benefactor

✠ Remember your unseen Benefactor everywhere and always with love, and thank Him for all His benefits with a pure heart. The greatest and highest of all His blessings is that by His good will Christ, His Only-Begotten Son, came to us and redeemed us by His precious Blood and suffering - from the devil, hell, and death. In this work He showed to us His unspeakable goodness towards us. We must, then, always gaze with faith upon this great work of God so incomprehensible to the mind, and remember God Who so loved us unworthy ones. We must give thanksgiving, from our whole heart, worship, praise, hymn, and glorify Him with our heart and lips.

St. Tikhon of Zadonsk - Journey to Heaven

On the Incarnation (conclusion)

by Fr. Theodore Heckman, St. Tikhon's Seminary, December, 1983

The other main hymn of a Feast is called the **Kontakion**. It is this hymn which is so beautifully illustrated on the traditional icons of the Nativity:

**TODAY THE VIRGIN GIVES BIRTH
TO THE TRANSCENDENT ONE !
AND THE EARTH OFFERS A CAVE
TO THE UNAPPROACHABLE ONE !
ANGELS WITH SHEPHERDS GLORIFY HIM !
THE WISE MEN JOURNEY WITH THE STAR !
SINCE FOR OUR SAKE
THE ETERNAL GOD WAS BORN
AS A LITTLE CHILD!**

Two aspects are shown here: what has happened to God, and what has happened to man (and all creation). God has done something He never had done before. The Son, begotten in eternity, now is born in time; that which was spirit has assumed flesh. And the effect on man, the world, the whole cosmos, is that it all has become new, sanctified, transformed. Because all creation is affected, all creation is represented in the **Kontakion** and the **Icon**: the angels, the heavens, men of high estate - the **Wise Men**; men of low estate - the shepherds, the earth, the animals - the ox and the ass - and all of humanity.

And each of these has an offering for the occasion of the Lord's Birth:

**The angels offer their song; the heavens a star
The Magi, precious gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh
The shepherds, their wonder
The earth, a cave
The wildlife, the manger
Humanity offers its most marvelous flower: the Virgin.**
(A hymn from the Feast)

Christ's Birth takes place in the midst of a dark cave, revealing so clearly the state of the world at the moment when God arrives. The world is in darkness, enslaved to death. And the Light comes, quietly, humbly. Though He was God, He takes the form of a servant. Though He is our King, He comes as an obedient subject. And He accepts all our condition, even death. In fact, this very cave of His Birth is a foreshadowing of the tomb which will hold His lifeless body. The swaddling clothes foreshadow His burial clothes. Some of the foreshadowing shows the opposite of what will happen: "The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master's crib; but Israel does not know me, my people do not understand."
(Isaiah 1:3)

Sometimes the Nativity Icon shows the presence of midwives assisting at the Birth. This Child is treated as all other children, it has the same earthly needs. Christ is fully man.

St. Joseph, the Betrothed, is not in the central group of figures; he is not mentioned in the **Kontakion** of the Feast. In the **Icon**, he is sitting off to the side, looking somewhat troubled. There is a bent figure of a man by him (the devil) speaking with him, filling him with doubts. How is a virgin birth possible? Only in fables! The laws of nature prohibit it. Joseph represents the difficulty mankind has throughout history: man, with his limited vision, and limited understanding, finds it so hard to accept that which is beyond reason. Faith is truly a task, yet even a tiny bit of it can move mountains.

St. Joseph the Betrothed – Remembered on the Sunday after Nativity

Today many believe that the blessed Mary had other children with the righteous Joseph. According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa and Saint Epiphanius of Cyprus, the Virgin Mary was betrothed to Joseph when he was eighty years old. Mary was entrusted to the elder so that he might serve as her guardian. Mary had consecrated to God her virginity and Joseph was not only picked to safeguard her, but to also be a witness to the purity of her life. Saint Athanasius the Great, Archbishop of Alexandria, writes, "Joseph was made steward of the mystery so that the Virgin, appearing to have a husband, would be held in esteem, and so that the devil would remain unaware that God had deigned to take up His dwelling among men." Saint Basil the Great says, "By means of Mary's betrothal to Joseph, the Lord concealed the Incarnation from the prince of this world." Finally, Saint John of Damascus testifies to the same truth: "Joseph was espoused to Mary to prevent the devil from knowing that Christ had been born seedlessly of the Virgin, and to curb him from inciting envy in Herod and among the Jews before the appointed time.

After the birth of the Lord, Joseph fully recognized Mary as the vessel of God, the Virgin foretold by the Prophet Isaiah, that she truly was and is the One chosen by God for the Incarnation. Having seen her bear a Son Who was God Incarnate and being a witness to the Nativity, Joseph could not even think of touching the Virgin, and as for Jesus' brothers and sisters, tradition indicates that Joseph was married before and had children, who became also children to Mary, and siblings to Jesus.

"And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." (Matt. 1:21)

A story of the Divine Christ-child:

When the Holy Family fled before Herod's sword to Egypt, robbers leapt out on the road with the intention of stealing something. The righteous Joseph was leading the donkey, on which were some belongings and on which the Most-holy Theotokos was riding with her Son at her breast. The robbers seized the donkey to lead it away. At that moment, one of the robbers approached the Mother of God to see what she was holding next to her breast. The robber, seeing the Christ-child, was astonished at His unusual beauty and said in his astonishment: "If God were to take upon Himself the flesh of man, He would not be more beautiful than this Child!" This robber then ordered his companions to take nothing from these travelers. Filled with gratitude toward this generous robber, the Most-holy Virgin said to him: "Know that this Child will repay you with a good reward because you protected Him today."

Thirty-three years later, this same thief hung on the Cross for his crimes, crucified on the right side of Christ's Cross. His name was Dismas, and the name of the thief on the left side was Gestas. Beholding Christ the Lord innocently crucified, Dismas repented for all the evil of his life. While Gestas reviled the Lord, Dismas defended Him, saying: This man hath done nothing amiss. (Luke 23:41). Dismas, therefore, was the wise thief to whom our Lord said: Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with Me in Paradise (Luke 23:43). Thus the Lord granted Paradise to him who spared Him in childhood.