Homily on the genealogy of Jesus Christ

Father Filip Lommaert   Sunday, December 23, 2018

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.

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?

Because, 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 ends with the appearance of "Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ" (Mt 1:16).

They are all the people to whose family the 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.

Every name carries 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: all ancestors of Jesus Christ in the flesh.

Let us 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, also of Luke, are made to and from Joseph.

Both Gospels are absolutely clear that his is not done to give the impression that Jesus came from Joseph's seed.

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.

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.

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 were heard last 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 how do we know who these people were? It is all rather difficult to understand. Why aren't we told immediately that which 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 is not to be read as a newspaper, magazine or online article to 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 the heart!

If you persist and complete the labour of reading the first verses, and then go on to read further, you will find that it becomes easier. And, you will be rewarded.

But if, upon opening the Holy Book, you say: "I cannot understand these words and I will not read further" –   then you will be left without the Word of God.

What this means is, that it is necessary not to just simply read, or just read from time to time, or just browse through the Bible; you have to become deeply immersed in the Word of God in mind and in heart.

And you will see that these names have meaning; that these verses about the genealogy of Jesus Christ tell 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 had grandfathers and great-grandfathers, just like we do. 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 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, our relationship with Him must be a personal one, because He did not only come to save mankind in general but much more importantly: He came to save each one of us.

We only have two more days of waiting and fasting to go, before we welcome our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

But, for quite a few in our parish, there is still a fortnight to go before they celebrate the nativity.

Allow me to warn you though, as I do during each fast. We all know that fasting is a really important part of our life as Orthodox Christians.

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

If you have a medical condition or if you are ill, please, 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, or myself, and we will be more than happy to advise you on this.

Having listened to today's 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", a Son who 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.