

SERMON on the Sunday after Nativity, December 30, 2018

We are still in the midst of the joyous celebration of the Nativity of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Yet, how often it is in life, that our joys and blessings are often accompanied by sadness and grief? The first example of this that comes to my mind is the funeral service. The rubrics and prayers were somewhat different in the early church, and the service emphasized, as it should, the joy of the resurrection. It is therefore becoming the practice more and more to wear white vestments for the funeral. What can be more joyous for us as Christians than to be united with our Lord and to be that much closer to the Resurrection and eternal life? Yet, paradoxically, as we celebrate the fact that a brother or sister in Christ has passed from this "vail of tears" and, having "fought the good fight," has now received his or her reward and joined our Lord and all the saints in the eternal heavenly banquet, yet the death of a loved one is one of the most grievous and sorrowful experiences that we undergo in our earthly lives. Even the Lord Himself, it is recorded in the Holy Gospel, wept at the death of His friend Lazarus. We are grateful for all of the blessed events in our lives that give us joy, happiness and cause for celebration. By the same token, we face grief, sorrow and disappointment with dignity and faith in God. Our Lord knows and understands our human situation. God created us, and His Only-Begotten Son "put on" human flesh and became a man. The Son of God Himself experienced what we go through. The Lord knew joy and happiness, as well as sorrow, grief, and even ultimately death itself. The key is faith and trust in God. So much depends on our faith. The Lord many times, having healed someone of a grievous illness, said "Your faith has made you well. Go in peace." The human condition is such, that it isn't always a personal sorrow that causes us grief and sadness. Many times it is the sorrow or grief that someone else undergoes that causes us to be sad and to shed tears. We call this co-suffering love. Many of the saints, the Elder Joseph the Cave-Dweller for one, always had tears in their eyes. The Elder Paisios often prayed and wept for sinful mankind. The closer one gets to God, the more one feels within themselves the sorrow and grief of others, and the sorrow and grief of the other enters into us, becomes part of us, and it is the same as if it were our own. The supreme example of this is when our Savior willingly ascended the Cross and suffered and died for the redemption of mankind. "Greater love than this hath no man, that he should lay down his life for his brother" (John 15:13). In war, how many heroes there were that put themselves in harms way to protect a brother soldier? Therefore, the key to facing sorrow and grief has two main ingredients. The first part of the key is, as I have already said, faith and trust in God. The second element of the key is love. The love I am talking about is not carnal, or attachment to material things. The love I am talking about is spiritual godly love, love that is pure, chaste and unconditional. We were created in the image and likeness of God. We read in the Holy Scriptures that God is love (1 John 4:8). "The one not loving has not known God, for God is love." God loves all of us, in spite of our sins. When we are able through much effort to encounter the image of God within us which is love, then we are strengthened to face all earthly sorrow and grief, whether our own personal sorrows, or the sorrows of others. Sometimes sorrow and grief can be worse when the sorrow has happened because of the deliberate action of others. Such is the sorrow we read about today. How evil and awful that in a selfish egotistical rage King Herod orders that all male children under two years of age be killed. King Herod was entrusted with a very responsible and lofty position in life. He had great authority. He had a golden opportunity to use his position and power to do good and to help people. Instead, he chose to use his power to do evil things and to bring sorrow and sadness to the very people whose lives were entrusted to him for protection and service. Let us take a lesson, my dear brothers and sisters. We may never be given such a loft position of power and authority as King of the land, yet we all in our lives in some way are entrusted with the lives and feelings of others. Maybe it is our co-workers or subordinates at work if we serve in a managerial position. Perhaps it is our children, our spouses, our parents, or other family members. Perhaps it is our fellow parishioners in church. Perhaps it is our friends and acquaintances. No matter where or with whom, all of us can choose to use our words and

actions to help people and to make people feel good. Or, we can choose instead to make people feel sad. Let us always, dear brothers and sisters, choose love and kindness. If we treat others with love and kindness, then we will receive love and kindness in return, and through words and actions of love and kindness we will find true happiness and peace for our souls. Amen