

**20th December 2020**  
**Fr Chrysostom MacDonnell**

**Sunday before Nativity**

From the 15th November, right through to the 2nd February, the Liturgical life of the Orthodox Church takes us on a journey through the story of the Incarnation of Our Lord. But this is no tidy, edited or sequential story. The celebration of His Nativity may well end forty days later with His Presentation in the Mosaic temple, and the meeting with Simeon and the prophetess, Anna, but the narrative seems to be interrupted by a much older feast: that of Theophany, the revelation of the incarnate God to the world at Christ's Baptism in the Jordan. It is like one of those films where we see not a flash-back of something that has already happened, but a flash-forward to what is to come in the drama. Indeed, if you read the biblical narratives carefully, you will see hints and indications of the coming sacrifice, the shadow of the cross. Think, for example of how the Magi bring the strange gift of the burial spice, myrrh. The truth is that the whole of Christ's life, from conception to ascension is an offering of obedience, glorifying the Father.

Historically, at first there was just one all-embracing feast, celebrating the shining-forth of God in our humanity as Jesus of Nazareth. It commemorated Christ's birth, the coming of the Magi, and the other childhood events of His life: His circumcision, His presentation to the temple, and it included His baptism. The separate Feast of the Nativity on 25th December is first recorded in 336AD in the city of Rome. It eventually spread to Constantinople, the imperial capital, thence throughout the Christian world.

But this mystery of God-in-the-flesh is no random event; a sudden divine intrusion into the affairs of mankind. If there is one virtue required of the spiritually minded person; one

approach needed by those who seek after God and His kingdom, then it is patience. Speaking of the trials of the faithful at the end of the ages, Christ says in Luke's gospel, '*By your patience, possess your souls.*' [Lk.21:19]

We have just heard the genealogy of Christ from the gospel of Matthew. According to the Book of Genesis, men began to call upon the name of the Lord way back in the days of Enosh [Gen.4:26], but Matthew only begins with Abraham, the intimate friend of God, the father of faith, and so begins the long journey through the generations, the spiritual history of Israel, that through centuries leads us eventually to the coming of Christ.

Again and again in the Old Testament scriptures, the idea of patience is reiterated, illustrated in the lives of those who waited upon God. Abraham and Sarah who waited all their lives for their child of promise, whose faith was tested, even by a false start in Ishmael until Isaac came along. We can recall the Children of Israel, who languished under the Egyptians for four hundred years until Moses came. Then, many years after the settlement of the Land of Promise, there was the kingdom of David and Solomon, that fell apart and suffered the invasions of foreign enemies and empires. There were the years of exile in Babylon, and after the restoration, the witness of the Maccabean martyrs against the incursions of Greek paganism.

I do not wish to test your own patience this morning in listing all the incidents of this history. *And what more shall I say?* as the epistle says this morning. *For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson,* and the rest. But what can we learn now, what benefit can we draw from all this, to help us in our own spiritual struggle? We have arrived at the last

Sunday before the feast. Just a little more waiting, just a bit more patience is required of us.

This is, perhaps, one of the earliest lessons in life itself that our children have to learn. Then I have a special message for the children here today. You are waiting eagerly for what is coming. Yes, I remember the feeling well! But that longing, that unbearably long time until the day arrives, helps to train us in God's ways; that what is best for us in the end, is that things should happen in God's time, and in God's way, for He is wiser than we are.

