

Sunday after the Nativity 1/11/2015

31<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Holy Innocents

Christ is Born! For Orthodox Christians now is the Christmas Season which continues for 12 days from the Feast of Nativity until Holy Theophany. This season is a continual feast of light and joy. For example, the second day of Christmas in the Orthodox Church is dedicated to the honoring of the Virgin Mary through whom the Saviour has come to us. All of humanity is forever indebted to Mary, who, by her assent made possible His coming.

The next three days of the post feast also have a very special significance. On the third day is commemorated the martyrdom of St. Stephen, the Protomartyr. The fourth day commemorates the 20,000 martyrs of Nicomedia and the fifth day the Holy Innocents, the 14,000 children of Judea slain by Herod the king in his effort to destroy Jesus. In the middle of our joyful celebration of light the Church compels us to come face to face with a terrible darkness. Many would prefer to ignore these commemorations. Many think of Christmas as something sweet and sentimental but these grim events, particularly the story of the murdered children in the Gospel narrative, remind us that the incarnation of Christ is far from being an appropriate subject for mere sentimentality.

As the hymns of these Festivals, (yes Festivals), declare, the persecution and death of innocent people, men, women and children is an inevitable result of the coming of Christ. Consider these verses, for example, from Vespers for St. Stephen; To the King and Lord of all who is born on earth, the most beautiful Stephen is offered today adorned in the crimson of his own blood as with precious gems. Come, O lovers of the martyrs weave the flowers of song into a crown honoring the Protomartyr of Christ our God for his spirit is radiant with wisdom and love, through His prayers we receive peace and great mercy.

And the kontakion for St. Stephen; Yesterday the Master assumed our flesh and became our guest, today His servant is stoned to death and departs in the flesh – the glorious Protomartyr Stephen.

Also let us hear this kontakion for the Holy Martyrs of Nicomedia; the throng of twenty thousand martyrs appears as a star in the Church, for these noble men, women and children were inflamed with Divine Love for their Master and in the fire completed the course of their lives in holiness and joy.

Lastly, let us hear again what was sung last night at Vespers; When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judah, the scepter of the house of Judah passed away. Infants who leaped in play were slaughtered for Christ – a voice was heard in Ramah, the lamentation of Judah's daughters, Rachel weeping for her sons, as it is written. For the lawless Herod murdered the infants – the land of Judah was soaked with innocent blood – the earth was reddened with the blood of babies- but the Church of the Gentiles is washed by this blood, clothed in radiant purity. She cries in joy the truth has come, God is made manifest. He is born of a virgin enlightening those who sit in darkness for the salvation of the world.

What is going on here? How are we to receive these apparently contradictory events, one joyous, the others horrible. How are we to keep festival in the face of such innocent suffering, not only of the martyrs themselves but of their families, loved ones and friends as well. To answer such a question we must go much deeper than mere sentiment will ever take us.

In our festal joy we are thus reminded of the reason for Christ's incarnation – the evil that so pervasively infects human beings and causes the cruel suffering that is unique to mankind – man's inhumanity to man. The record of history is a convicting commentary on the dark side of human nature. Most painful for us to think upon is the suffering and killing of innocent children by Herod the king. Here in stark terms is made visible the problem of innocent suffering. This problem is also the main theme of the Old Testament book of Job.

We know that in every age, including our own, innocent suffering scars the lives of so many people – who among us can avoid it? Children are physically and emotionally abused by unstable parents and guardians. The elderly are often mistreated by insensitive, selfish children, relatives or care givers. People suffer innocently because of crime, war, terrorism or other circumstances completely beyond their control.

We are also reminded that it is quite obviously not Christ's intention to put a stop to these evils by some kind of physical force. Despite Herod's fear that the new born King has come to overthrow his dynasty politically, that is clearly not Christ's intention. At the very end of His earthly life we hear Christ affirm this before Pilate when He tells him "My kingdom is not from here". What he tells Pilate after this is of utmost importance to our discussion this morning. He says "You say rightly that I am King. For this cause I was born and for this cause I have come into the world that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice". Here Jesus tells every generation why He is born that night in Bethlehem.

That witness is His own innocent suffering and His own cruel death by which He demonstrates His complete identification with suffering humanity – God is with us. He even shares our very understandable desire to avoid and escape suffering in the world. In the garden He prays that "This cup might pass". Yet, like for so many of us, the cup does not pass. It did not pass for St. Stephen who in his last moments emulated the last words of Christ on the cross saying "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing". The cup did not pass from the martyrs of Nicomedia. When the soldiers surrounded their church on Christmas Eve and told them to come out and offer incense to Caesar or be burned alive, the catechumens raced to be baptized and chrismated so that they might die in communion with Christ and each other.

Christianity does not promise an escape from the cruelties and sufferings of this fallen world. It does not offer a satisfying philosophical explanation of suffering. Instead it presents us with a great mystery – the joy of the Martyrs. Like Christ, the martyrs have not so much changed the world as they have overcome the world. They have heard His Voice calling to them "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world". (Jn 16:32) And they, in Christ, have also overcome the world. The martyrs are the friends of Christ "This is My commandment", says Jesus in (John 15), "that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you". In their innocent sufferings, according to

the daring words of St Paul, they “complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of His body, that is the Church”. (Col 1)

What then of us brothers and sisters? Cannot we, who have no real experience of deadly persecution, still contribute to the building up of Christ’s Kingdom in the world (which is the Church)? Yes we can. We too can die daily to the temptations and terrors of this world when we refuse to worship at the altars of the many modern idolatries that surround us; idolatries of money, physical beauty, political ideology, food, sex and perhaps above even all these the idolatry of self-importance. We can die daily to the self-indulgence of taking offence at what others say or do. All these things we can and must do if we wish to be friends of Christ and co-witnesses with Him of the truth of God’s Kingdom. Herein lies the mystery and transformative power of innocent suffering. Christianity has not found a cure for suffering. Neither has it found an explanation or an excuse for suffering. But it has found a use for it. For Christ is Born!