

16th December 2018  
Fr Chrysostom MacDonnell

Sunday of the Forefathers

On this, the second Sunday before the feast of the Nativity, we commemorate the Forefathers of Christ after the flesh. Next week we shall hear the gospel of the Genealogy according to Matthew, tracing Jesus' own family line. Starting with Abraham, we rehearse the line through the prophet-king, David. Finally, we shall come to Joseph the Betrothed of the Mother of God, whom the liturgical texts call, *The Bride Unwedded*.

Indeed, the children in our Sunday School have been learning about this, creating decorations for a *Jesse Tree*, illustrating the principal ancestors of Christ and hearing their stories from the Old Testament. Jesse of Bethlehem was the father of David. David the king, whose prophetic voice can be heard in the Psalms, gave voice to the longing of Israel for the coming on earth of the Christ, thus fulfilling the promises made to the Forefathers we commemorate today.

Our Lord himself, in the days between His resurrection and ascension, reminded His apostles of the meaning of the Psalms and the Prophets. St Luke's gospel tells us, '*He said to them, "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me."* And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.'

[Lk.24:44-45]

This serves to remind us that none of this is fortuitous; nothing in the mind of God happens by chance. The Almighty, as Einstein said, does not play dice. The pagan mind sees only unending cycles in times and seasons of birth, growth, decay, death, decomposition and rebirth. The scientific mind observes only the interplay of physical laws, of action and reaction; a random tale, in the end, signifying nothing.

But for the Forefathers, to the Hebrew mind, the biblical mind, the mind of Christ, there is a sacred history, a line of events that leads

to its goal. Many times, I have exhorted you to read the Old Testament, but to do so knowing that it finds its fulfilment only in Christ. Only in the coming of Christ can the Law and the prophets make sense, have any purpose and reason in eternity. That is why we have the feasts of the Old Testament saints in the liturgical calendar of the Orthodox Church, including the prophet-king David on the Sunday after Nativity, and today, the holy prophet, Haggai.

The great question for those who lived during Our Lord's days on earth was whether they were aware of this; did they realise that in Jesus the promises made to the Forefathers were being fulfilled before their very eyes. Those promises, that gospel proclaimed to Abraham beforehand, amounted to this: that once Sin and the last enemy, Death, had been defeated, all might now enter the Kingdom of God. As St Paul writes to the Galatians, *'And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed."* [Gal.3:8]

Whether individuals or whole groups, many responded to the gospel preached by Our Lord and His apostles. The tax-collectors and sinners, the outcasts and harlots repented, the poor the maimed, the halt and the lame, the blind and the demoniacs, all found their liberation in Christ; but few among the Pharisees and Sadducees. There are honourable exceptions in Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus. But others found their excuses: the rich young ruler, still bound by his wealth, would not bear his cross. Last week we heard of the ruler of a synagogue, tied by religion to his own interpretation of the Law, unable to rejoice in the healing of the woman bound by Satan for eighteen years. And those at the top in Jerusalem, the temple authorities and leading priests, who feared for the sacred building if they upset the Roman occupiers and found, in the words of St John's gospel, *'That it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish.'* [Jn.11:50] They made their excuses and rejected the Christ and went on to lose the temple anyway in 70AD!

It is in the light of all this that we can understand today's parable in the gospel: the invitation to the feast. Jesus addresses this story,

indeed, aims this parable at His contemporaries who oppose or reject Him. It is as if they were no longer in sympathy with the longings of Israel; were ignorant of or had abandoned their nation's story: that sacred narrative of their God, abandoning it as others had done throughout their history, rejecting the Lord God for the worship of the Baals and Ashteroth of Canaan, abandoning the Law of Moses and suffering invasion upon invasion: Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and Romans.

But that is all in the past now. The New Israel, the house of God has moved on from there and the Church of the Living God, the great assembly of the Orthodox, proclaims the same invitation to the feast in all the world and to each and every soul. And as ever, many will choose their excuses, bound up in the affairs of this world, as they appear in today's parable: the lure of property: *'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it'*; the practicalities of life: *'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them'*; the search for a settled, happy life here and now: *'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.'*

And what then of us, we who prepare now to celebrate the feast of His incarnation? By all means, be ready; deal indeed with the practicalities but do not neglect what it is all for. Paul reminds us in the epistle today that there is not just one coming of Christ. The first was in humility, to deal with Sin and Death, but the second will be in glory for judgement. *'When Christ, Who is our life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.'* [Col.3:4] But we will not be *with Him in glory* unless we take seriously our own story, the call of the gospel; unless we put aside our sloth and the continuous excuses we make for ourselves.

It is nothing less than putting to death what is earthly in us, as St Paul tells us: *'Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these, the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience.'* This is not Paul the puritanical moralist, ranting against the failings of society: this is the blessed apostle reminding us of our true joy, our true vocation, our true home in the heavenly places with Christ.

For the saints of the Old Testament it was longing for the Christ and being ready for the fulfilment of the promises; in the days of the New Testament it was being able to recognise the Christ when He came; for the early Christians it was being ready for martyrdom at the hands of tyrants and mobs; after St Constantine the Great it was the call to witness to the truth of the Orthodox Faith and for many, the life of the desert fathers. None of this has really changed for us who live in these times, where faith has faded, and the love of God has grown cold for many.

The invitation to the kingdom is always open to us. When we gather here for the Liturgy let us, as the hymn says, *lay aside all earthly care*, tasting even now on earth the promises of God that we await, like the Forefathers of old. Whenever we hear the words of the priest at the beginning, chanting, *Blessed is the kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*, let us pray with him that by the Spirit's grace we may enter in to the foretaste of what is yet to come. For the priest is like the servant in today's gospel, sent to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for all is now ready.'