

The Importance of the Sundays before Christmas

Dearly beloved in Christ,

I would like to invite your attention to the importance of the Sundays leading to the Nativity of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Before I write anything about it, I think, I should start with explaining the Calendar which we are using. There are two calendars that the Syrian Orthodox Church uses, namely Julian (BC 45) and Gregorian (AD1582). Earlier, the Syrian Orthodox Calendar was based entirely on the Julian calendar. But from 1955 onwards, our Church celebrates the immovable feasts (like Christmas, Epiphany) according to the Gregorian calendar, with an exception in the Holy Land. The Julian calendar continues to determine the observation of the Great Lent and the Holy Week. The Church in India switched entirely to the Gregorian calendar in 1953, according to the Patriarchal Encyclical of Moran Mor Ignatius Aphrem I (No.620, dated 11/20/1952). Therefore we, the Syrian Orthodox faithful from India, are following the Gregorian calendar here in our Archdiocese.

Liturgical calendars guide the faithful in the practice of spiritual life in the Church. The calendar of the Church sets apart days for the commemoration of events in the salvation history of man, emphasizing more importance to the events associated with the Lord, Jesus Christ. The days commemorating those events are called Feasts of the Lord (Moranaya Perunnaal). These days include all Sundays, and feasts of our Lord commemorating His birth, circumcision, baptism, entrance to the Temple, transfiguration, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension.

The Syrian Orthodox calendar begins with the Consecration of the Church (Qoodosh Eatho) which falls on the last Sunday of October if it happens to be the 30th or 31st of the month, or else the first Sunday of November. Then the Sundays that follow until Christmas fall in the Advent period that commemorates the chief events preceding the Incarnation of the Word, in the given pattern:

1. Qoodosh Eatho (Consecration of the Church)
2. Hoodos Eatho (Dedication of the Church)
3. Annunciation to Zachariah
4. Annunciation to Virgin Mary

5. Visitation of Virgin Mary to Elizabeth
6. Birth of John the Baptist
7. Revelation to Joseph
8. Sunday before Christmas (preparation)

1. Qoodosh Eatho (Consecration of the Church)

This is the new-year day of the Church's Ecclesiastical calendar. The Church is preparing to receive her Lord by consecrating herself with purity and holiness. The consecration or purification of the Church does not mean the cleaning of the parish building, rather the purification and consecration of its members, the faithful people. We all are to be cleansed ourselves to receive the Lord as we approach the Nativity. That is why the Church has set the Nativity Fast, beginning from Dec 15. Today is a day which reminds us of our true calling to be HOLY. "Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest *your* hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, *as* in your ignorance; but as He who called you *is* holy, you also be holy in all *your* conduct, because it is written, "*Be holy, for I am holy*" (1 Peter 1:13-16)

2. Hoodos Eatho (Dedication of the Church)

Consecration is not enough; we have to dedicate ourselves to the habitation of the Holy Spirit. We are told by our Lord of a man's condition who after relieved from an unclean-spirit and not dedicate to God. He was inhabited by seven more unclean spirits when they saw he was cleaned but not occupied. "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and *that* the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which *temple* you are" (1 Corinthians 3:16, 17). We are the temple of God and we have to consecrate and dedicate – not only the building- but ourselves as the Body of Christ.

This dedication festival has a historical background for the Jews. In BC 168-164 Antioch Epiphanus captured the temple in Jerusalem and made unclean by burning the Scripture, Erecting the statue of Olympion Zeno, and

sacrificing pigs and prohibiting the Circumcision. In BC 164, Judah Maccabi and his brothers were able to oust this Antioch and they REDEDICATED the temple. Jews celebrate this as the Hannukkah (dedication festival).

3. Annunciation to Zechariah

This week's theme shows how special and significant is the birth of John the Baptist -- announced in the temple to the boy's father, a priest. But it also has lessons for us as disciples. Zechariah certainly lives his life to follow the God he loved, but his faith falters. What can we learn from his faith that we can apply to our own? The story begins carefully placed in geography and time. Luke relates this not as a timeless legend, but as an historical event.

"In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years."
(1:5-7)

We meet Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, an elderly, childless couple. According to Mosaic law, priests weren't required to marry a wife from the Tribe of Levi (Leviticus 21:7, 13-15), but for a priest to have a wife from Levi's tribe was considered a twofold honor. Religious workers in Israel were divided into two groups, priests and Levites. All were descended from the Tribe of Levi, but, additionally, the priests were descendants of Moses' brother Aaron. Priests were set apart for a special ministry in the Temple with regard to the worship of God that took place there.

