

THE BURNING BUSH

Monastic Journal



Winter 2016

Volume 29

Number 3

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THE GENEALOGY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST

(Adapted from a Homily given on the Sunday before Christmas, Dec. 2015.)

On the Sunday before the Nativity of the Lord the Gospel of Matthew (1:1-16) is read about the ancestry of our Savior.

It is the Gospel in which we have all these names, a long list of names that are the ancestors of our Lord. St. Matthew makes no attempts to purify the list, which in many ways it might be a little shocking or disturbing to the Jewish listeners because this Gospel of Matthew was clearly written to the Jews, by constantly quoting, referring to the Scriptures—that is, the Old Testament Scriptures—and there are also several Gentiles on the list. But maybe the most striking is when the text says that David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, with no attempt to cover up David's sin, or to somehow cleanse it or wipe it from the history of the Messiah that he was proclaiming to his people.

When the priest prepares the Lamb for Holy Liturgy that will come out in the Great Entrance to be consecrated and received as the Body of Christ he takes the spear and slices, from the left side—from the Lamb's point of view the right side—and says: "Like a sheep is led to the slaughter," on the opposite side: "The Lamb before its shearers opens not his mouth" across the top: "In his humiliation, just judgement was denied Him," and across the bottom: "Who shall declare His generation?" (Acts 8:33). These are words that are taken from the Holy Prophet Isaiah (7:14)—about the suffering servant—telling us that this Messiah that is to come is different from what we might expect. He will not come in a simple way, He will not come to sort of set up His kingdom on this earth; He will come to suffer, be slaughtered like a lamb. But He will also have this sort of mysterious origin. The Ethiopian eunuch was reading in the book of Acts when Phillip approached him. He says: "How can I understand these things, unless someone guides me?" (Acts: 8:31) So Philip explains this text to the Ethiopian eunuch.

In the Gospel of Matthew we have this declaration of His genealogy; Who shall declare His generation? Here is His generation, from Abraham down. In the Gospel of Luke, we have it all the way back to Adam and Seth. But when we listen to the words of the genealogy that Matthew gives, we hear this repetition, "so-and-so is the father of so-and-so, who is the father of so-and-so, who is the father of so-and-so, "...who is the father of Joseph, who was betrothed to Mary, from whom Christ was born." (see Matt. 1: 1-16). It does not say Joseph was the father of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ. He has the genealogy under the law of His stepfather but He has His human flesh taken from His Mother. His genealogy remains a

tremendous mystery to us, because we know from the Gospel of John and the teachings of the Holy Fathers, that He is begotten of the Father before all ages, eternally begotten from the Father, and yet, by miraculous conception, begotten of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary in time. His generation remains a mystery to us, even though He is properly situated under the law. It was such a stumbling block to the Jews at the time—“Who is this fellow? His mother is Mary, His father is Joseph, here are His brothers and sisters. He is nobody special. We know Him; He is just a carpenter’s son. Who does He think He is, teaching us these things, and doing this stuff?” Even to this day, people would like to make Jesus a good man, a good person, an ethical man just because “we like His teachings;” to make Him normal in some way, like one of us. The Gospel text ends with this additional quote from Isaiah, “Therefore the Lord Himself shall give you a sign, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Emanuel” (Is. 7:14). Matthew adds that Emanuel means “God with us.”

This feast that takes place in the final days of preparation for the Birth of our Lord—and we have just a few days left to prepare ourselves to enter into this mystery of God longing to be with us, of longing to be with us—this collection of human beings that are in some sense His own ancestry— adulterers, sinners, Gentiles, Jews. He came to be with us as we are, not in some other pretend way. And maybe this is our greatest sin, when we try to pretend to be somebody that we are not; maybe this is the one way in which Christ cannot be with us. It was so hard for Him to be with the Pharisees and the Scribes because they were hypocrites, because they were pretending to be somebody that they were not. They pretended to be purified in a way that Matthew would not purify our Lord’s genealogy. God longs to be with us; so much so that He is willing to take on our own nature, to be with us as one of us. A generation from all eternity that we do not understand, and a generation in time that we cannot comprehend. And yet, He comes so that we can experience Him now—even without understanding or comprehension— to be able to be experienced by us, especially in the mysteries of the Church, and most fully and beautifully in the Holy Divine Liturgy. He comes to take up residence in our hearts, to be born ever new in the cave that is in our hearts, that awaits Him.