Impatience seems to be a feature of the current age. Financial structures, technology and popular culture all feed that insatiable desire for instant gratification. It used to be said that justice delayed was justice denied, but the word justice is now replaced by shifting desires of the human heart, as if desire delayed were desire denied. It will not surprise you, therefore, that we are bidden, we are called, to be very different: to bind our hearts with patience and to fix our longing, above all else, upon our redemption. *'Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.'* [Matt.6:33]

In the early days of his spiritual development, Blessed Augustine of Hippo had notoriously prayed, *'Lord, give me chastity, but not just yet.'* He was, no doubt, thinking that he had plenty of time for repentance afterwards; that God would be necessarily patient with him, while he continued in his wayward life of pleasure. But there is the paradox! No patience, no waiting is required when it comes to repentance. *'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel,'* are the very first, urgent words of Christ in St Mark's gospel [Mk. 1:14]. But who among those who had waited so long for the coming of the Messiah,

were ready when He came? Fr Filip reminded us last Sunday of those in the parable of the banquet, who made their excuses, pressed by the needs and distractions of this world.

But if we learn patience in waiting for the joys of a feast, it is only to train us for something better, like those again in today's epistle who, *though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.* The hard part, the part that requires asceticism and struggle on our behalf, is that patient waiting upon God. We cannot pray, copying the younger Augustine, and say, Lord, give me patience, but hurry! There is no other way to acquire patience than by *being* patient.

At the end of this cycle of feasts we shall meet again Anna the daughter of Phanuel, the prophetess. Along with Simeon the Elder, she stands at the very end of the long, waiting history of God's old people; she is privileged to encounter the long-desired Messiah, the hope of Israel. St Anatoly, one of the Elders of Optina, referring to her patience says, *Those who endure, it is said, will fly on wings; they will ascend like eagles. According to the gospel, the Holy Righteous Anna was patient, sitting in the house of God until deep old age. Strive to imitate her.*

We can all learn that same patience and humility before God, especially through our strong prayer. Prayer that comes before our Lord is not a matter finding the right formula or words; not the occasional prayer, uttered when we just happen to feel the need. It is not bargaining with God, like the young Augustine, or making demands according to what we judge should happen in the world, informing the Almighty about what we think He needs to know! Strong prayer, fervent prayer, is that which endures, that does not give up easily. It

is continuous, regular, and disciplined, not as vain repetitions, as if by magic formula, but as a constant rule and a faithful duty of love. Like the centurion Cornelius in the Acts of the Apostles, whose prayers and alms had come up for a memorial before God, [Acts 10:4] we too shall be heard if we continue patiently in hope. And there is no more powerful prayer than when we, the body of Christ, come together here, gathered and constituted as the Orthodox people of God in this place. Here, more than anywhere else, we can let go of the busy world and the fever of life for a time; laying aside, as we say in the Cherubicon, all worldly care.

Whatever it is you pray for, whether it be in your own sufferings, or the healing of others; whether under temptations and trials, for endurance or guidance, in sorrow or repentance; whether in supplication, devotion, thanksgiving or praise, do not cease, do not stop, even when God seems silent. For our prayer will be answered in God's good time and in God's own way, and whatever befall us and our loved ones in this life, the words we have prayed so often, *Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done*, will have their fulfilment anyway.

We who come to this earthly temple, we, who as living stones ourselves, become here the temple of God, may also call to remembrance the All-Holy Theotokos, the one who was herself the temple of Christ's body. She too was no random appearance but was foreknown in the mind of God, one of a long line of women of the Old Testament despised, in the way of the world, for their childlessness, before God blessed them. Think of Sarah the wife of Abraham who bore Isaac, Hannah the wife of Elkanah, the mother of Samuel, and the wife of Manoah, who is not even named, who bore Samson. And, of course, Anna the wife of Joachim, who bore the Theotokos, who, most mysterious of all, defied the way of

nature itself and held in her womb the Uncontainable, God Himself. Her whole life is a patient temple of prayer, as she says in Luke's gospel, *Behold the handmaid of the Lord! Let it be to me according to thy word.* For whether it is standing together in liturgical prayer or reciting alone those canons and akathists to the saints, or offering up, morning and evening, our own worship and intercessions: when we have learned how to pray like Our Blessed Lady, we shall be, as the good soil in the parable, that having heard the word with a noble and good heart, we shall keep it and bear fruit with patience. [Lk.8:15]