

We are now about two weeks from the celebration of one of the most significant events in all of human history-the Nativity of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ. With all of the modern commercialization of this time of year, it's hard sometimes to even remember what made Christmas-time such an important time of year to begin with. It had nothing to do with loads of presents and big sales and all the mess that goes with Christmas today. December 25 is important today because some 1600 years ago (in the late 300s AD) the Christians chose that day to commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ. The feast of the Nativity of Christ became one of the most popular of all the feasts in the Christian Church; in fact, many people today really only celebrate Christmas and Easter as feasts of Christ. If it weren't for the birth of Christ, and the later feast established to commemorate His birth, there would be no Christmas, or Fall Holiday, or whatever the world now wants to remember in late December.

I'd like us to briefly remember why Christmas is so important, and what it really is that we should be remembering as we prepare for this day. It all really goes back to Genesis, and the creation of man. On the sixth day, God creates man and woman: "God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them" (Genesis 1:27). God created humanity in a unique way. Regardless of whether you interpret the Bible literally or figuratively, the creation of human beings is something different, a unique moment in the creation of the world. God doesn't simply tell the land or the sea to bring them forth, as He does with the animals and the fish.

We first read the expression of God purpose - "let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Genesis 1:26). And then God reaches out and takes the clay of the earth and forms man exactly as He wants man to be. And then God breathes the breath of life into this new creature, and with that we have the creation of the human race. The only thing created in the image and likeness of the Creator - animals nor angels share in that dignity. Only man. And then mankind is given dominion over all the earth; he's instructed to care for the plants and the animals. But the greatest gift that God gives the crown of His creation is not rule over the earth, but is to be created in the image and the likeness of God.

We share something in common with God - His image and likeness. Christian theologians have discussed through the centuries exactly what this commonality is - free will, creativity, independence, rational thought, etc. But what we know for certain is that this image and likeness is given only to man. The way the ancient Fathers of the Church understand this is: man is created in the image of God, with the potential to attain, by God's grace, to the likeness of God. We're created in His image, to grow in His likeness, to be like Him [this is central in the Orthodox understanding of salvation - we are able to be with God because we are like God, and being with God (saved) is no less than sharing in the life of God, His sharing of Himself with us].

But as we all know, mankind fell. We sinned. And in sinning, we separated ourselves from

God. God is life, and so separation from God is death. When Adam and Eve are sent from the Garden of Eden and told that they would die - this is not the punishment of an angry God. God loves us. Death and separation from God are the natural result of man's un-natural actions (sin). When you sin, when you move away from the will of God, then you separate yourself from God, and everything falls apart. We see that so clearly in what God tells Adam and Eve - the earth suffers, the man suffers, the woman suffers, the animals suffer - all because sin entered the world.

But God doesn't give up on mankind. Biblically speaking, after the man and the woman are created and placed in the Garden of Eden to live, the first thing we do is sin. But God doesn't abandon man; He promises from the beginning to offer man the opportunity for redemption. In the Orthodox Christian Church, we understand that promise for humanity's eventual redemption to be a foretelling of the birth (and life and death and resurrection) of Christ. The Person of Jesus Christ was foretold from the beginning. That's what makes the remembrance of Christmas so important. This event was awaited since the fall of mankind. All people had awaited the birth of the Messiah, of some type of redeemer sent by God to man. Virtually all people groups around the world were waiting for something like the birth of Christ. For God to become man, to enter the world He created, to take it on His shoulders and to redeem it.

Christ - the Son and Word of God - took on all that it is to be human, He set aside what it meant to be God (though He was and is always divine, He simply didn't reveal His divinity very often while on this earth), He lived as a simple human being. And in that act, humanity was transformed.

God took humankind to Himself - Christ was man, is man, and will always be man. His human body is seated even now at the right hand of the Father. Christ did many things in His earthly ministry: He grew and taught and worked miracles and eventually was crucified and buried and rose again. All of this was done to show us how much God loves us, and to call us back to our original purpose - to be with God.

So as you're preparing for Christmas, I urge you to keep in mind the origins of this great feast. It can be a life-transforming day, to remember the love of God, His work and His desire for our salvation. Preparing for Nativity I would urge us all to think on how we can best understand and (even more importantly) accept the great gift offered to us in the birth of the Christ-child in Bethlehem nearly 2000 years ago.

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!