

THE ANNUNCIATION THE HUMANITY OF CHRIST

March 25, 2012

GOSPEL: Luke 1:24-38

EPISTLE: Hebrews 2:11-18

Of the Twelve Major Feasts Days of the Orthodox Church, six of them involve the Virgin Mary in some way. These are, in chronological order for her life:

EVENT	FEAST DAY	CALENDAR DATE
Her Nativity	September 8	c. 20 BC
Her Entry into the Temple	November 21	c. 17 BC
The Annunciation	March 25	c. 5 BC
The Nativity of Christ	December 25	c. 4 BC
The Presentation of Christ in the Temple	February 2	c. 4 BC
Her Dormition	August 15	c. 55 AD

In this study, the events of the Gospel lesson will be treated from an historical perspective and discussed chronologically by treating events before and after to give some perspective. Historical documents will be referred to when they can clarify some of the accounts in the Gospel lesson.

Mary's birth was similar to the birth of her cousin John the Baptist. Both their parents were advanced in years, both their mothers were barren and both their parents had prayed for a child for a long time. And in both their cases, the Lord heard their prayers and granted them a child. Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna, had vowed that if the Lord would grant them a child, they would dedicate the child to the Lord's service for life. Thus, after Mary was weaned, Joachim and Anna presented Mary to the Lord in the Temple at the age of three. Their intent was for Mary to serve the Lord in the Temple as did Samuel (1 Samuel 1:22, 28) and Anna (Luke 2:37).

Growing up in the Temple, young Mary earned her keep by doing spinning and weaving of fabrics required for the Temple and for the priests. Along with some other young girls, she became quite skilled at this. In addition, she became known among the people who lived at the Temple as a very humble, but yet very devoted and knowledgeable young girl. Among those she grew up with were the aged Simeon (Luke 2:25-35), the Prophetess Anna (Luke 2:36-38) and the future Apostle Matthias, who was a student of Simeon (Prologue, August 9). Her cousin, Elizabeth, and Elizabeth's husband Zachariah also kept a watchful eye on young Mary after her parents died when she was 10. For more details, see the Feast Days for the Nativity of Mary (September 8) and the Entry of Mary into the Temple (November 21).

Mary is Betrothed to Joseph

When Mary was 13, the Pharisees began to remark that it was not the custom to allow girls that old to remain a virgin in the Temple lest hanky-panky result and the Temple be defiled. Therefore, they said, Mary should be married along with the other virgins (since girls were often married in their mid-teens). The other virgins acquiesced, but Mary reminded the priests that her parents had devoted her to the service of the Lord and that she herself had vowed never to lie with a man. This put the high priest in a difficult situation. He did not wish to dissolve the maiden's vow and disobey the Scriptures: "Make vows to the Lord your God and fulfill them" (Psalms 76:11); and "It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay" (Ecclesiastes 5:4-5). On the other hand, he did not wish to introduce a new custom among the people either.

To resolve this, Zachariah was asked to consult the Lord in the Holy Place wearing the breastpiece of judgment as high priest. When he went into the Holy Place, Zachariah was instructed by an angel to call together all the widowers in Israel and have each one bring his rod (or walking stick). To narrow things down, lots were cast over the 12 tribes of Israel and the lot fell to Judah. Therefore all the widowers of the tribe of Judah were called and asked to come to Jerusalem.

As he was instructed by the angel, Zachariah collected the rods of all the widowers of Judah and placed them in the Holy of Holies overnight. The next day the men returned to receive back their rods: the man whose rod budded with leaves and flowers would be betrothed to Mary. And it was Joseph's rod that budded similarly to Aaron's rod in the wilderness (Numbers 17:1-8).

Joseph, who was already 80 years old, was at first unwilling to take Mary as his wife, saying: "I am an old man and have children. Why do you hand over to me this infant who is younger than my grandsons?" Until he, himself, could ascertain the Will of God, Joseph asked the priests to send five other young virgins with Mary to accompany her. After the betrothal ceremony, Joseph returned to his own city, Bethlehem, to prepare for the marriage while Mary and her five companions left for Joseph's home in Nazareth. At this point, Joseph was considering a betrothal of Mary to one of his unmarried sons.

