

On Friday we commemorate **Saint Nicholas of Myra**. Throughout the centuries devotion to him has spread around the world. In the secularized West he has even been transformed into the red-suited Father Christmas who has lost all connection to the original saint. However, the holy bishop from Myra can be a helpful guide as we prepare to celebrate Christ's Nativity.

Saint Nicholas was bishop of Myra in Asia Minor in the fourth century. He was imprisoned during the persecutions of Diocletian and Maximian, but also experienced the new freedom that the Church was granted under St Constantine. St Nicholas was a strong opponent of the heretic Arius and was present at the Council of Nicaea in 325 where Arianism was condemned.

St Nicholas is best known, however, for his care and compassion for his flock. He was, quite simply, a genuinely good man, a true shepherd through whom Christ's love was able to shine. And he is best known by the many miraculous accounts of how he helped others.

Even as a young man he was known for his almsgiving. As a bishop he would help people in secret in order to not bring attention to himself. On different occasions he provided dowries for girls who would otherwise have been sold into prostitution. He saved city of Myra from famine by appearing to the master of a ship full of corn and telling him to take it to the city. He interceded on behalf of people condemned to death. And he is particularly known for helping sea-farers in distress.

Readings and saints for this week:

Monday: 1 Thessalonians 2:20-3:8; Luke 20:27-44
Prophet Habakkuk; Cyril of Phileus

Tuesday: 1 Thessalonians 3:8-13; Luke 21:12-19
Prophet Sophonias; John the Hesychast

Wednesday: Matthew 25:1-13; Galatians 3:23-29; 4:1-5; Mark 5:24-34
Great Martyr Barbara; John of Damascus

Thursday: Luke 6:17-23; Galatians 5:22-26; 6:1-2; Matthew 11:27-30
Sabbas the Sanctified; Martyr Diogenes; Philotheos of Mount Athos

Friday: John 10:1-9; Hebrews 13:17-21; Luke 6:17-23
Nicholas the Wonderworker; Nicholas of Asia Minor

Saturday: 2 Corinthians 11:1-6; Luke 13:19-29
Ambrose, Bp. Of Milan; Martyr Athenadorus

**Sunday 1 December 2013 is the
Fourteenth Sunday of Luke**

Matins Gospel: Matthew 28:16-20

Epistle: Ephesians 2:4-10

Gospel: Luke 18:35-43

Resurrectional Apolytikion:

Angelic Powers were at your grave,
and those who guarded it became
as dead, and Mary stood by the
tomb, seeking your most pure
Body. You despoiled Hades and
emerged unscathed; You met the
Virgin and granted life. Lord, risen
from the dead, glory to You!

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Evangelion

A Bulletin of Orthodox Christian Faith

Archbishopric of Good Hope,
Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa

1 December 2013

The Light of the World

Today we hear Saint Luke's description of how Jesus Christ healed a blind beggar on the road near Jericho. When this man heard who it was who was passing by, he cried out: "Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me." When Jesus asked him what he wanted, he replied: "Let me see again." Jesus Christ then announced that his faith had saved him and, able to see, he gave praise to God.

There are many accounts of healing miracles that Christ performs, and yet they also have a significance that goes beyond the healing granted to particular people. In this incident we see God's power displayed in Jesus Christ. He is able to give sight to this man because He is Himself the Light of the world.

The healing that Christ brings is not only the literal healing of physical blindness but also a spiritual healing. We are all to some extent blind, for our vision has been corrupted by the fall. We might think that we can see clearly, but too often how we perceive things is blurred by our own passions. Like this man, we need to learn to see with the eyes of faith.

This man knew that he was blind, but too often we go to great lengths to convince ourselves that our way of seeing things is right. Admitting that we are at least partially blind, that we do not have all the answers, or that there may be other ways of seeing things, can be very threatening. Yet it is only when we can recognise our own need and cry out to God in humility that we are able to receive His gift of healing.



The Light came into the world to give sight to the blind
and faith to those who lacked it.

Saint Ephrem the Syrian

A Mercy of Peace, a Sacrifice of Praise

An introduction to the Divine Liturgy (continued)

We saw last week that faith and love are inseparably intertwined. Just as we cannot have faith if we do not love, so too we cannot properly love God without a right faith. So, having asked for God's gift of love, we confess our faith in the words of the Creed, or the Symbol of Faith as it is also known.

