

On the nativity fast - the preparation of the soul

'Make ready, O Bethlehem: let the manger be prepared, let the cave show its welcome. The truth has come, the shadow has passed away...'



The herald of the pending miracle begins. It is the Eve of the Nativity as these words are sung. The transformation of the world, the birth of God, is but hours away, and it is through such words that the faithful are called into attentiveness and anticipation. *'Make ready, O Bethlehem!'* We can see the radiant lights of the feast just beyond the horizon, we can taste the sweetness of the miracle that took place beneath a star; and through the words sung around and within us in the Church, the great eve of the birth of God is made a reality in our present experience. We make ready, and we wait.

But this is not the first moment of preparation for the Feast. For 'forty days', with the usual adjustments to that length for Sabbaths and Sundays causing it to begin on 15 November, the Church has been setting herself in readiness, drawing her attention to the mystery to come, waiting in expectation. She has made use of the great joy that will arrive on Christmas day as occasion to take up the task considered by so many as opposite to joy: fasting, with all its rigour, its harshness, its discomfort. These are the steps which, for Orthodox Christians throughout the world, lead to the radiant wonder of the Nativity of Christ.

Whence the spirit of this fast, which each year 'stands in the way' of our arrival at Christmas rejoicing? The question itself helps guide the way to an answer: the fast seems awkward because so often we see Christmas as joy alone and do not appreciate fully the deep and profound mystery that is at the heart of our rejoicing. 'Hark, the herald angels sing!' we are eager to recall, but quietly we forget the universal significance of the event that is the cause of their singing. It is not just that a babe is born: He who is without birth is born. He who created all is made a created child. He who holds the universe in the palm of His hand, is held in the hands of a tender mother.

Before Thy birth, O Lord, the angelic hosts looked with trembling on this mystery and were struck with wonder: for Thou who hast adorned the vault of heaven with stars hast been well pleased to be born as a babe; and Thou who holdest all the ends of the

earth in the hollow of Thy hand art laid in a manger of dumb beasts. For by such a dispensation has Thy compassion been made known, O Christ, and Thy great mercy: glory to Thee.

(Sticheron of the Third Hour, Eve of the Nativity)

We do not tremble when we think of Christmas, we are not always struck with the wonder of the Nativity. Instead, we buy gifts and plan parties, catching a glimpse of the joy of the Feast, but without a heart immersed in its wonder. Thus the fast becomes that which we must 'get through' in order to reach that joyful day. When we arrive there, however, if this has been our attitude, we are caught askance by the hymns the Church feeds into our hearts. We find ourselves joined to a celebration of triumphal release from bondage, but we little understand what that bondage means. We sing songs of joy for deliverance, but we do not truly comprehend how we are enslaved. We find ourselves suddenly transported to the mountaintop, but without having climbed there from the valley far below, the scene we see is only another beautiful picture casually set before our eyes, and not the vision for which we have worked and struggled and longed with all our being. We may feel joy, perhaps even Christmas joy; but we will know, deep inside, that our joy is not like that which is exalted in the hymn:

Make glad, O ye righteous! Greatly rejoice, O ye heavens! Ye mountains, dance for joy! Christ is born; and like the cherubim the Virgin makes a throne, carrying at her bosom God the Word made flesh. Shepherds, glorify the newborn Child! Magi, offer the Master gifts! Angels, sing praises, saying: 'O Lord past understanding, glory to Thee!'

(First sticheron of the Praises, Nativity Matins)

A Time of Preparation

The Fast of the Nativity is the Church's wise solace and aid to human infirmity. We are a forgetful people, but our forgetfulness is not unknown to God; and our hearts with all their misconceptions and weakened understandings are not unfamiliar to the Holy Spirit who guides and sustains this Church. We who fall far from God through the magnitude of our sin, are called nonetheless to be close to Him. We who run afar off are called to return. Through the fast that precedes the great Feast of the Incarnation -- which itself is the heart and substance of our calling -- the Church helps draw us into the full mystery of what that call entails.

Like Great Lent, the fast of the Nativity is a journey. *'Come, O ye faithful, and let us behold where Christ is born. Let us join the Magi, kings from the east, and follow the guiding star'* . Let us 'join the Magi', let us 'follow' and 'behold'. On the fifteenth of November, the Church joins together in a journey toward that salvation first promised to Adam in God's curse laid upon the serpent (Gen 3.14-15). The One who will crush the head of the serpent, of sin and the devil and all that is counter to the life God offers, is Him to whom the star leads us. The fast of the Nativity is our journey into the new and marvellous life of the Holy Trinity, which is offered by God but which we must approach of our own volition. In this act, we are joined to the story of our fathers. The gift of a new land and great blessings was freely given by God to Abraham, but in order to obtain it, *'Abram went, as the Lord had told him'* (Gen 12.4).

A journey is, by its nature, naturally ascetic. Unless my life is already very humble, I cannot take the whole of my possessions on a journey. I cannot transport social and political ties along a journey's path. I can never be too reliant on the plans I have made for my journey: a control lying beyond the self must be admitted and accepted. This is the spirit to which the fast calls us.

A journey is, by its nature, an act of movement, of transportation, of growth. What is old is left behind, newness is perceived and embraced, growth of understanding takes place. And even if the journey comes to a close in the same physical location from which it began, that place is transformed *for us* by the journey through which we have re-approached it. The aid shelter on a street corner in London is no different after a journey to the Middle East; but after witnessing there first-hand the struggles and torments of poverty, of suffering, of sorrow, the meaning and importance of that small shelter is indeed different *for me*.