Before Mary left for Nazareth, Zachariah had another vision in the Temple where the angel Gabriel announced that his prayers had been heard. His wife Elizabeth would conceive in her old age and bear John the Baptist. Zachariah asked for a sign and was made mute for nine months (Luke 1:5-22). Being mute, Zachariah had to be replaced as high priest. His replacement, Samuel, commissioned Mary and her five companions to spin the special thread for embroidering the new veil for the Holy of Holies according to the pattern given to Moses (Exodus 26:31). This they did in Nazareth in Joseph's house.

Meanwhile, Joseph finished his preparation for his marriage to Mary in Bethlehem and returned home to Nazareth. However, he left immediately for many months to build houses abroad along the Sea of Galilee according to his trade as a carpenter. At least one of his sons went with him. Thus Joseph was still out of town when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary with the Annunciation that she would be the mother of God in the flesh (Luke 1:26-38).

With Joseph gone, Mary was left in charge of the household that included Joseph's younger children. James, the youngest at about 8 years old, was still brokenhearted and sad over the loss of his mother a year ago. Mary took young James under her wing and raised him from that time on. In the Scriptures, therefore, Mary was referred to as the "mother of James" (Luke 24:10). Mary had a profound effect on young James and he imitated her life of fasting and prayer the rest of his life. James was later Bishop of Jerusalem and presided at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:13-19). For 30 years after Pentecost, James spent a great deal of his time in the Holy of Holies asking his step brother (Jesus) to spare His people Israel in spite of the stream of atrocities they were committing against the Christians (Acts 7:54-60, 12:1-3, 22:27-31).

Joseph's other sons (see Figure 1, page 629) were older, were married (1 Corinthians 9:5) and had their own households. Joseph, Jr. was later one of the Seventy (Luke 10:1-20), was probably the oldest and was also known as Barsabas or Justus. When two of the Seventy were proposed to take the place of Judas Iscariot and be numbered among the Twelve, Joseph and Matthias were brought forward. The lot then fell to Matthias (Acts 1:16-26). Joseph later was one of the leading men among the Church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:22) and was a prophet (Acts 15:32). He and Silas delivered the decree of the Council of Jerusalem to the Church in Antioch (Acts 15:22-34).

Jude was one of the Twelve Apostles and was the author of the Epistle of Jude in the New Testament. He was also known as Lebbeaus (or Levi) and Thaddaeus (Matthew 10:13, Mark 3:18). Simon (in Hebrew *Simeon*) is listed among the Lord's brothers (Matthew 13:55) but little is known about him. It's possible that there is some confusion between him and the Lord's cousin Simeon, the son of Cleopas (or Alphaeus). The Lord's cousin Simeon was one of the Seventy and was the second Bishop of Jerusalem after James.

Joseph's daughter, Salome, was about Mary's age and still lived at home. She and Mary became very close and Salome was later numbered among the righteous women at the Cross and at the tomb (Matthew 27:56; Mark 15:40, 16:1). Salome later married Zebedee and bore two of the Twelve Apostles: James and John. Little is known about Joseph's other two daughters, except that they were probably older than Salome.

Thus the household in Nazareth consisted of Mary and her five virgin companions, James, Salome plus extended family living nearby. Mary, at this time, was about 14 years old, although manuscripts vary between 14 and 16 in describing her age.

The Annunciation

With Joseph gone and working along the shore of the Sea of Galilee building houses, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary. Gabriel had appeared to Zachariah about six months earlier announcing the conception of John the Baptist and Zachariah was still mute from that encounter (Luke 1:19-23). Zachariah was now home in the hill country of Judah with Elizabeth, who was in her sixth month (Luke 1:36-39).

As Mary went out of Joseph's house to draw water from a well, Gabriel spoke: "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women" (Luke 1:28). Mary didn't see where the voice came from. Trembling, she picked up the water pot, went into the house and sat down to continue spinning the purple thread that she had been working on. The angel then came into the house (Luke 1:28) and repeated the greeting.

