

SAINT ANTHONY ORTHODOX CHURCH



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SUNDAY AFTER THE NATIVITY OF CHRIST

27 December 2015

TONE 5. First Martyr Stephen, Righteous Joseph, David the Prophet and King, and James the brother of the Lord.

FIRST ANTIPHON

I will praise Thee, O Lord, with my whole heart: I will speak of all Thy marvelous works. In the assembly of the upright and in the congregation, the works of the Lord are great. (R.): Through the intercessions of the Theotokos, O Savior, save us! They are sought out according to all His purposes. His work is honorable and glorious, His righteousness endures forever. (R.) Glory... Now and ever... (R.)

SECOND ANTIPHON

Blessed is the man who fears the Lord and delights greatly in His commandments: His seed shall be mighty upon earth; the generation of the upright shall be blessed. (R.) Save us, O Son of God Who art risen from the dead, as we chant to Thee, "Alleluia"! Glory and riches shall be in His house, and His righteousness endures forever. (R.) A light in the darkness arises for the upright: God is gracious, full of compassion and righteous. (R.) Glory... Now and ever... (Only begotten Son and Word of God ...)

AT THE LITTLE ENTRANCE

Come, let us worship and fall down before Christ! O Son of God, Who art risen from the dead, save us who sing to Thee: "Alleluia"!

TROPARION OF THE RESURRECTION (Tone 5): Let us believers praise and worship the Word; coeternal with the Father and the Spirit, born of the Virgin for our salvation. For, He took pleasure in ascending the Cross in the flesh to suffer death; and to raise the dead by His glorious Resurrection.

TROPARION OF THE NATIVITY (Tone 4): Thy Nativity, O Christ our God, hath shone upon the world the light of knowledge. For they that worshipped the stars learned therefrom to worship thee, the Sun of Righteousness. And to know that from the East of the Highest Thou didst come; O Lord, glory to Thee.

TROPARION FOR THE SUNDAY AFTER NATIVITY (Tone 2): Proclaim, O Joseph, to David, the grandparent of God, the amazing wonders; for thou hast seen a Virgin great with child; for with the shepherds thou didst give glory, with the Magi thou didst worship, and by the angel it was revealed to thee. Wherefore, plead thou with Christ God to save our souls.

TROPARION OF ST. STEPHEN THE PROTOMARTYR (Tone 4): The crown of the Kingdom has adorned the brow of thy head because of the contests that thou hast endured for Christ God, thou first of the martyred Saints; for when thou hadst censured the madness of unbelief, thou didst see Christ thy Savior standing at the right hand of the Father. O Stephen, ever pray Him for us, that He would save our souls!

KONTAKION OF THE NATIVITY (Tone 3): Today the Virgin gives birth to the Transcendent in essence. The earth offers the cave to the unapproachable One. Angels with shepherds glorify, and Magi journey with a star; for a new Child hath been born for our sakes, the pre-eternal God.

TODAY'S APOSTLE READING (For Saint Stephen)

Prokeimenon: His voice has gone out into all the earth. The heavens declare the glory of God.

From the Acts of the Apostles.

(Acts 6:8-7:5, 47-60) In those days, Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, arose and disputed with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. Then they secretly instigated men, who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, and set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place, and will change the customs which Moses delivered to us." And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. The high priest said, "Is this so?" And Stephen said: "Brethren and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham, when he was December 27, 2015 Liturgy Variables 2 Sunday after Nativity in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, 'Depart from your land and from your kindred and go into the land which I will show you.' Then he departed from the land of the Chaldeans, and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living; yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him in possession and to his posterity after him, though he had no child. But it was Solomon who built a house for Him. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands; as the prophet says, 'Heaven is My throne, and earth My footstool. What house will you build for Me', says the Lord, 'or what is the place of My rest? Did not My hand make all these things?' You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, Whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it." Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they grinded their teeth against him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God." But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together

upon him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him; and the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Saint Stephen is remembered as the protomartyr, that is, the *first martyr* of the Christian Church. But what is a "martyr"? Even though we immediately think of martyrs as persons who sacrifice their lives for their convictions, the Greek word "martyros" means, quite simply, "witness."

Indeed, a martyr is, first and foremost, a witness to the faith. Stephen was put on trial for his faith and he witnessed before the entire court about Christ. Note that the court is silent as Stephen retells the faith story of Israel: what he says, as a Jew who follows Jesus, is no different from what a faithful Jew of his time would believe. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, the Temple ... these are all common to the Jewish and the Christian faith; and we, Jews and Christians, believe in the "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

When Stephen insults his judges ("stiff-necked," "hard-hearted"), they are enraged—who would not be?—but they find no reason to execute Stephen, because an insult to the judges is not a blasphemy. When Stephen accuses them of being "the heirs of those who have killed the prophets" and of having executed "the Righteous One" (that is, Jesus), and when he implies that he himself is a prophet who will soon be murdered unjustly, the judges, grind their teeth in fury, but ... still no blasphemy.

The climax of the trial is reached when Stephen suddenly has a vision and reports about it to the assembly of judges. "Behold, I see the heavens opened," he cries out. He speaks just like the prophet Ezekiel at the beginning of his visions: extravagant perhaps, an extraordinary claim that one may take seriously or deny—but there is no blasphemy here.