So in the final days, there will be preparations, beautiful and wonderful; lights go up, meals are prepared, presents are purchased, for a celebration that is beautiful, uplifting and joyous; but whatever it is, let it be one that is genuine and not given to any sort of external pretense. This is the only way that our hearts—that cave that is within our hearts that longs to receive Him— will be able to receive Him. All of the external preparations that we make, will not provide the space in our hearts for Him, unless we can be genuine and honest before Him about our own lives. ■

THE PARABLE OF THE RICH MAN

(Adapted from a homily by Fr. John Konkle on Nov. 22, 2015)

In the Gospel of Luke, Christ tells the parable of the rich man who hoarded possessions. The rich man suffered from a fairly simple but common disease. He says to himself: “This is *mine, my* field; It was planted with *my* seeds, by *my* workers who cared for *my* crops, harvested *my* crops, and now I have to have them build *my* barns so that *my* crops can be stored for *my* care, for *my* many years that are ahead of *me*.” (See Luke 12:13-34). His thought was totally about himself, what he possessed, what his life would be like, with really not the slightest thought about others; totally blinded to those around him. St. Nicholas of Zicha and South Canaan says he could have instead said this: “What am I going to do with these things? Glory and praise to You, O Most High and most merciful God! How great an abundance You have! Who in Your power and wisdom have brought forth from the black earth. You have through the sun’s rays poured sweetness into all the fruits of the earth. You have given every fruit a wonderful form and a particular flavor. You have rewarded me a hundred fold for my small labors. You had mercy on Your servant and have poured such gifts from Your hand into his lap. O my most wondrous Lord, teach me to give joy to my brothers and neighbors with these gifts. So *they*, my brothers and neighbors, together with me, rejoice and thankfully glorify and praise Your holy name and Your inexpressible goodness.” But he did not say anything like that. He was blind to thankfulness, blind to thankfulness toward God, blind to an awareness that all that he had—his field, his servants, his crops—were all gifts from God. God is the one to be thanked and praised. St. Paul makes it so clear in the first chapter of Romans that lack of thankfulness and praise to God is the source of our blindness; the source of our inability to see the world as it really is; the source of our inability to see the world in any other way than somehow revolving around us, with us at the center of it. And so this man's lack of thankfulness, this man's lack of gratitude, left him focused solely on himself. Thankfulness to God is important. Sometimes we hear the phrase, we even say the phrase: “Thank goodness!” But the only goodness that there is, is goodness that is God's goodness, even as St. Nicholas' prayer indicates “praise and thank God for His goodness.” Sometimes people think there is no God because there is so much evil in the world; how could there be a God when there is so much pain and suffering and hardship? And very seldom do people think, “O there is so much goodness in the world; there must be a God.” We somehow feel quite comfortable attributing the ability to produce goodness to ourselves; we do not need a God for goodness, we just need a God to

have a problem with evil. There is not any goodness apart from God. We should be cautious saying the phrase “Thank goodness!” It is a sort of cop-out. Thankfulness is intrinsically a personal characteristic; it comes by seeing something as given to you as a gift. It is not just something that is there, a brute fact about the world. It comes with a kind of “personal-ness” attached to it, with intentionality, with purposefulness. And so we thank God because God has given us all of these things—sometimes even hardships and difficulties and sufferings—but always with the belief that His love and His goodness are such that they are ultimately for our good, for the good of our souls, for the good of the entirety of our being, and not just for what we think will help us survive in this passing life.