The word translated "highly favored" (v.28) and "favor" (v.30) are both forms of the Greek word *charis* which is translated everywhere else as "grace". But what was it about Mary that led Gabriel to call her "highly graced" (v.28) and to say that she had "found grace with God" (v.30)? This is not a small thing! The angel Gabriel did not say that to Zachariah six months earlier when he announced the conception of John the Baptist (Luke 1:11-20).

It is useful to compare the visitation of Gabriel to Zachariah with his visit to Mary. Appearing to Zachariah he identified himself: "I am Gabriel who stands in the presence of God..." (Luke 1:19). He didn't say that to Mary. The implication is that Mary knew who he was from her previous life before God in the Temple. And the implication is that Mary's life before God was so special that she found such grace in the eyes of God.

But yet, Mary was troubled at what Gabriel said, and wondered what manner of greeting this was. Not only had Gabriel called her "highly graced", but also "blessed among women" (Luke 1:29). Mary was such a genuinely humble person that this just didn't compute.

When Gabriel announced that Mary would conceive and bear a son, the long awaited Messiah, Mary was also troubled because this would void her vow of chastity. So she said, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" (Luke 1:34). When Joseph returned home and when they were married, Mary could have conceived by Joseph. But her statement here implies she had no intention in this direction; she intended to remain a virgin. She was holding steadfast to her vow to the Lord even in the face of an angelic announcement! She was a very determined young lady!

Gabriel then explained that, yes, she would conceive, but that no, her vow would not be dissolved: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the Power of the Highest (i.e. God the Father) will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

From Gabriel's words, the entire Trinity was involved in the Incarnation. And the importance of the Incarnation is difficult to overstate. Without Christ's death on the Cross, we are still dead in our sins (Colossians 2:13-14, Ephesians 2:1-9). Yet if He is not really God, He cannot keep the Law perfectly and thus cannot be the lamb without blemish (Hebrews 9:14). If

He is not really man, He cannot die in our place (Hebrews 2:17-18). Thus the baby conceived in the womb of the Virgin was both God and man. He was without father in His humanity and without mother in His Deity.

There are many other effects of the Incarnation that, again, are difficult to overstate. For example, in the Incarnation divinity is united to material creation in the Son of God; and this has an enormous effect on the healing and restoration of creation that is beyond the scope of this work.

After mentioning Elizabeth's pregnancy in her old age (Luke 1:36), Gabriel concluded with: "For with God, nothing will be impossible" (Luke 1:37). Mary did not ask for a sign, she simply believed the angel and replied: "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

Mary's response indicates her depth of humility. The word, "maidservant" is the feminine form of the Greek word *doulos* meaning slave. Slaves had some rights under Hebrew Law, but they were the lowest class in society. In this regard, Mary is a model of humility for us today. An archangel has just appeared to her giving her accolades unprecedented in human history and she still thinks of herself as a slave!!

Mary Visits Elizabeth

In the Orthodox lectionary, the account of Mary's visit to Elizabeth is read during Matins on the Feast of the Annunciation. This occurred shortly after Gabriel's announcement, and Mary went there with her five virgin companions, first going to Jerusalem to submit the purple and other color thread to the high priest for the veil. The high priest was moved by the Grace of God and blessed Mary saying: "The Lord has magnified your name and you shall be blessed in all the generations of the earth."

Proceeding from Jerusalem they headed for Zachariah and Elizabeth's house, about five miles West of Jerusalem in the hill country of Judea (Luke 1:39). There Mary was greeted by Elizabeth in a most extraordinary manner.

To help with the understanding of Elizabeth's greeting and the significance of the Annunciation -- which is the Incarnation -- certain Scripture readings are chosen. The Epistle reading is Hebrews 2:11-18 which addresses Jesus' humanity. He could not die for mankind if He were not truly a man. For a discussion of the details of the Epistle lesson, see that section of this study. On the other hand, one of the Old Testament readings for Vespers of the eve of the Annunciation is Proverbs 8:22-30 which addresses Jesus' divinity as the Eternal Son.