Here the importance of the fast. As the Nativity approaches, that great feast of cosmic significance and eternal, abounding joy for which heaven and earth together rejoice, the fast calls me to consider: do *I* rejoice? *Why* do I rejoice? The hymnography of the Church makes it clear that this is a feast for all the world, for all creation; and the fast calls me to take my place in that creation, to realise that, despite all my infinite unworthiness, Christmas is a miracle for my soul too.

Make ready, O Bethlehem: let the manger be prepared, let the cave show its welcome. The truth has come, the shadow has passed away; born of a Virgin, God has appeared to men, formed as we are and making godlike the garment He has put on. Therefore

Adam is renewed with Eve, and they call out: 'Thy good pleasure has appeared on earth to save our kind'.

Adam and Eve, all of humankind, are renewed and made alive in the Incarnation of God in Christ, who 'appeared on earth to save our kind'. Fallen flesh, so long bound to death, so long yearning in for growth and maturation into the fullness of life, is sewn into the garment of Christ and at last made fully alive. There is a pleasing old saying, with perhaps more than a touch of truth to it, that humankind drew its first full breath at the infant Christ's first cry.

We are called, then, to approach this great mystery as God's condescension into our own lives, personally and collectively. The Canon of Matins for the Nativity lays it out clearly: *'He establishes a path for us, whereby we may mount up to heaven'*. The Nativity is not only about God's coming down to us, but about our rising up to Him, just as sinful humanity was lifted up into the person of Christ in the Incarnation itself.

We are called to arise, then, during the fast that is the journey into this Feast. *'O blessed Lord who seest all, raise us up far above sin, and establish Thy singers firm and unshaken upon the foundation of the faith'*. The faithful take up this call through the abandonment of those things which bind, rather than free, in order that a focus on God as 'all in all' might become ever more real and central to daily life.

Meals are lessened and regimented, that a constant, lingering hunger may remind us of the great need we each have for spiritual food that goes beyond our daily bread. The number of Church services is gradually increased, that we might know whence comes that true food. Sweets and drink are set aside, that we might never feel content with the trivial and temporal joys of this world. Parties and social engagements are reduced, that we might realise that all is not so well with us as we often take it to be. Anything which holds the slightest power over us, whether cigarettes or television, travel or recreation, is minimized or -- better -- cast wholly aside, that we might bring ourselves to be possessed and governed only by God.

The fast is an ascetic time, designed by the Church to strip away common stumbling blocks into sin, to provide us with the means of self-perception that we lack in our typical indulgence, and to begin to grow the seeds of virtue. All these are necessary if we are ever to know even partially, or appreciate even menially, the 'depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God'. We must take up the task of our own purification, gifted by God and achieved only through His grace, that we might approach Him on

Christmas Day as did the Magi and the shepherds in Bethlehem:

Come, O ye faithful, inspired by God let us arise and behold the divine condescension from on high that is made manifest to us in Bethlehem. Cleansing our minds, let us offer through our lives virtues instead of myrrh, preparing with faith our entry into the feast of the Nativity, storing up treasure in our souls and crying: Glory in the highest to God in Trinity, whose good pleasure is now revealed to men, that in His love for mankind He may set Adam free from the ancestral curse.

(Sticheron of the Sixth Hour, Christmas Eve)

True Joy in the Mystery of the Nativity

The Church journeys toward the birth of Christ God, steered by the ship that is the Nativity fast. She does so with the knowledge that unless she struggles up the mountain that is desperately too steep for her to climb, she will never know the breadth of the gift that is the mountain's levelling by the hand of God. Resurrection unto life is the ultimate gift of the Incarnation, but unless a man understands that he is dead, he will never know the meaning of resurrection.

The fast is a holy and blessed tool that brings us closer to such self awareness. It reveals to us who we are, perhaps more importantly who we are not, and makes us more consciously aware of that for which we stand in need. Then and only then, with eyes opened -- even only partially -- by the ascetic endeavour, we will truly know the life-giving light of the Nativity of Christ. We will hear with awe the proclamation of the hymn at vespers, taking the mystery presented therein as united directly to us:

Come, let us greatly rejoice in the Lord as we tell of this present mystery. The middle wall of partition has been destroyed; the flaming sword turns back, the cherubim withdraw from the tree of life, and I partake of the delight of Paradise from which I was cast out through disobedience. For the express Image of the Father, the Imprint of His eternity, takes the form of a servant, and without undergoing change He comes forth from a Mother who knew not wedlock. For what He was, He has remained, true God: and what He was not, He has taken upon himself, becoming man through love for mankind. Unto Him let us cry aloud: God born of a Virgin, have mercy upon us!

(Sticheron of Vespers of the Nativity)

We will never fully comprehend this ineffable mystery; some knowledge is properly God's alone. But by His grace through the ascetic effort, we will come to understand --

perhaps, most of us, only to the slightest degree -- how this mystery is our own mystery, how His life is our own life, and how the salvation of Christmas Day is, indeed, our own salvation. And with this realisation, joy: joy far greater than a mere entrance into the temple on Christmas Day could ever bring us. This is the joy of the age-old journey of man, our own journey, come to its fulfilment in the awe-inspiring mystery of God Himself become a man. With this joy in our hearts, we shall embrace the hymnographer's words as our own:

Today the Virgin comes to the cave to give birth ineffably to the pre-eternal Word. Hearing this, be of good cheer, O inhabited earth, and with the angels and the shepherds glorify Him whose will it was to be made manifest a young Child, the pre-eternal God.

(Kontakion of the Forefeast)