This day, Zechariah is "chosen by lot" to go inside the temple and burn incense on the Altar of Incense in the Holy Place. It was at that point that an angel of the Lord *did indeed* enter the Holy Place.

What a contrast with Mary, who when the birth of Jesus is announced, doesn't respond with "How *can* this happen?" like Zechariah, but "How *will* this happen?" and, "I am the handmaiden of the Lord. May it be to me as you have said" (1:34, 38).

What can you do to nurture an attitude of faith, of belief, of spiritual sensitivity and openness? I think it begins with humility, repentance, and prayer. When you see unbelief in yourself, don't excuse it, but be ashamed and ask

God's forgiveness. We are disciples on a journey with Jesus. Even if we have some rough areas in our lives, as we walk with Jesus, he would refine us to be worthy disciples. God can make a wonderful disciple out of an old, set-in-his-ways priest and an impulsive fisherman. What can he do for you?

4. Annunciation of our most holy Lady Theotokos and ever Virgin Mary.

Our benevolent and loving God, Who always takes care of the human race as an affectionate father, saw that the creature which His hands had made was being tyrannized by the devil. Man was being carried away by the passions of vice and was subject to idolatry. So, God decided to send his only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, in order to redeem us from the devil's hands.

This is why He sent angel Gabriel to the town of Nazareth and told Mary: "Hail Mary full of Grace, the Lord is with thee." Some other words followed and finally the Virgin said to the Angel: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word." Immediately after these words she supernaturally conceived in her womb the Son and Word of God, His wisdom and power which has substance, with the overshadowing of the Word of God Himself and with the coming of the Holy Spirit upon her.

As a teenager, Mary is quite taken aback by the Angel Gabriel's words. Luke says that Mary was greatly troubled. Was Mary afraid? Whenever we meet something new and strange, we get confused. The patterns we're used to are disrupted, and little alarms go off in our head. That's the way God made us to respond to change; it's a kind of built-in conservatism and defense mechanism.

Some people say we shouldn't question God, but Mary did. She asked "How?" Questions cause us to grow and learn. Questions stretch our minds and hearts and increase our understanding. Questions and the exploration for their answers contribute to our faith, even if the questions themselves may ultimately go unanswered. Mary's question arose from faith, not doubt.

Here is a teenager facing misunderstanding and rejection from her family, her betrothed, and her townspeople. And yet she agrees. Mary affirms the bedrock truth that express our discipleship: "I am the Lord's servant." After all is said and done, after we have explored all the possibilities, we still must decide: am I a servant or a master? Is my allegiance to the Lord or to my own desires?

Sometimes it takes great turmoil in our souls to come to the place of submission, but come to it we must. Even before Jesus was conceived, Mary was faced with the decision: Will I obey and make way for this King? or Will I take the easy way that avoids difficulty and pain? To her everlasting credit, Mary's response of faith is what our response must be: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

5. Visitation of Virgin Mary to Elizabeth

Mary has just been visited by the angel Gabriel and told that she will bear a son, Jesus. Mary is confused -- at least you would be if you were Mary. Who can she talk to about this? The only person she knows who will be able to understand her is relative Elizabeth. The angel has told Mary: "Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God." (1:36-37). And so Mary hurriedly prepares for a trip to see Elizabeth. She is just a young teenager, and she needs steadying, guidance. The journey was about 80 to 100 miles and would probably take Mary three to four days.

Now she seeks out Zechariah's home in the tiny village, and greets her kinswoman Elizabeth. Elizabeth, now six months pregnant, comes to the door and sees her niece. She hasn't expected her, but now Mary greets her. For the Jews greeting is an important ceremony. Remember Lord instructing his disciples to offer a greeting of "Peace to you," in homes that they enter (10:12) This word of peace, when received, functions like a powerful blessing upon the householder.

While we don't know the greeting Mary brings to Elizabeth, it had an effect so powerful that Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, and begins to speak out prophetically. "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit." (1:41)

John the Baptist, in Elizabeth's womb, also responds to the presence of the Messiah inside of Mary. Elizabeth interprets this stirring within her as motivated by joy -- and why not? Elizabeth offers two blessings under divine

inspiration, first upon Mary herself, as being blessed above all other women, and then upon the fetus of Jesus within her, probably only a few weeks along at this point in time. Then she wonders out loud why "the mother of my Lord" would come to visit her. How could Elizabeth know that Mary's child was the Lord? The power of the Holy Spirit upon her gave her special knowledge of Mary's condition, and blessedness, and faith. Elizabeth has sudden insight also into Mary's faith: "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" (1:45). While Elizabeth's husband had doubted what the Lord had told him -- and was mute because of it -- Mary had believed. This very trip south to Judea was evidence of her belief, for she was acting it out, coming to visit the one person whom God had prepared to help her -- Elizabeth.

