

Nativity of the Theotokos – September 20, 2015

Today, in addition to our weekly celebration of Christ's ministry, His life, His teachings, His death and resurrection, we are also celebrating the birth of Mary – whom the Church has traditionally called Theotokos – the birth-giver or Mother of God. This title, Theotokos, is often misunderstood. Mary is certainly not the Mother of God in the sense of God's eternal, uncreated being. She is, however, the human Mother of God incarnate, Jesus Christ, and as such holds a special place in the history of man's salvation and in the hearts of all Christian people.

The early Christians found in the Hebrew Scriptures a rich source of typographical images relating to Mary's role in God's great plan; the burning bush, the uncut mountain, Jacobs Ladder and the East Gate of the Temple "that no man shall pass through because the Lord will enter by it". The hymns of her feast day thus refer to her as "a stairway, reaching from earth to heaven, a house of God, the gate that opens into heaven, the dwelling of the wisdom of God" and other similar praises.

The Old Testament readings during Vespers emphasize these images. In Genesis we read Jacobs dream, of a ladder that provides the way for heaven and earth to be joined. In Ezekiel we hear of the prophet's vision of a New Jerusalem and especially about the "East Gate" which is for the Lord. The reading from Proverbs tells how "wisdom has built her house" and that to be wise we "must first have reverence for the Lord.

What is this reverence for the Lord? Mary shows us so beautifully what this really means in the Scripture at Matins when she tells Elizabeth "my soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour". In the beautiful and very theological icon of the spiritual great-great-grandfathers of our Parish, Sts Sergius and Herman of Valaam we also see the Saints standing side by side holding an icon of the Theotokos. Above them in the sky is suspended another icon – that of the Transfiguration. The message is clear: Mary is a model for us of the spiritually pure heart, the soul that shall "see God" as the Beatitudes also tell us. Not only did she see God but recognized Him and loved Him as well. Because

the pure heart is not an empty heart but a heart that is full of reverence, finding and rejoicing in God.

Sadly, not every soul magnifies the Lord. Most people seem to be more interested in magnifying themselves. The King in Jesus' parable of the wicked husbandmen sends his son to collect the rent thinking – they will reverence my son, but they don't. The demons recognize Christ but they don't love Him. Most of the people in Jesus' own time didn't pay much attention to Him at all.

Do our souls magnify the Lord? Do our spirits rejoice in God our Saviour? Yes, yes they do! That is exactly what we came to Church this morning to do. Bravo, every visit is a victory. At almost every Matins Service – the morning prayer of the Church – we sing the Magnificat of Mary and pray that our souls will also magnify the Lord. This is a prayer that God will always grant in the affirmative.

I was especially blessed, my soul delighted by the reading from Proverbs for Vespers. Since we were unable to have Vespers last evening I thought it might be good and a blessing from the Theotokos to share it with you this morning. The text is from Proverbs 9 verses 1-11 where wisdom, represented as a woman is speaking. "Wisdom has built her house and made seven columns. She has had an animal killed for a feast, mixed spices in the wine and set the table. She has sent her servant girls to call from the highest place in town "come in, ignorant people" and to the foolish man she says "come, eat my food and drink the wine I have mixed. Leave the company of ignorant people and live. Follow the way of knowledge.

If you correct a conceited man, you will only be insulted. If you reprimand an evil man you will only get hurt. Never correct a conceited man; he will hate you for it. But if you correct a wise man, he will respect you. Anything that you say to a wise man will make him wiser. Whatever you tell a righteous man will add to his knowledge.

To be wise you must first reverence the Lord. If you know the Holy One, you have understanding. Wisdom will add years to your life."

Interestingly this passage is read not only for feasts of the Virgin Mary but also for the Consecration of Churches. The house built by wisdom is first the Theotokos herself for Christ is conceived in her womb. Secondly, the house is the Church. The seven pillars are the Holy Spirit, the seven spirits of God (from the Book of Revelations), the seven graces of the Holy Spirit that rested upon Christ summarized in Isaiah, wisdom, counsel, understanding, might, knowledge, godliness and the fear of God. The sacrificial animal and the wine are types of Christ and the Eucharist. The Church sends its members (that's us), to invite people to Christ and His Eucharist. Those who accept His invitation and forsake their vices or sinful passions will find life.

A prefiguring of Christ's famous words about not offering pearls before swine is also included here. Mary is also a model of such wise reticence and the Proverb also prefigures the mixed reception by the world of her offering of the living word, Jesus Christ Himself.

Mary's birth according to God's plan is thus seen as a preparatory sign of the Good News of Christ, a sign of God preparing for us the wedding feast of His Kingdom rich in grace, love, truth, wisdom and countless blessings. The dismissal hymn of this feast day celebrates the central event of salvation, as follows – for Mary always, as in her icons, holds forth to the world Jesus Christ –

O Theotokos, your birth heralded joy to all the world
From you rose the sun of righteousness, Christ our God
He destroyed the curse against us, and poured out grace
He abolished death and granted us eternal life

The feast of the Nativity of the Theotokos is also the first great feast of our Orthodox Liturgical year. Besides the great feast of Pascha/Easter we celebrate 12 great spiritual banquets of the Kingdom of God in addition to the weekly Sunday celebrations. Thus the Church nourishes the faithful throughout the seasons.
Happy New Year!

Today is the day of the Lord.

O peoples rejoice in it! Behold,
the bridal chamber of the Light is born.
The living Bible of the word of life,
come from a womb; the great gate of the
East is established awaiting the coming of Christ,
the High Priest.

Today God who rests on spiritual thrones
prepares for himself an earthly throne.
He who made the heavens with wisdom
fashions a living heaven with His love.

Lord, you who are the God
of wondrous deeds
and the hope of things beyond hope.

Glory to thee.

Amen