Another of the readings for Vespers is Exodus 3:1-8 which is the account of Moses' encounter with the burning bush, where the bush burned with fire but was not consumed. Moses said, "I must turn aside now and see this marvelous sight, why the bush is not burned up" (Exodus 3:3). The reason this passage is read for the Annunciation is to give us an understanding of just Who it is that was conceived in Mary's womb. It is the same God that appeared to Moses at the burning bush; and just as it was miraculous that the bush burned but

was not consumed, so it is miraculous that Mary could contain the Uncontainable and not be consumed. (Compare Hebrews 12:29, Exodus 24:17, Deuteronomy 9:3)

At Mary's visit to Elizabeth, Elizabeth was in the sixth month of her pregnancy with John the Baptist (Luke 1:36) and Mary had just begun her first month of pregnancy with Jesus. Elizabeth was in her 70's, while Mary was about 15. Yet, from Figure 1, Mary and Elizabeth were first cousins and Elizabeth knew Mary quite well from Mary's growing-up in the Temple. Elizabeth also remembered how Mary was born 15 years ago to aged parents -- and now Elizabeth herself is about to experience that same type of event.

As Mary entered the house of Zachariah and Elizabeth and greeted Elizabeth, the infant (or fetus!) John leaped in Elizabeth's womb (Luke 1:41, 44). John had been filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb (Luke 1:15) and would be spoken of by Jesus (the fetus now in Mary's womb!) as the greatest of the Prophets (Matthew 11:7-14). Thus John prophesied while still in His mother's womb.

Elizabeth was also filled with the Holy Spirit and responded to Mary with the same words used by the angel Gabriel: "Blessed are you among women" (Luke 1:28, 42). Elizabeth knew that Mary was still a virgin and this fact was not lost on Mary's five companions either, as we'll see later. Even though Mary is just in the first week or two of her pregnancy, Elizabeth called her "the mother of my Lord" (Luke 1:43). Thus Elizabeth, from the illumination of the Holy Spirit, recognized that the infant (fetus!) in her womb was God, the Second Person of the Trinity. Thus by the Holy Spirit, the mother of the prophet greeted the mother of the Lord, and both prophesied. As a side note, it is not inappropriate for us in the 20th Century to address Mary in the same manner as did the Archangel Gabriel and the Spirit-filled Elizabeth.

But one should also note Elizabeth's humility. She said, "But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to Me?" (Luke 1:43). Older women were treated with respect by teenagers. But Elizabeth, by the Holy Spirit, recognized Mary as special because of Who she carried in her womb. And Elizabeth was very honored that her Lord had come to her.

The things Elizabeth said go beyond human understanding. Mary was barely into her first month; how could Elizabeth know she was even pregnant, never mind pregnant with the Son of God? She then went on to say (Luke 1:45) that Mary was blessed because she believed the things that were told her from the Lord; that is at the Annunciation.

Mary responded to Elizabeth with what has come to be called the Magnificat. [*Magnificat* is the first word in the Latin translation of Mary's response.] The prophecy contained in the Magnificat is remarkable, coming from a 15 year old girl. In a way, it foreshadows Mary's Son as a 12 year old boy when He astonished the teachers in the Temple with His understanding (Luke 2:46-47).

Beside prophesying that she would be called blessed by all generations from then on (Luke 1:48), Mary also spoke of:

scattering the proud

bringing down rulers
exalting the humble
filling the hungry with good things
sending the rich away empty-handed.

Some have said that the proud, the rulers and the rich were the scribes and Pharisees, or the Greek sages while the humble and hungry were the Gentiles who were afar off (Ephesians 2:11-18). The bringing in of the Gentiles was a mystery that was hidden from the ages and that was now beginning to unfold (Ephesians 3:3-12), Romans 11:25-29, 16:25-26, Colossians 1:26-27).

Mary and her five companions stayed with Elizabeth for three months and returned to Joseph's house just prior to the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:56). Just as Elizabeth had hidden herself and stayed out of the public eye (Luke 1:24) when she became pregnant, so Mary did from the third month on. Thus no one but Elizabeth and Zachariah knew of her pregnancy.

