

This morning, even though we're a few days before the actual Feast of the Nativity, on the Sunday before the Feast we always read the account of the birth of Christ. This is one of the central events in human history, and it's one that's gotten a lot of negative attention in the last 50+ years-reinterpreting, mythologizing, outright attacking, etc. Especially criticized is our belief of the Virgin birth, and Who Christ truly is. We have to understand, as best as we are able, what the Church has always taught about our Lord's Nativity (and why it's been taught), because God becoming man in the person of Jesus Christ is absolutely necessary for our salvation, and for existence of our Faith.

The Virgin Mary was found to be with child "by the Holy Ghost," St. Matthew writes. And this was done to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah, "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which means "God with us." The Christian Church must believe and teach the virgin birth of the Messiah-not because human procreation is bad or evil. And not to make the birth of Christ seem that much more amazing (we don't teach the virgin birth for shock value). The Church must believe and teach the virgin birth of Christ really for two reasons-I) it is the witness of the Scriptures and the Tradition, and II) this belief is essential to preserve a proper understanding of the person of Jesus Christ.

I.

Both the Old and the New Testaments witness to the Virgin Birth of Christ; the Tradition of the Church we would also hold up and see that never has this teaching been challenged in the Orthodox Church. Even from the time of the Prophet Isaiah, the people of God were taught that a virgin would conceive in her womb a son. St. Matthew and St. Luke both specifically write in their Gospels that Christ was conceived in the womb of the Theotokos by the Holy Spirit-she had never known a man.

We'll sing at Matins for the Feast - Why do you marvel, O Mary? Why are you amazed at what has come to pass? "I have given birth in time to a timeless Son; I cannot explain how He was conceived in me. I have known no man; how then shall I bear a child? Who has ever seen a birth without seed? When God so wills, as it is written: 'The order of nature is overcome.'" Christ is born of the Virgin in Bethlehem of Judah.

To be Christians, we're bound to believe those things that have always been taught and believed by the Christian Church. But there's a reason that St. Matthew and St. Luke and all of our Fathers have known and taught the Virgin birth of Christ.

II.

The belief in this reality is necessary to our proper understanding of Who Christ is. The Prophet Isaiah said He would be called Immanuel. And in St. Luke's Gospel, the angel who appears to the Theotokos at the Annunciation says to her, "The Holy Spirit will overshadow you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you, therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). Even before His birth, Christ is called "God with us," and "the Son of God."

The Virgin Birth isn't needed for shock value, but to preserve the reality that the Son born of the Virgin Mary has no human father; His Father is God. He is the very Son of God. And in the Person of Christ, God is with us. We see here the working of the Holy Trinity-according to the will of the Father, the Holy Spirit descended on the virgin, and the Word of God was formed in her womb. Christ is fully God-He is God by His essence. The Holy Trinity is a mystery that we can only barely begin to speak about, and certainly we can't understand. But we believe that there is One God in Three Persons-Father, Son, and Spirit. There is one essence of God in which these three Persons share naturally. They are the One God. It's beyond our meager human logic to understand. What is necessary for our healing and salvation is that the second person of the Holy Trinity-the Word of God-became man in the womb of the Theotokos. He remained fully God; God cannot become "not God." Christ was always God.

And in the Incarnation, when He was formed in the Virgin's womb as a little child, God became man. Christ didn't take over the body of some random human being-the body of Christ was His own, created just for Him, in the same way that our bodies are our own. And in this moment, when God becomes man, this is the working out of our salvation. What it means to human (we all share that in common-human-ness) was joined for all of eternity with what it means to be God. There was no confusion (as we say in the Creed). Mankind did not become God; but human nature from that moment on was given a new relationship with its Creator.

The love of God for us is shown so powerfully in the life of Christ. We often look to the Crucifixion-His beatings and tortures and humiliation and eventually the horrendous death on the cross. But we should also look and find the enormous love of God for us shown in the Feast we're preparing to celebrate later this week. The Word of God laid aside what it meant to live as God, and He entered the womb of a 15/16-year old girl. He took on the form of His creation. We were created to be like God, but for our salvation God had to become like us. So the God of all grew in the womb of the Virgin, nurtured by His own creation. He was born into a fallen and sinful world, where He was totally at the mercy of those around Him. Herod tried to kill Him; the wise men came to worship Him; His mother and foster father Joseph cared for Him-fed Him, clothed Him, taught Him, raised Him. But Christ wasn't just any other child; they were raising God in the flesh. It is an unimaginable love for the all-supreme being in the universe to come and experience life as we live it on the earth. In just a few days, God will be born, God will lay in a manger in a stable, God will sleep in the lap of His Mother and nurse at her breast.

As we sing in Matins for the Feast - How can a womb contain Him Whom nothing can contain? How can he remain in His Father's bosom, yet rest in His mother's arms? It is His good pleasure to accomplish this. Having no flesh, He purposely assumes it for our sake. HE WHO IS becomes what He never was. He shares our substance without forsaking His own nature. Desiring to make us citizens of the world on high, Christ, the Only-begotten of the Father, is born on earth as a man.

This is why we try to understand and we preach what the Scriptures and the Fathers teach us about the Nativity of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To proclaim the love of God for man, and to preserve the teaching of our salvation, seen in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ in the city of Bethlehem some 2,000 years ago.

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!