Now, Mary, too, breaks out in Spirit-inspired speech. Her first words are an utterance of praise to God for his awesome blessings to her, and sound very similar to the inspired Psalms of the Old Testament.

Perhaps you are a young Christian, struggling hard to understand and make your way. I believe God has someone for you who can help and guide you. It's likely that you'll find this mentor at church -- that's where God-loving, mature believers usually congregate -- or perhaps a small group meeting like Youth program or Prayer meeting. I encourage you to pray that God would enable you find an Elizabeth to help you out during this period of your spiritual journey.

You may be a more mature Christian that God is preparing to be an Elizabeth to some Mary out there. You've been through your own share of pain and struggle. You can understand. You can sympathize. But have now found how to walk with the Lord, how to call upon him in need, how to pray. There's a Mary out there who needs you. Be on the lookout for her, when God sends her along. You have your struggles, to be sure, but Mary needs to watch you meet them with the Lord's help.

6. Birth of John the Baptist

This passage is important to us Christians because it lays a foundation of understanding of what God is doing in sending John the Baptist and then Jesus the Messiah within six months of each other. As we study the prophecies, we begin to get a glimmer of what God has in mind.

Elizabeth, the elderly, barren woman, has given birth. What an amazing sign of God's mercy to her and Zechariah. The Jewish ceremony of circumcision on the eighth day after birth represents placing the sign of the Covenant upon each male child that becomes part of the nation (Genesis 17:11; Leviticus 12:3). Apparently, Zechariah was seen by the townspeople as both dumb AND deaf, though the angel had said only that he would be unable to speak until the child's birth (1:20). How Elizabeth knew the child's name was to be John we aren't told, but likely Zechariah had communicated this to her. At any rate, the townspeople won't take Elizabeth's word for it. They go to Zechariah, who requests a "little (wooden) writing tablet" and writes "John". After bestowing the name the Angel had given to him -- Zechariah now begins to speak after at least nine months of silence.

"Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, 'What then is this child going to be?' For the Lord's hand was with him." (1:64-66)

See carefully, the Zechariah's prophecy of his son John as a Preparer. "And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him." (1:76)

Isaiah says; "A voice of one calling in the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God." (Isaiah 40:3).

Then at the end of the Old Testament, Malachi prophesies that Elijah will come to prepare the way:

"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty." (Malachi 3:1)

John is the messenger of this covenant. When the Angel Gabriel first appeared to Zechariah in the temple he announced that the child's role would be "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (1:17). Later, when John the Baptist enters his ministry, he is asked who he is. His answer: "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" (John 1:23).

Something in us wants to be recognized, acclaimed, appreciated. We usually want to get credit for the good we do (and our sins forgotten). But, if the truth be told, few get the credit they deserve. Many, like John, carry on ministries of tremendous importance to prepare for the future, but are seldom recognized for that role. If John had not prepared the people with a spiritual revival that emphasized repentance from sin, baptism, and forgiveness, Jesus' could not have built on this foundation -- he would have had to build it himself, diverting him from his chief ministry and emphasis.

You may be one of God's preparers so that the ministry of your church in the future can be more effective. It doesn't matter whether or not people appreciate you. But it does matter that you are faithful to God who called you to this ministry of preparation so that his work might go forward unimpeded.

7. Sunday of Revelation to Joseph

This Sunday's message is very crucial with respect to the birth of our Lord. First, Matthew affirms, against any possible misinterpretations of the virgin birth, that Joseph controlled himself, practicing sexual restraint. By calling Joseph *righteous* (1:19) Matthew invites us to learn from Joseph's character about fidelity, discipline and preferring God's honor above our own. This paragraph assumes the principles of sexual fidelity and discipline that both Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries demanded (see 5:27-30).