Joseph Returns Home

After Mary had completed her sixth month - and was now very obviously pregnant - Joseph returned home with the intention of marrying the virgin who was betrothed to him. Seeing Mary, Joseph was stunned and wanted to die. Trembling, he is recorded as saying, "With what face can I look up to the Lord my God? What shall I say concerning this young woman? For I received her a virgin out of the Temple of the Lord my God, and have not preserved her in purity! Who has thus deceived me? Who has committed this evil in my house? Who has seduced her from me and defiled her?"

Joseph then confronted Mary, "O you who have been so favored by God, why have you done this? Why have you debased your soul, O you who were educated and reared in the Holy of Holies and received food from the hands of angels?"

Mary replied with a flood of tears, "I am innocent and have known no man." Joseph said, "How then are you with child?" Mary answered only, "As the Lord my God lives, I do not know by what means."

Mary's five companions then spoke to Joseph and testified that she was a virgin and untouched. She had always continued with them in prayer, and daily the angels of God had spoken with her and daily she received food from their hand. They didn't know how it would be possible for her to have sinned and they suspected that the Holy Spirit had caused her to conceive. Joseph was very suspicious at this and suspected that someone pretended to be an angel of the Lord and seduced Mary. Weeping, Joseph went away feeling as if he had betrayed the trust placed in him by the priests.

Joseph was very perplexed as to what to do. According to the Mosaic Law, if a betrothed virgin willingly had sex with someone, both she and her lover were to be stoned (Deuteronomy 22:23-24). On the other hand, if Mary and her five companions were right, he didn't want to betray the life of an innocent person. Thus "Joseph, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away (i.e. divorce her) secretly (Matthew 1:19).

“But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she shall bear a Son; and you shall call His Name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:20-21).

To Joseph, this cleared up a lot of misgivings he had. He had been reluctant to accept young Mary as his wife but had done so in obedience to the high priest who received instructions in the Temple to do so. But now recognizing that Mary was pregnant with the long-awaited Messiah, Joseph can understand. From the angel’s words “you shall call His Name Jesus”, implies that the angel expected Joseph to fill the role of Jesus’ legal father. The genealogies in Matthew 1 and Luke 3 both reflect this, where Jesus’ genealogy is traced back through Joseph, His legal father. Since Joseph and Mary were cousins having the same grandfather, Matthan, Matthew’s Gospel effectively traces Mary’s genealogy while Luke traces Joseph’s genealogy through his legal father, Eli. “Then Joseph arose from his sleep, and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took her as his wife” (Matthew 1:24).

Joseph is also recorded as giving thanks to God for giving him this grace (i.e. being the legal father of the Messiah). He then spoke to Mary and her companions and told them the vision. Comforting Mary, he said to her, “I have sinned, in that I suspected you at all.” And he kept her in chastity and continued to take care of her during her pregnancy (Matthew 1:25).

A day or two later, Joseph was visited by one of the scribes from Jerusalem, who noticed that Mary was pregnant. The Scribe reported this to the priests in Jerusalem, saying, “Joseph has defiled the virgin whom he received out of the Temple of the Lord and has not revealed it to the sons of Israel.” Both Joseph and Mary were then seized by the officers of the Temple and brought before the tribunal. Under intense interrogation, both Joseph and Mary denied any wrongdoing: Mary that she had not known a man and never intended to; Joseph that he had not defiled her.

The priests then had both Joseph and Mary drink the water of conviction (also called the water of bitterness) that was to be used to discern extra-marital affairs (Numbers 5:11-31). This water was holy water mixed with dust from the floor of the Temple (Numbers 5:17). This water caused the accused’s stomach to swell and their flesh to rot if they were guilty; it would have no effect on the innocent. When Joseph and Mary returned unharmed with no swelling or rotting after the appointed time of isolation, the priest said, “If the Lord God did not disclose your sin, neither will I judge you.” Joseph and Mary then returned home glorifying God. With this encounter, the Virgin Birth was proclaimed in the Temple for the first time.

PARABLES OF THE FEAST OF THE ANNUNCIATION

Three other Old Testament readings are prescribed for the Vespers preceding the Feast of the Annunciation. These are called “parables” in that they address allegorically what is taking place with the Word becoming Incarnate.