What does Stephen see? We read that "he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, namely Jesus standing at the right hand of God" and that he then reports, "I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God." Now, this is different. The judges find this blasphemous: they accuse Christians of such as Stephen of abandoning the faith one God by adding Jesus alongside God.

Note, however, that Stephen sees all of this while "full of the Holy Spirit," whereas his judges judge by human reasoning. Saint Paul will theologize on this point and say that "no one can say *Jesus is Lord* except in the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:3). Enlightened and empowered by the Holy Spirit, the martyr bears witness to the truth that we also confess: Christ is risen, Christ has been taken up in glory, Christ is Lord, Christ is true God from true God, at the right hand of God the Father. This is not funny mathematics (1+1=1), but a matter of Revelation, a self-disclosure of God.

As Christians we are called remain faithful in our confession, standing firm on the foundation of the martyrs—confessing Christ, like Stephen, even to the shedding of blood. Without martyrdom, faith becomes an intellectual commodity sprinkled with some "moral values"—some religion among others; whereas the Church of the martyrs carried God's power and grace for the renewal of mankind.

TODAY'S GOSPEL READING

The Reading is from the Gospel according to Saint Matthew

(Matthew 2:13-23) When the wise men had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt have I called my son." Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old

or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more." But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." And he rose and took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archela'us reigned of Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and dwelt in the city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, "He shall be called a Nazarene."

Christmas is not a yearly commemoration of some event that happened long time ago, in a distant place. What the Church celebrates at the Feast of the Nativity is the beginning of our own journey with Christ. And in order to know how that looks like, we meditate on the saints of God, those brother and sisters of ours who have learned to live as children of God.

Today we remember Joseph, the man betrothed to the Virgin Mary and entrusted with the task of protecting the newborn child and his mother. What the Church has always celebrated in him is his humility and perfect obedience towards God, and his life of selfless service to the neighbor.

Today's Gospel reading shows Joseph journeying to and from Egypt, in obedience to divine guidance. All around there is weeping and loud lamentation, a time and place of ruthless and murderous tyranny; but the righteous Joseph and those under his care, are kept safe. It is as in the verses of Ps. 91:

You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shade of the Almighty, say to the LORD, "My refuge and fortress, my God in whom I trust!" He will shelter you with his pinions, and under his wings you may take refuge; his faithfulness is a protecting shield." Though a thousand fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, near you it shall not come. ... Because you have the LORD for your refuge, and have made the Most High your stronghold, no evil shall befall you, no affliction come near your tent."

The Righteous Joseph is, literally, "walking with God": a living icon of what our Christian life should be. May this feast of the Nativity stir up in all of us a desire to do likewise.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- **Next Saturday and Sunday, 1/2-3:** Vespers (6:30 pm), Matins (9:15 am), Divine Liturgy (10 am). We will transfer to next Sunday the Feast of the Lord's circumcision (January 1).
- **Sunday, 1/10, 1:30 pm: Outdoor Blessing of the Waters.** After Divine Liturgy, we will gather at Lake Arthur, joining the parishes of Sts Peter and Paul and St Andrew, and the nuns at Transfiguration Monastery. The blessing of waters will "expand" our celebration of the Lord's Baptism to all of creation.
- **Saturday and Sunday, 1/ 16-17: Pastoral visit from Bishop Thomas and Feast of Anthony the Great.** Bishop Thomas will be with us Saturday evening (Vespers and meeting with the parish council). On Sunday we will be hosting our brothers and sisters from the other two Orthodox parishes, donate the collection to a monastic community (since they are the followers of Saint Anthony, "the father of monasticism"). Our guest and speaker will be **Archbishop Melchizedek**, who will speak about the place and mission of monasticism in the Church.

Remember in your prayers

LIVING: Bill and Ann; Dottie; Bernard (Dottie's brother); Stelian (Cezar's father); Seba, Lisa, and Sam (Michaels), Norma, George (Georgiades), Christine (Abraham), Jim, Tony, Samantha, Luke (relatives of Dollie's), Norma, Richard (Johns), Bill, Ed, Peter, Georgia and Scot, Sam, Karen (Joanna's mother), Diane, Sula, Dollie, Karyn, Ignatius and Amy, John, Jonathan and Joanna, Andrei, John, Janet, Christy (relatives of Jean); John and Julie (Smolen); Dennis, Vincent, Roy and Laura, Danny, Danny, Cathy (relatives of John and Julie); Diane; Shea and Katie; Tim and Caroline (Becker).
Ron, catechumen; Garrett & Autumn, Benjamin, Christine – seeking for the true faith.

DEPARTED: Dolores (Bingham), Diane (Georgia's sister); Gladys (Smolen); David (Steve's father-in-law); Donald (Norma's brother); William (Fr. Paisius's father); Sue (Stacey's mother); Vicki (Frank's mother); Craig (Jean's son-in-law); Abie Abraham; Patrick (Rose's brother); Josephine (Julie's sister); Hieromonk Roman (Braga); priest Thomas (Hopko); Cristian (Andronic); Rick, Phyllis (Seba's husband and sister), Angeliki, Joe and David Sipos; Glenn (Jean's grandson); Stella, Edmund (Ed's uncle), Richard, Leatrice (Totin), Ed (Joanna's grandfather), Joseph (Rose's father), Fred (Dollie's uncle), Bob (Diane's father), Michael, Gabriel, Hilda (Chris Abraham's mother), Alfred, Stormy (friend of Ron's).