

**The Dread Judgement Already Begins Here**  
**Sunday After the Nativity of Christ**  
**January 9, 2000**  
**By Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev**

On the Sunday after the Nativity of Christ we hear the Gospel story about the flight of Joseph and the All-Holy Virgin into Egypt with the Child Jesus (Matthew 2:13-23). In this story, along with Joseph, Mary and Jesus there is also another active participant — King Herod. Specifically, it is because of his anger that the Holy Family had to flee into Egypt.

The first thought that came into the mind of Herod when he heard about the birth in Bethlehem of the King of the Jews was that this King could encroach on his authority. In order to alleviate this danger, Herod ordered the murder of all male children two years old and younger in Bethlehem and its environs. We hear about this in the liturgical texts of the Orthodox Church: “The insane man says that there is no God. Trembling with fury, in his raging madness he plotted to kill Christ, reason has fallen because of insolence, arm yourself from the killing of the children of the non-malicious and the defilement of the earth with blood.” Here we see the main reason for Herod’s insanity — for him “there is no God.” He had no fear of God. Therefore, in order to achieve his worldly goals he did not even refrain from horrible evil deeds. It is well known that Herod suffered from the illness of paranoia. This paranoia gave birth to and fed his passion for authority. He murdered not only the Bethlehem children but also faithful servants and even his own wife and sons: he suspected all of them of conspiracy.

Behold, we see another man, Joseph. The Gospel says very little about him. When he was already betrothed to Mary, suddenly it was revealed that *She was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to send her away quietly* (Matthew 1:18-19). Behind these two or three phrases from the Gospel about Joseph there is a personal drama. Without a doubt, Joseph was a righteous man, but what was he to think about his wife — “She,” as is recorded in the liturgical texts, “who he received...from the hands of the priests from the Temple” and from whom he expected only the best and most pure things, — all of a sudden, now discovers that she is with child? However, an angel appears to him in a dream and informs him concerning Mary: *that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit* (Matthew 1:20). At that moment Joseph rearranges all of his thoughts and the entire vision of his life. From that moment on his entire life is dedicated to Mary and the Child, Who is not his son, but the Son of God. In order to protect Mary’s virginity — for we believe that Mary remained a Virgin even in her marriage, for we confess her as “ever virgin,” — and in order to protect the life of the Child, Joseph takes upon himself the role of head of the household. They flee from the anger of Herod into Egypt and Joseph guards and protects Mary and the Child. Later, having learned of the death of the impious king, they return to Judea and settle in the environs of Bethlehem.

In this way, in the excerpt from the Gospel which is read today, there are two examples of men before us. One example is of a man who lives without God. For him nothing exists except his egotistical aspirations and desires and he is capable of doing anything, no matter what the cost, in order to keep everything that he possesses in this world. The other example is a man who is prepared to give up everything and even sacrifice his own life for the Child Christ.

Holy Scripture tells us that each of us has a choice: to choose the path of life or to choose the path of death, the path of faithfulness to God or the path of denying Him. *I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live* (Deuteronomy 30:19). Sometimes entire nations find themselves having to make such a choice. The Jewish nation stood before the person of Christ. They could choose either to accept Him as their Savior or to deny Him. They chose to deny Him. Every specific person, every human soul often must make a choice: Do I sacrifice myself and dedicate myself to

Christ or do I live as though God completely did not exist? Millions of people face a similar choice, some choose life but others choose death.

At the threshold of Great Lent we hear the preaching of Jesus on the Dread Judgement, how the Lord separates the sheep from the goats and how some inherit the Kingdom of God, but others — the fires of Gehenna. Let us remember that the separation of the sheep from the goats already occurs in the life in this world. The Dread Judgement begins already here. We make the choice ourselves. We ourselves determine our fate, when we choose either life or death, blessing or a curse.

***Translated by Archpriest Peter Olsen***