Jacob’s Ladder - Genesis 28:10-17: In this account, Jacob was enroute to Mesopotamia, where Abraham had come from, to seek a wife from among his kinsmen. One night, he had a dream of a ladder that was set on the earth but whose top reached to heaven. And the angels of God were ascending and descending on the ladder. When Jacob awoke, he cried, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the House of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (Genesis 28:17).

Many of the Church Fathers spoke of how this prefigured God Incarnate in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Just as the ladder connected heaven and earth, so did the Virgin Mary: The King of Heaven took on flesh (His creation) in Mary’s womb and lived there for nine months. And just as Jacob saw angels ascending and descending on the ladder, so there was a strong angelic presence around the Lord everywhere He went. Even Satan recognized this in quoting from the Psalms, “He shall give His angels charge over You; to guard You in all Your ways. In their hands they shall bear You up lest You dash Your foot against a stone” (Psalms 91:11-12). Following this encounter with Satan, angels came and ministered to Jesus (Matthew 4:11).

Around the Throne of God in heaven, angels continually surround the Lord (Revelation 4). The Tabernacle in the wilderness pictured this: Cherubim were embroidered into the veil (Exodus 26:31, 36:35, 2 Chronicles 3:14) and the Presence of God dwelt between two cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:18-22, 37:6-9, 2 Chronicles 10-13). Just because the Lord took up residence on earth in the womb of the Virgin doesn’t mean the angels disappeared. For nine months, the House of God was the womb of the Virgin; and because heaven and earth met there, this can rightly be called the gate of heaven.

Wisdom Built Her House - Proverbs 9:1-11: This reading speaks of Wisdom building her house (v.1) and how the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (v.10). This again was a mystery and it wasn’t until after the Resurrection that it was revealed how extensive the house was that Wisdom built.

For example, Paul wrote that he was privileged to help to “make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ. Now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the Church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 3:9,10). Paul also said, “But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew. For had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory” (1 Corinthians 2:7,8). This Wisdom of God involved the Cross, and it became a stumbling block for Jews and foolishness for Greeks. For those who were called, however, the Wisdom of God was also the Power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18-24). All this began to unfold with the Incarnation at the Annunciation.

The East Gate - Ezekiel 43:27-44:4: The third parable of the Feast of the Annunciation is a

little more obtuse than the others. Ezekiel's vision took place during the Babylonian captivity (Ezekiel 40:1). Ezekiel saw a vision of some future Temple and he described this Temple at length. This Temple was to be "the place of My Throne and the place of the soles of My feet where I will dwell among the sons of Israel forever" (Ezekiel 43:7). From comparisons with the dimensions of Solomon's Temple (1 Kings 6, 2 Chronicles 3), and Zerubbabel's Temple (Ezra 6:3), the description of Ezekiel's Temple represents a building that has never been built. Herod's remodeling of the Temple (c. 20 BC) was greatly influenced by the description of Ezekiel's Temple, however (see Unger, Bible Dictionary, pg. 1080).

The parable only addresses the East Gate of the Temple, which in Herod's Temple was the only gate to the Temple area. In Ezekiel's vision, the Glory of the Lord came into the house by the East Gate (Ezekiel 43:4). Ezekiel was told, "This gate shall be shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it, for the Lord God of Israel has entered by it; therefore it shall be shut" (Ezekiel 44:2).

Many of the Church Fathers spoke of this East Gate as prefiguring the Incarnation, where the East Gate represented the womb of the Virgin Mary. And as the East Gate was shut in Ezekiel's vision, so the Virgin Mary remained a virgin her entire life according to her vow and the vow of her parents.

THE HUMANITY OF CHRIST

March 25, 2012

EPISTLE LESSON: Hebrews 2:10-18

Today's Epistle lesson is used in the Orthodox lectionary both for the Annunciation and for the Feast Day of the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem, who were murdered by King Herod as he searched for the infant Christ. In the West, this Epistle lesson is used just at Christmas.

The Father in Christ

This Epistle lesson is also used for Sixth Hour Prayers on Good Friday, which revolves around Christ on the Cross, between two criminals. The Epistle lesson begins, "For it was fitting for Him, for Whom are all things and by Whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the Captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings" (v. 10). The one "for Whom are all things" is the Father and "the Captain of our salvation" is His Son. The suffering referred to is the Son's humanity, since He can't suffer in His Deity.