So there is a profound importance from this parable in understanding the significance of thanksgiving to God, and how it opens our eyes and changes us to see the world differently. If we have done that, then we can see, listen maybe, to what will sound to us like extreme words that come from St. John Chrysostom. He says in the context of this parable, “Have you eaten your fill? Then remember the hungry. Have you quenched your thirst? Remember the thirsty. Are you warm enough? Remember the frozen. Do you live in a richly furnished house? Bring the homeless into it. Have you made merry at a party? Bring merriment to the sad and the sorrowful. Have you been honored as a rich man? Visit and relieve those in need. Have you come out joyful from your master? Then make sure all your servants are joyful. If you are merciful and indulgent toward men, you will yourself be shown mercy when your soul leaves your body.”

The Holy Fathers were always very strict about generosity. St. Basil might be the strictest of all; he said: “If you have two pairs of shoes in your closet, you have stolen one pair from the poor.” We do not feel so comfortable with these words. But what it reveals to us is that if we really had this true and genuine sense that everything we had came from God and we really do not have to be anxious for anything—because He is the one providing for our every need—the clothes that we wear, the house that shelters us, the food that we eat—if we really believe that when we call God “Father,” we mean Father—the one who provides for us, the one who cares for us, the one who protects us— then “father” is not just an empty word. If we really believe that, then not only do we thank Him for it, but we freely give what He is giving us because we know he provides for us, and he wants to provide for others through us. And so thankfulness to God is what sets us free to be generous toward others, toward those whom God puts in our life, toward others around us.

There are a couple different stories in the desert fathers; one is about St. Anthony and other monks, where God reveals to them that in spite of all their ascetic efforts there are some others that are actually more holy than

they are. And so the monks are led to a couple in Alexandria. The husband's name is Eucharistos, from Eucharist, meaning “Thankfulness;” and the monks ask Eucharistos “What is your life like? What do you do?” After some probing it turns out that he and his wife have this practice: a third of what they make they give to the poor and needy; a third of what they make in their work they reserve for hospitality, for receiving other people into their home and honoring them, and a third they keep for themselves, for their own needs. This is such a profound statement in the context of the desert fathers because it reveals so powerfully that the ascetic effort that we make by fasting, prayer, vigil and all the strivings, staying up late at night, getting up early in the morning, whatever it is it is really, in a way, nothing compared to offering to others of what God has given us. Jesus even says this to the Pharisees: “You hypocrites! If you cannot do anything else, at least do this, give to the poor, and you will be saved. For all of your hypocrisy, you would still be saved if you would just give to the poor, if you would just be generous.”

There is another story from the life of St. Anthony, where a brother who wants to be a monk comes to St. Anthony; he has renounced the world, and he has sold all his possessions and given almost everything to the poor, but he has saved a little bit back for his own needs, the text says. And he comes to St. Anthony, and he tells St. Anthony what he has done, and St. Anthony tells him: “Well before you become a monk, first do this: ‘go into the city and go to the meat market, buy some meat, and rub it all over your body naked, and then come back here.’” And so the brother does exactly what he was told. And the wild dogs and the birds come, and they gnaw at his flesh, and he is just ripped to pieces; he is alive, but he has been fighting off all of these demons, all of these attackers. He comes back to St. Anthony, and St. Anthony asks him whether he had followed his advice, and the brother shows him his wounded body. St. Anthony says then: “Those who renounce the word but want to keep something for themselves”—for their toothbrush and their lattes—“are torn in this way by the demons who make war on them.” It turns out that this “saying” from the desert fathers is exactly like what we read in the book of Acts, in the fifth chapter.