Like most first-century Jewish people, Joseph was faithful to his future spouse in advance, awaiting marriage, and he expected the same in return. So clearly does Matthew want his audience to understand that this was part of Joseph's character that he points out that even once he and Mary were married, they refrained from marital relations until Jesus' birth (1:25). Second, Matthew implicitly teaches about the nature of commitment in marriage: infidelity is always unjust, whereas divorce is just under some circumstances. For Joseph to "put Mary away" (1:19, literally) meant for Joseph to *divorce her* (NIV). At the same time we should observe that the circumstances under which Joseph was planning to divorce Mary were hardly light. Unlike today, Joseph had no option of giving Mary a second chance, even if he wanted to. Jewish and Roman law both demanded that a man divorce his wife if she were guilty of adultery. Roman law actually treated a husband who failed to divorce an unfaithful wife as a panderer exploiting his wife as a prostitute. Further, Joseph had another reason to divorce her. Because others would assume that Joseph himself must have gotten her pregnant unless he divorced her, his reputation was at stake for the rest of his life. Joseph experiences the pain of betrayal, the breach of a contract (unfortunately our

culture has less respect for commitment and fidelity). Because a wife's adultery could imply the husband's inadequacy or his family's poor choice of a mate, Mary's apparent unfaithfulness shamed Joseph as well (compare 2 *Enoch* 71:6-11). Under these circumstances, Joseph would be righteous in divorcing Mary; to fail to do so would violate law and custom.

Matthew also exhorts us to temper justice with compassion, a central principle in his Gospel (9:13; 12:7). Joseph was righteous not because he was divorcing Mary (although, as noted, this did not make him unrighteous); rather, Joseph was righteous for divorcing Mary *quietly* or privately-that is, for not bringing unnecessary shame on her. He knew suffering already awaited her: her premarital pregnancy had likely already ruined any chance of her ever marrying, a horrible fate in an economically and honor-driven male-centered society. (Deut 22:21-24 mandated execution for this offense). Yet Joseph could have profited by divorcing Mary publicly. By taking her to court, Joseph could have impounded her dowry-the total assets she brought into the marriage-and perhaps recouped the bride price if he had paid one at betrothal. By simply providing her a certificate of divorce in front of two or three witnesses, he would forfeit this economic reimbursement-simply to minimize her public dishonor. Joseph's "justness" or "righteousness" reminds us that justice is not merely a matter of punishment and shame but also a matter of mercy. Joseph was going to divorce Mary, but wounded though he felt, he would do everything in his power to minimize her shame.

Joseph values commitment to God above his own honor. When God reveals the truth to Joseph, he immediately believes and obeys God's will, unbelievable as the truth would seem without a deep trust in God's power. Joseph trusted God enough to obey him. Yet such obedience was costly. Because Joseph married Mary, outsiders would assume that he had gotten Mary pregnant before the wedding. Joseph would remain an object of shame in a society dominated by the value of honor. With Mary, Joseph also chooses to embrace shame to preserve the sanctity of God's call. Joseph's obedience to God cost him the right to value his own reputation.

8. Sunday before Christmas

This Sunday reminds us that Jesus is born in history, at a specific time and place. Jesus is presented as the *son of David*, a title of the rightful heir to Israel's throne (as in Jer 23:5). Other lines of evidence support the claim that Jesus' family stemmed from this royal lineage and ancient Jewish polemicists never bothered to try to refute it. Thus Matthew opens and closes the genealogy with a title for Jesus that is significant but rare in his Gospel: *Jesus*

Christ, that is, the messianic king (1:1, 18). Matthew also calls Jesus *son of Abraham*. This is especially significant because subsequent chapters further portray Jesus as Israel's representative, the epitome of its history (for example, 2:15; 4:2). As the heir of Abraham par excellence, Jesus can communicate Abraham's promised blessings to his people. In this section Matthew is most interested in Jesus' spiritual ancestry in Israel's history. The names in Matthew's genealogy-like Judah, Ruth, David, Uzziah, Hezekiah, Josiah-would immediately evoke for Matthew's audience a whole range of stories they had learned about their heritage from the time of their childhood. By evoking great heroes of the past like David and Josiah, Matthew reminds his audience of the ultimate hero of Israel's history to whom all those stories pointed. Matthew's genealogy unifies the defining periods of Israel's history and points them to Jesus. Jewish people also viewed genealogies as a testimony of God's providence in their ancestry. History is important: it defines our identity and shapes our preparation for the future; and because we are God's people, Israel's history in the Bible has more to say to us about our eternal identity than does the heritage of any other culture we may claim as our own. Jewish people regarded genealogies as important to establish the purity of their lineage (as in 1 Esdras 5:39-40), yet it is the mixed nature of Jesus' lineage that Matthew purposely highlights. When Matthew cites these four women, he is reminding his readers that three ancestors of King David and the mother of King Solomon were Gentiles. Matthew thus declares that the Gentiles were never an afterthought in God's plan but had been part of his work in history from the beginning. This point fits an emphasis that God is not only for people of our own race or culture; we must cross racial and cultural boundaries to evangelize the whole world, humbly learn from other cultures, and serve with our brothers and sisters there.

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