John Chrysostom (4th Century) said of this: "He (the Father) has done what is worthy of His love toward mankind, in showing His Firstborn to be more glorious than all and in setting Him forth as an example to the others, like some noble wrestler that surpasses the rest. Do you see that to suffer affliction is not the portion of those who are utterly forsaken? And truly His taking flesh to suffer what He did suffer, is a far greater thing than making the world and bringing it out of things that are not. This (i.e. the Creation) indeed also is a token of His loving kindness, but the other far more. And the Apostle himself also pointing out this very thing, said: "That in the ages to come He might show forth the exceeding riches of His Grace, He both raised us up together and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:6, 7). The suffering for any one not merely profits 'him', but he himself also becomes more glorious and perfect. And this too he says in reference to the faithful, comforting them by the way: for Christ was glorified when He suffered. But do not suppose that there was an accession of glory to Him; for that which is of nature (i.e. His Deity) He always had, and received nothing in addition" (Homily IV on Hebrews 2).

The Epistle continues by stating that, "He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying: 'I will declare Your Name to My brethren; in the midst of the assembly, I will sing praise to You' (Psalm 22:22)

And again:

'I will put My trust in Him' (Isaiah 8:17)

And again:

'Here am I and the children whom God has given Me' " (Isaiah 8:18)

The context from Psalm 22 quoted above was a prophecy of Christ dying on the Cross: "For dogs have surrounded Me; a band of evildoers has encompassed Me. They pierced My hands and My feet. I can count all My bones. They look, they stare at Me; they divide My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots" (Psalm 22:16-18, Matthew 27:35).

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The second quote from Isaiah 8 is taken verbatim from the Septuagint and was a prophecy regarding the nation of Israel being led into captivity by Assyria (Isaiah 8:7). The section quoted by Hebrews, however, was addressed to the Lord's disciples living in apostate Israel. The complete text from Isaiah is, "Behold I and the children which God has given me: and they shall be for signs and wonders in the house of Israel from the Lord of hosts, who dwells in Mount Zion" (Isaiah 8:18 LXX).

While the text from Isaiah appears to be addressing Isaiah as a "father" to these disciples, Hebrews quotes this as referring to Christ as a father figure to these disciples. Thus Christ appears both as a brother (Hebrews 2:11, 12) and as a father. In this father-like role, we note His response to Philip. Philip had requested, "Lord show us the Father and it is sufficient for us" (John 14:8). Jesus responded, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority but the Father who dwells in Me does the works" (John 14:9-10).

Humanity Conquers Death

There were some heretics in the First Century who claimed that Christ came in appearance only and not in the flesh, not in reality. They were understandably impressed with the Deity of Christ and assumed He wouldn't stoop to take on the suffering and filth of His Own Creation. Paul addresses this in v. 14: "Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death; that is the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (vv. 14-15). Chrysostom stated that Christ "partaking of flesh and blood" refers to the Incarnation (Ibid.)

Chrysostom continues, "Here he points out the wonder, that by what the devil prevailed at, by that was he overcome; and the very thing which was his strong weapon against the world (namely death), by this Christ smote him. In this He exhibits the greatness of the conqueror's power. Do you see how great a good death has wrought?"

"Why do you fear him that has been brought to nought? He is no longer terrible, but has been trodden under foot, has been utterly despised (see 2 Timothy 1:10); he is vile and of no account."

Chrysostom then made an analogy: Life prior to Christ he compared to being held captive in prison awaiting execution, but being fed with choice food all the while. But now, the choice food and the death sentence have been removed and in its place is a contest involving combat that leads not to death but to a kingdom. "Of which group would you wish to be in: Those fed well in prison awaiting execution, or those who contend much and labor willingly that they may crown themselves with the diadem of the kingdom? Not only has death been terminated, but he who is ever showing that war without truce against us (i.e. the devil) has been brought to nothing, since he that doesn't fear death is out of reach of the devil's tyranny" (Ibid.)