Remember Ananias and Sapphira from the book of Acts. The Christian communities were brand new in and around Jerusalem and everything was held in common. So Ananias and Sapphira sold their land and brought their money to the apostles, and it is said that they “laid it at their feet,” but they kept some back for themselves—for their toothbrush and their lattes. But they did not tell the apostles this. Well, you probably know the story, they both ended up falling dead. So there is the great danger for any of us in our lives to hold onto something too tight, to grasp something as if it is mine—my field, my crops, my leisure time— whatever it is. When we read

parables like this, maybe we are tempted to say: “Lord, I am glad I am not a rich man.” But of course it turns out that we are; I am sure many of us are really filthy rich compared to other people in the world. We always see that there are people richer than us; we do not think that we are rich people, but in reality we are so filled with wealth. But even if we do not think that we are wealthy in possessions and money, we are wealthy with time, we have lots of time. Our culture idolizes and worships having idle time and leisure time and recreation time. We have lenient schedules so we can go do whatever we want, for us, for me, for my benefit. So there are many ways in which we are rich, not just in money; many things which we possess, not just material possessions. And we are attacked by demons when we fail to give thanks to God for these gifts, to see them as coming from Him in such a way that we are so free through our awareness of God's generosity to us that we are able—or not able if we are not thankful—to give these things freely. In the first antiphon of the Divine Liturgy we sing “Bless the Lord, o my soul, and forget none of His kindnesses.” This is a problem, these things come to us as a kindness of God, but we forget that; we think only of ourselves.

Think of the Thanksgiving holiday; it is a great national holiday, a great civil holiday. It was clearly originally a national holiday of giving thanks to God, but a strange thing happened to it over the decades; It was a national—not local, not family—it was a national calling to give thanks, not thanks to “goodness,” but thanks to God. Certainly the focus was on it being a family holiday; nobody paid too much attention to it being a national event, except that you got Thursday, Friday, and Saturday off work. When it went to be just a family event it started drifting away from giving thanks to God. But now, it is so striking that in the last couple years, black Friday has come into Thanksgiving, and now it is a commercial event.

There is always this pull, this temptation, this draw for us to forget where these things come from. All of these things—the air we breathe, the heart that pumps our blood, everything that we have—comes from God. And if we give Him thanks, if we truly experience God as our Father in the way in which fathers are supposed to be, in the way in which God is, then we will be able to be set free.

We do not know when our soul will be called from us, when we will have to give an account of our life. By God's grace, let it be a time in which we have learned the practice of thankfulness and generosity such that we stand before Him fully aware that this is the One who provided for us and allows us to provide for others.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ■

**FEAST OF THE NATIVITY & THEOPHANY
2016 - 2017**

SCHEDULE OF SERVICES

Saturday, December 24 Eve of Nativity	Matins, 3rd & 6th Hours Liturgy & Festal Vespers Vigil Service	6:00 am 9:00 am 6:00 pm
Sunday, December 25 Nativity of the Lord	Akathist, 3rd & 6th Hours Divine Liturgy of St. Basil Vigil Service	9:00 am 10:00 am 6:00 pm
Monday, December 26 Synax of the Theotokos	Akathist, 3rd & 6th Hours Divine Liturgy of St. John Lunch & Caroling Vigil Service	9:00 am 10:00 am 12:30 pm 6:00 pm
Tuesday, December 27 Protomartyr Stephen	Akathist, 3rd & 6th Hours Divine Liturgy of St. John	8:00 am 9:00 am
Saturday, December 31	Matins, , 3rd & 6th Hours Divine Liturgy Vigil Service Thanksgiving Service	6:30 am 9:00 am 6:00 pm 11:30 pm
Sunday, Jan. 1, 2017 Circ. of our Lord St. Basil the Great	Akathist , 3rd & 6th Hours Divine Liturgy of St. Basil	9:00 am 10:00am
Thursday, Jan. 5, 2017 Eve of Theophany	Vesperal Liturgy of St. Basil Blessing of Water follows. Vigil Service	8:00 am 6:00 pm
Friday, Jan. 6, 2017 Feast of Theophany	Akathist, 3rd & 6th Hours Divine Liturgy of St. John Blessing of Water Great Vespers	9:00 am 10:00 am 11:30 am 5:00 pm
Saturday, Jan. 7, 2017 Feast of St. John	Matins Akathist, 3rd & 6th Hours Divine Liturgy of St. John	6:30 am 8:00 am 9:00 am

PRAYER LIST

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or:

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