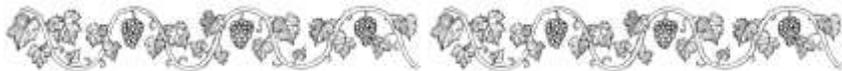


A Gateway to the Mysteries

Before the Creed is chanted, the deacon proclaims: "The doors, the doors. With wisdom let us attend." These words are a reminder of how, in the early Church, only the faithful could attend this part of the Liturgy. The catechumens, or those preparing for baptism, had already been sent out, as we saw previously, and the doorkeepers would ensure that nobody else entered the church from this point on. Although this no longer happens and we do not stop anyone attending the Liturgy, these words remind us that the Liturgy is not a public thing, but is rather one of the mysteries of the Church, and we can only participate fully in it if we are members of the Church and identify ourselves with her faith.

For the early Christians, the Creed was not something public. Although catechumens were taught what the Christians believed while they were being prepared for baptism, it was only after being illumined through Holy Baptism that they were allowed to recite the Creed for the first time. The Creed is truly the Symbol of our faith and its presence at this point in the Liturgy serves as a sort of gateway, for we can only proceed to the rest of the Liturgy if we accept the faith of the Church and make it our own.

During most of the Liturgy, the Church prays as a community, using the plural "we". There are only two places where we pray in the first person, namely in the pre-communion profession of faith, and in the Creed, where we say: "I believe". The Creed that we confess is a baptismal creed and is said before our baptism. It is this Creed that marks our entrance into the Church and each of us has to affirm and reaffirm this faith. Without this faith we cannot participate in the Divine Liturgy, for it is this faith of the Church that makes us members of the Church and able to approach the Holy Gifts.



In spite of our sinfulness, in spite of the darkness surrounding our souls, the Grace of the Holy Spirit, conferred by baptism in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, still shines in our hearts with the inextinguishable light of Christ ... and when the sinner turns to the way of repentance the light smoothes away every trace of the sins committed, clothing the former sinner in the garments of incorruption, spun of the Grace of the Holy Spirit.

Saint Seraphim of Sarov

Reading the Bible with the Church: Rod of the Root of Jesse

During this time of the Nativity fast when we are preparing to celebrate the birth of Christ at Christmas, the Church's liturgical texts provide us with a rich illustration of how the Orthodox Church reads the Bible. The Scriptures are not merely about historical events in a distant past, but are loaded with meaning that finds its fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ. We can only understand the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament, for its very purpose was to prepare the way for the coming of Christ, and its pages are full of prophecies of and allusions to the coming of Christ.

We do not read the Bible as isolated individuals, but as members of the Church, and the Church's liturgical texts guide our interpretation of it, helping to explain otherwise obscure passages. This is particularly evident during this time of preparation for the Nativity, and the Katavasia, which are based on the biblical odes, provide a good example of this.

The fourth ode refers to one of the great prophecies of the coming of the Messiah:

There shall come forth a rod from the root of Jesse, and a flower shall grow out of his root. The Spirit of God shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and godliness. (11: 1-2)

Jesse was the father of King David, whose royal line would be cut off because of sin.

Nevertheless, God had promised David that his seed would be established forevermore. Therefore, a "rod" or "shoot" would grow forth from the dead "stump" of Jesse's family tree. The Church understands the Virgin Theotokos as the root of Jesse, and Christ as the rod or flower that has sprung forth from this family tree. In the Gospel reading that we will hear on the Sunday before Christmas, Saint Matthew goes to great lengths to establish the family ancestry of Jesus Christ. Far from being about boring or irrelevant details, this is important because it shows how the birth of Christ is the fulfillment of people's longings for the Saviour throughout the centuries.



Rod of the root of Jesse, and flower that blossomed from his stem, You, O Christ, have sprung forth from the Virgin. From the mount of shaded leafy trees, You, the God who is not material, have come to be incarnate from her who did not know wedlock. Glory to Your power, O Lord.

Fourth Ode of the Katavasia
of the Nativity