Man and Angels in the Age to Come

After going into a lot of reasons why we should not neglect so great a salvation, Paul then goes into some reasons why we should be motivated to pay close attention. “For He has not put the world to come, of which we speak, in subjection to angels” (v.5).

Following this statement, he again quotes word for word from the Septuagint:

“What is man that You are mindful of him, or the Son of Man that You take care of him? You have made Him a little lower than the angels; you have crowned Him with glory and honor, and set Him over the works of Your hands. You have put all things in subjection under His feet” (Psalm 8:4-6).

From the context of Psalm 8, this would seem to be speaking of men in general. For example, Psalm 8:7 lists some of the “all things in subjection”: sheep, oxen, birds and fish. Yet Paul uses this quote from Psalm 8 to refer to Christ. He calls the man Jesus Christ the Captain of our salvation, Who is in the process of bringing many sons to glory (Hebrews 2:10).

So then, Psalm 8 **does** refer to men in general, but specifically those men who are related by the second birth to their Older Brother. He is the Firstborn of many brethren (Romans 8:29) and He is not ashamed to call us His brothers (Hebrews 2:11).

Paul then brought in a little reality check: “But now we do not yet see all things put under Him” (v.8). Instead we see Christ, made (in His flesh) a little lower than the angels and suffering death that He might taste death for everyone. As a result He was crowned with glory and honor in His humanity (v.9) and sits at the Right Hand of God (Hebrews 10:12, Mark 14:62, Luke 22:69). When He returns, God the Father will put all things in subjection under Him and leave nothing that is not put under Him (v.8). It was the Father’s plan that all things are for Christ and all things are by Christ (v.10). And as He has been exalted and glorified, so shall we be when He returns. Thus, just as Christ was made a little lower than the angels in His humanity, so we are now. But by being united with Him in the Body of Christ, just as He was exalted to His previous glory (prior to the Incarnation), so shall we be as He “brings many sons to glory”.

This does not necessarily imply that we will rule angels as He does. The Lord said that, in the Resurrection, we will be equal to angels (Luke 20:36). We will judge angels, i.e. those that had fallen (1 Corinthians 6:3), as the Twelve will judge the Twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28). But the angels refer to themselves as our fellow servants (Revelation 19:10, 22:9), and they are referred to as “sons of God” also (compare Genesis 6:2, 4; Job 1:6, 2:1, 38:7; Luke 20:36; Romans 8:14). “Equal to angels” however, does not imply being identical to angels, since they are non-physical beings.

Paul mentioned that again in Hebrews 2:16: “For indeed, He does not latch onto (or grasp) angels, but He does latch onto (or grasp) the seed of Abraham”. Chrysostom stated, “He did not take on an angel’s nature, but a man’s. He did not grasp that nature which belongs to

angels, but ours. This expression "grasp", or "latch onto" (Greek *epilambano*) is derived from the figure of persons pursuing those who turn away from them, and doing everything to overtake them as they flee, and to take hold of them as they are bounding away. For when human nature was fleeing from Him, and fleeing far away (Ephesians 2:13), He pursued after and overtook us. For it is a great and wonderful thing, and full of amazement, that our flesh should sit on high and be adored by angels and archangels, by Cherubim and Seraphim. For God has great zeal on behalf of our nature."

"Moreover, he said not simply 'of men He latches onto' but of the 'seed of Abraham' (v.16) thus showing that their race is great and honorable. Therefore in all things, he had to be made like His brethren' (v.17). This goes both ways also. Just as He was made like us in the Incarnation, so we will be made like Him in the Resurrection. He did not lose His deity in taking on humanity; just so, we will not lose our humanity when we take on immortality. But "the righteous will shine forth like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father (Matthew 13:43, Daniel 12:3). Moses and Elijah have already tasted of this in the Transfiguration; we will join them at the Resurrection. This is a great salvation that is foolish to neglect by drifting away. Instead, it is something worth paying attention to every minute of every day. As Chrysostom said, "If He who is worshipped by angels, for our sake endured to have a little less than the angels, much more ought we, who are inferior to angels, to bear everything for His sake" (Homily iv on Hebrews 2).

FIGURE I