

We have in the liturgical calendar of the Orthodox Church feast days of the Old Testament saints, the patriarchs and the prophets. And on this second Sunday before the Nativity we especially commemorate the holy Forefathers of Christ after the flesh. The hymns of the services this day refer to the God-pleasing lives of these holy ones who, in the days before the appearing of the grace of Our Lord, prefigured and anticipated our own salvation.

The virtues of these God-pleasing lives represent the very best that pious but fallen humanity can offer to God, before the coming of Grace to raise us up. And the same virtues can be given to us to acquire, in as much as we are worthy, as we make our way through the narrow gate to Life. (Matt. 7:14)

Among the Forefathers we can recall a few: Enoch who walked with God and was taken up, an example of faith and piety; Abraham, the father of faith and obedience; the hospitable and kind domestic love of Sarah; the maternal love of Rebecca; the chaste integrity of Joseph; the unconquerable patience of Job the long-suffering; the meek and wise leadership of Moses; the courage of Joshua, Barak and Gideon; the resolute Deborah; the repentance of David; the patriotic love of Judith and Esther; the ascetic and noetic lives of Elijah and Elisha, having their minds on high; and the dedication and faithfulness to the Law of Daniel and the Three Holy Youths.

Faith, love, piety, and long-suffering: these are all virtues that are still admired by those who have not yet had their minds and hearts seduced by secularism which, finding itself naked, has had, like Adam and Eve, to devise its own modern idea of virtue as if from fig leaves.

But even these who, in the faith of Christ, have become *our* ancestors, *our* forebears too, did not immediately enter into the fullness of salvation in the kingdom. As we shall hear in the Apostolos next Sunday: all these, having died in faith and having received a good testimony, did not receive the promises of God. And this idea,

found in the letter to the Hebrews, tells us something even more astounding: that the Forefathers had to wait for us! (Heb. 11:40) They all needed patience as well as faith, looking to that which was to come; they of whom, Hebrews tells us, the world was not worthy. (Heb.11.38)

We too have to wait but only two weeks now and we shall be celebrating the feast that marks and commemorates the fulfilment of those promises. For *that* is the proper understanding of the feast of the Nativity; this *is* what we understand by Christmas: the Lord God fulfilling his covenant with the holy Forefathers of the Old Testament. What God had declared to Abraham, what is recorded in the book of Genesis, that, *'By your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed,'* (Gen.12:18) finds its consumption in Christ's coming on earth. As St Paul expresses it in his second letter to Timothy: *'Remember that Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, was raised from the dead according to my gospel.'* (2 Tim.2:8) That is why Christ was born at the first Christmas, to keep the promises and to redeem all who would hear and accept the gospel, the good news of salvation.

Those great canticles of salvation from St Luke's gospel and used either at Orthros or Vespers in our ancient Liturgy, sing of the same story:

*'He has helped His servant Israel, sings the Theotokos in the Magnificat. 'In remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever.'*

And Zacharias, singing of his son, John the Forerunner, in the Benedictus, *'Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David, as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets, who have been since the world began, to perform the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember His holy covenant.'*

And the righteous Simeon who sings in the Nunc Dimittis, *'For my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.'*

Whatever the world takes as the 'meaning of Christmas,' whether in folklore or in traditions, admonitions and goodwill, in sentiment and conviviality, or even in the all-consuming driving of commerce and conspicuous consumption, it is welcome to it. And much of it is good at heart and not, necessarily, to be despised. But our faith calls us far beyond what is there just for a season only. *You bet your life*, as the expression has it: we have pitched out tent on this ground; we have put all of our money on this; staked all on the promises of God. On this belief we have pinned all our hope, our reputation, our understanding, our trust and all that we have and are, for together with the Forefathers, we, the Orthodox Church, are the household of God.

And if we should be wrong? If this *life everlasting* in which we believe is but an illusion, as the world thinks...? Well, we have taken Pascha's wager. Think about it: If it does not await us beyond this world, at least we shall never know that we were wrong! But if we are right... *then* the unbelieving world will certainly know *it* was wrong and will know the judgement of God and will know itself to be unworthy of the world to come.

Only, let each one of us be very clear that this *is* our faith, too, every one of us. Let us be admonished. That parable we heard, appointed for today's gospel reading, has been interpreted in many ways by preachers of the Word. It has been used, for example, to encourage people to come to church regularly; to share in this foretaste of the eternal banquet, the marriage of the Lamb, envisioned by John in the book of the Apocalypse (Apoc.19:7-9). But there is something underneath this parable, to be found in its original purpose; something far more critical here. For Christ told this story to his contemporaries in response to a statement someone made at a Sabbath meal where He is the guest of a leading Pharisee. Someone had said, "*Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!*" and Jesus responds with the parable we heard this morning. In other words, He is telling them indeed, that is true but you Pharisees and you leaders of God's people, Israel, have given your excuses, trading the kingdom of God for this fallen world. That which the Forefathers

longed for; that for which they waited patiently, suffered and even died for, is here among you and you cannot see it!

It is, of course, in the nature of holy scripture that, whatever was happening originally in the story of our salvation preserved in the Canon, the Lord still speaks through His Word to edify each one of us, when we understand the Church's mind and her interpretation of the Bible. So it is that today, confronted by this parable of the banquet that others declined, we are asked in our turn to come. Like the Forefathers, we are to long for Christ, to wait patiently for His coming again but this time not in humility, not in obscurity, not as a child but in the fullness of His glory with His holy Angles, with the Forefathers and with all His saints.

What must we do then, now, in this season? Can we engage in this world's commerce, this giving and receiving of gifts? Of course we can, only be sure to give also to the poor, the destitute, the downtrodden; those from whom we expect no return. Can we engage with the entertainments of this season? Of course we can, only do not become distracted to the point where Time, the only context where prayer and liturgy can find a place in our lives, is poured away and wasted for, '*Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.*' (2 Cor.6:2) Can we, after the fast, enjoy the feast and the pleasures of the common table? Of course we can, only we must not be consumed ourselves by what we eat and drink.

From *the highways and the hedges*, we, the Church of the gentiles, the nations, a new Israel indeed, have been called in, together with the Forefathers. And as we too wait, we are assured: Blessed, for certain, is the one called to the wedding feast of the Lamb!