

Homily on the genealogy of Jesus Christ

Father Filip Lommaert

Sunday, December 22, 2019

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God. Amen.

Today's Gospel reading is the reading of the Evangelist Matthew on the genealogy of Christ.

I am sure that many amongst you, when first reading this, were probably quite surprised by this list of ancient and strange names.

Only one other Evangelist, Saint Luke, also lists the genealogy of Christ. And he goes even further back into the Old Testament than Saint Matthew.

Where Saint Matthew traces the lineage of our Christ and Saviour back to Abraham, Saint Luke traces it back all the way to Adam.

I can hear you ask: Why is it necessary to name 14 generations, then another 14 generations followed by another 14 generations?

This genealogy lists the generations of people from Abraham to David, from David to the Babylonian captivity of the people of Israel, and then on to the birth of Jesus.

It is a selected genealogy, ending in the appearance of "Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ" (Mt 1:16).

For one thing, they are the people to whose family our Lord Jesus Christ belongs through His humanity.

They are all relatives of His, and this should be enough for us to find their names deeply moving:

"Christ is of their blood, Christ is of their family".

Each of them — thinking of the Mother of God — can say, 'She is a child of our family',

and of Christ, 'He also is a child of our family, although He is our God, our Saviour, the very Divine Presence in our midst'.

What Saint Matthew wanted to do was to remind us of the complete history of the Old Testament, and show us how it is full of anticipation for the coming of the Christ, the Saviour of the world.

And in every name, there is the story of a life. There is the righteous Abraham, following the Lord and sparing nothing for Him.

There is the righteous Moabite Ruth, leaving her homeland behind and accepting faith in the One God...

And there are sinners and righteous men: they were all ancestors of Jesus Christ in the flesh.

Let us briefly concentrate on two people in this genealogy: Abraham and David.

Abraham was a prophet and a priest. David was a prophet and a king. Both are what we call 'types' or revelations of Jesus Christ, but neither has all three ministries.

Only Jesus Christ has all three ministries. He is at once Prophet, King and High Priest, uniting all the shared ministries of Abraham and David.

The genealogies in the gospels of Saints Matthew and of Luke, are made to and from Joseph.

This is not to give the impression that Jesus came from Joseph's seed. Both gospels are very clear on this point. Jesus is born from the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The point is rather that Joseph is Jesus' father according to the law, and it is from the father that one's lawful descent is to be traced.

Jesus' legal father is "Joseph, son of David," the legal husband of Mary (Mt 1:20).

One other important point is made in listing the human generations which led to the birth of Jesus.

This is the fact that God is faithful to His promises even though His chosen people are often not faithful. Among the people from whom Jesus came are both sinners and heathens.

In a word, Jesus comes not only from the righteous and holy, but from the wicked and sinful. And He comes not only from Jews, but also from Gentiles.

The names of the four women specifically mentioned in St. Matthew's list-- Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah (Bathsheba)-- were noted, not to say notorious, Gentiles, including one of David's own wives, the mother of Solomon.

The point we see here is one which is beautifully made in an early Christian hymn quoted in the Bible in the second letter to Timothy:

If we have died with Him,
 we shall also live with Him;
 If we endure,
 we shall also reign with Him;
 If we deny Him,
 He also will deny us;
 If we are faithless,
 He remains faithful-- for He cannot deny Himself. (2 Tim 2:11-13)

This is the wonderful witness of the genealogies of Jesus: If we are faithless, the Lord God remains faithful - for he cannot deny Himself!

This is again beautifully expressed in the Vespers of the Sunday before the Nativity which will be heard this evening:

Behold, the time of our salvation approacheth;
 Make thou ready, O cave;
 For it is time for the Virgin to give birth;

And thou, Bethlehem of Judah, rejoice and be happy;
 For from thee shall shine forth our Lord.
 Listen, O mountains and hills and the regions about Judah;
 For Christ cometh to save man whom he did create;
 For he is the Lover of mankind.

But we say: how do we know who these people were? It is difficult to understand all of this. Why aren't we told immediately what is necessary for our hearts?

And here is what is most important – the difficult beginning of the Gospel, which requires some effort from all of us, denotes the entire spiritual life.

It must not to be read as a newspaper or a magazine, and then be discarded afterwards.

This is the Word of God, and it demands of us a degree of concentration, it demands of us work of the mind and of the heart!

He who persists and completes the labour of reading the first verses, and then goes on to read further will find that it becomes easier. He will be rewarded.

But he who says upon opening the Holy Book: "These words are not understandable, and I will not read further" – he is the one who will be left without the Word of God.

What this means is, that it is necessary that we should become deeply immersed in the Word of God in our mind and in our heart. Simply reading from time to time or browsing through the Bible should be avoided at all cost.

And you will see that these names have meaning; that these verses about the genealogy of Jesus Christ talk about Him as the King and Saviour who was foretold.

They tell us that the Lord became human in the flesh, that He became one of us.

That He also has what we have, grandfathers and great-grandfathers in the flesh. That He came into the family of mankind.

In this book it was possible to write the kinship of all people, millions and billions of them – and that they all became related to our Saviour in the flesh.

He became related to us, He became flesh through a Nazarene Woman, through the Virgin Mary.

Calling Christ, the Saviour is important, but it is far more important to call Him "Our Saviour" or "My Saviour".

In other words, we must personalize our relationship with Him, because He did not only come to save mankind in general but more importantly: Christ was born to save each one of us.

We only have a couple more days of waiting and fasting to go. And I can hear you say, YES, but they are the hardest days of the fast.

This is true. But we cannot fail now, we are nearly there.

Everyone should, within his possibilities and within what his health allows, look with joy towards these last days of the nativity fast.

Because on Wednesday; we will be welcoming our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Allow me to warn you though. Fasting is very important, and it is an integral part of our life as Orthodox Christians.

But we should not strive to become more perfect in Christ by fasting if it endangers our health.

If you have a medical condition or if you are ill, please be careful. It is this time of year when many are suffering from colds and other winter related ailments.

If you are in doubt or have questions, please talk to Father Chrysostom, Father Alexander or myself, and we will be more than happy to advise you on this.

As I said, a few more days and we will be celebrating the birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We are already singing the hymn: "Christ is born!"

Today we listened to the Gospel story, of how it was predicted in a dream to Joseph, that his wife would bear a son, to Whom he should give the name Jesus, which means "the Lord's Salvation", and, this Son will save people from their sins.

And this signifies that God is with us! For this reason, joy approaches!

All of us, bent over by the burden of our sins, cares, sorrows and illnesses, should now straighten up and look in front of us to meet the Lord as sung in the words of St. Gregory the Theologian:

"Christ is born – come meet Him halfway!"

And we go to meet Him – after all, He was born not only then, but He is born for us now, because He lives amongst us!

He who opens his heart to Him will then dwell with Him and will know the meaning of the following words:

"God is with us! Understand, all nations, and submit yourselves."

For they mean: "understand, unbelievers, and bow down before Him", "for God is with us!"

Amen.