

The Cherubim Depart From the Tree of Life
Nativity of Christ
January 7, 1997
By Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev

“Christ is born; glorify Him! Christ from heaven; go out to meet Him! Christ came down to the earth; ascend to Heaven! Sing unto the Lord all the earth!” With these words St. Gregory the Theologian begins his Christmas sermon and to this day, for sixteen centuries, they are heard in our church services, asking us the same questions: what is the significance of the Nativity of Christ for each of us; how can we greet Christ, Who has come down from Heaven; how can we ascend from the earth to Heaven; how can we glorify Christ with our life?

Many religions which confess one God promise man that in one way or another it is possible to touch God and to experience His presence and nearness. However, not one religion, except for Christianity, permits man to know God as a brother and as a friend. According to St. Symeon the New Theologian, through the incarnation of the Son of God we become sons of God the Father and brothers of Christ. God becomes incarnate in order to be able to commune with us, to share our fate, to live our life and to tell us about Himself and us, this last truth unable to be revealed in any other way. That truth is that there is no chasm which separates God from man and there are no insurmountable obstacles for man to meet God — one to one, face to face.

This communion takes place in our hearts. The Lord came into the world for the sake of this communion, became Man and lived the human life: was born in a cave in Bethlehem, took flight into Egypt, returned to Nazareth, was raised in the house of a carpenter, was crucified, went out to preach, walked throughout Galilee, Samaria and Judea, preached the Kingdom of Heaven and healed human sicknesses, underwent unendurable sufferings and death on the Cross, rose from the dead and ascended into Heaven. All of this was so that the mystical communion could take place and the barrier between man and God could be destroyed, this barrier having been created by human sin. “The wall of separation is destroyed, the fiery swords are withdrawn, the cherubim depart from the Tree of Life and I commune of the food of paradise;” we hear in the hymnology of the Church. The barrier is destroyed and the sword of the cherubim which blocked the entrance into paradise departs; the gates of paradise are opened and mankind returns to the Tree of Life, from which he partakes of the Heavenly Bread.

The history of the Fall of Adam is the history of all mankind and of each and every one of us. The sin of Adam is repeated in each of us when we turn away from God and we sin. Christ, however, became incarnate for each of us and for this reason the salvation of Adam by Christ is also our salvation. In the canon at compline of the forefeast of the Nativity we hear the words “having freed Adam from bondage, freedom has been granted to all the faithful.” Through Christ, the Godlike freedom which had been lost by Adam and his descendants because of sin and the fall from God is now returned to all people.

The luminary Gregory the Theologian calls the incarnation “a second creation,” when God in a way newly creates man, taking upon Himself human flesh and there is a “second communion” between man and God: “the Self-Existent comes into being, the Uncreated is created, That which cannot be contained is contained, He Who gives riches, becomes poor, for He assumes the poverty of my flesh, that I may assume the richness of His Godhead...What is this mystery that is around me? I had a share in the image; I did not keep it; He partakes of my flesh that He may both save the image and make the flesh immortal. He communicates a second communion with us far more marvelous than the first.”

In the incarnation of the Word, according to the expression of St. Ephraim the Syrian, an “exchange” occurs between God and man. God takes from us human nature and to us He gives His Divinity. The deification of man occurs through the incarnation of the Word. “The Word became incarnate so that we could become deified” says the luminary Athanasius the Great. “The Son of God became the Son of Man in order for the sons of men to become the sons of God” says St. Irenaeus of Lyons. Deification, which was foreordained for man in the

actual act of creation and which was lost through the Fall was returned to man through the incarnate Word.

Thus, the complete renewal of human nature occurs through the Nativity of Christ. Not only through that single birth, which occurred two thousand years ago in Bethlehem, but through that birth of Christ which occurs again and again in our souls — this “beastly manger” which God makes the temple and repository of His Divinity. Because of the Fall men “became like senseless cattle,” but God comes to fallen mankind and makes the souls of men a place where the mystical communion between God and us can occur.

The greatest miracle of the incarnation is that having occurred once in history, it is renewed in every person who comes to Christ. In the deep silence of the night the Word of God became incarnate on the earth. In the same way He becomes incarnate in the silent depths within our souls — where the mind is silent, where words are exhausted and where the mind of man is present before God. Unknown and unrecognized, Christ was born on the earth and at least the wise men and the shepherds with the angels came out to meet Him. In the same way, quietly and not noticed by others, Christ is born in the human soul, which goes out to meet Him, because within the soul the star is ignited which leads the soul to the Light.

In a mystical way we meet Christ in prayer, when it is revealed that our prayer is accepted and heard, that God “comes and dwells within us” and fills us with His life bearing presence. We meet Christ in the Eucharist, when having communed the Body and Blood of Christ, we feel that our own body is permeated with His Divine energy and within our veins flows the Blood of God. We meet Christ in the other Mysteries of the Church when, through contact with Him, we are renewed and enlivened for life eternal. We meet Christ in our neighbors, when man is suddenly revealed to us and we see his innermost depth, where the Divine image radiates. We meet Christ in our daily lives, where amidst the noise we hear His voice calling to us and inviting us to Him, or when we see His clear and sudden intervention in the course of history.

Just like that — suddenly and unexpectedly — God intervened in the life of mankind two thousand years ago, when His birth changed the entire course of history. Just like that He is born again and again in the souls of thousands of people and changes, transforms and transfigures their entire lives, changing them from unbelievers into believers, from sinners into saints, from those who are perishing into those who are saved.

Let us be silent to the world, so that in our souls the Divine Word can be born and fill us with His Divinity, light and sanctity.

Translated from the Russian by Archpriest Peter Olsen