

## Fr Philip's Sermon 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost Dec 15, 2013

Dear friends in Christ, as we prepare for the Great Feast and celebration of Christ's Nativity, the Church gives us clear instructions on how best to undertake this preparation. You will perhaps remember the little motto of the "5 P's"; "proper preparation prevents poor performance". We might substitute the word "participation" for the word performance here so that the motto would read "proper preparation prevents poor participation", for we are called to participate in the Great Feast, not just to observe it as spectators. It is not an entertainment.

For Christians, the Nativity of Christ celebrates an historical event of the utmost importance to all of humanity and to each of us individually. To be aware of that event and of its importance is central to our ability to celebrate the Feast correctly – for what it really is. Yet here in America I have over the years observed an increasing separation and estrangement of virtually all religious and even political "holidays" from their original meanings. Thanksgiving has become "turkey day", Memorial Day becomes the beginning of summer and the grilling season. Christmas, of course, may as well have no religious meaning; Santa Claus is not St. Nicholas. Although we Orthodox do keep the true meaning of Christmas in our Church services, our way of life, how we live day to day, cannot help but be influenced by the secular culture we live in. An hour or two of Church services once a week is not going to be much of an antidote to this relentless removal of any profound meaning or high purpose from the fact of our human existence.

For this reason, if for no other, I am grateful that our Parish observes the Fasts and Feasts of the Church according to the "old-style" Julian based Church calendar. Not only do we fast during this bizarre "holiday season" but the celebration of Christ's Nativity is delayed until after the New Year and its culturally endorsed excesses. This helps us to maintain an awareness of ourselves as both a religious and a cultural minority in America. Orthodoxy is not a religion that one can just 'believe in' while participating uncritically in a culture that is ideologically and socially hostile to virtually everything it stands for.

Yet our job as Christians and as Church is to be in the world as a leaven, as a catalyst or transformative element. In the world but not of it, is how it is often described. To do this, we must be more than just Orthodox in name. Apart from all the different cultural ethnic customs and pieties of Orthodox people, there remain certain activities, attitudes and aspirations that literally define us all as Orthodox. One of these is the universal acceptance and practice of asceticism – literally to work or exercise. We expect to work for our dinners. St Seraphim of Sarov once said "if a person claims to be Orthodox and does not keep the fasts, he is not Orthodox, no matter what he may say".

Even our prayer and worship is ascetic. The Fathers teach that spiritual life is first and foremost a physical labor. If we wish to gain control over our passions we must first gain control over our stomachs. They may teach about the prayer of the heart, but before that is possible they teach the prayer of the body – which is long standing, making our cross, bows and prostrations. Fr. George Calciu used to share with us in his talks that his mother taught him to pray. When he would complain that his legs hurt from standing, she would remind him “that’s part of your prayer”. Now that’s an Orthodox mom for you! Such an attitude is utterly foreign to the spirit of self-indulgence and entitlement so present in our American culture today. Yet those who have learned this kind of prayer know first-hand how absolutely essential it is for any genuine spiritual progress. These are the things we too must learn to do; not just how to do them, that’s rather simple. We must learn to do them as foundation for our way of daily living.

In the Church’s teaching on the Incarnation of Christ, which His Nativity initiates, we discover the most basic and foundational reason why we must do these things. As Metropolitan Hierotheos teaches “The Incarnation of Christ was aimed at the deification of human nature”, in other words, “Christ became man so that man might become God”, St Irenaeus’s famous saying. Not God of course in the sense of becoming the Creator Himself or even becoming autonomous in our being – self actuating and having the essence of our existence in ourselves, as only God does. Rather this is deification through intimate communion with the Divine Source of Life itself. Metropolitan Hierotheos continues, “each one of us must also be personally deified”, and further, “If we do not anticipate deification, then for us it is as if Christ had not become man”. In other words, if we are not preparing ourselves, (active anticipation), for this restored communion with God, then at least as far as we are concerned, the reality of Christmas simply doesn’t matter for us.

The Church teaches us how to prepare; repentance with confession, fasting, increased prayer and almsgiving. All of these things have a physical component that is do-able by all. We either do this or we do not.

Keeping this in mind let us turn our attention to today’s Gospel lesson. Consider if you will, that we are all this wealthy ruler. Even the poorest among us is wealthy by the standards of the ancient world and even by the standard of vast numbers of people living in the world today. But beyond even the incredibly high standard of living enjoyed by Americans, we also have as our most precious possession our own personal way of life – or our way of doing things. None of us, of course, has a ‘perfect’ life according to our wishes, but what we do have we tend to hold on to very tenaciously. We all have our own way of living and of doing things. We are all, to a greater or lesser extent, rulers of our lives.

What riches represent to us is the greater ability to have things our way. What Christ is saying when he says “it is impossible for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God”, has more to

do with this element of self-will than with money itself. "Come and follow me", says Christ. Give up the fantasy that following your own will is the way to happiness. To be with us required a sacrifice on His part. For us to be with him also requires a sacrifice on our part. Our sacrifice often comes down to relinquishing our stubborn self-will and rejecting the desire to be ok with God, and yet we still live the way we want to.

Although there are many things about Orthodoxy that are ambiguous, and often are deliberately so, there is nothing ambiguous here. To be Orthodox is to accept the opportunity of deification made possible by Christ's Incarnation. God has already taken the initiative. He has demonstrated His love for us in the great miracle of the Incarnation. God has become man. What is our response to this? Throughout the centuries, the truest, most real, most challenging and most fulfilling of all possible responses has been what is now called 'Orthodoxy'. This is not Orthodoxy as an abstraction or bunch of religious ideas but Orthodoxy as a way of life. This way of life continues to produce deified people to this very day. Look at St. Porphorios and now Fr George Calciu. And Orthodoxy produces not just these great saints but multitudes of little saints – people who have accepted the gift of God and who respond with 'philotimo', gratitude, that produces action - the Orthodox way of life. May God grant that we also may be included in this family of transfigured human beings and join them in the celebration of our Lord's miraculous Nativity. Amen