

and “he was cut off” from his priesthood, because he did not want to forgive his friend Nicephorus, who persistently sought his forgiveness, down to the last moment. Nicephorus gained the glory of martyrdom, because he proved humbler and more charitable. This humility and compassion, is the safe entrance ticket into the Kingdom of God, since Christ also rang the danger bell for many charismatics and miracle workers that if they are found naked of these virtues, on the last day they will hear the “I do not know you” and they will remain outside of His bridal chamber.

The unsurpassable honor, that Christ, reclining in the manger of irrational animals, is giving us, but also the exceptional responsibility for us believers of the Old Testament, is that all the holy forefathers of the Old Testament are awaiting us, for us to together enjoy His highest final promise to all of us. They await us to become their fellow travelers to Bethlehem, for us to worship the Son and Word incarnate, who came to coelevate us to the Jerusalem above, in the final glory of His heavenly Kingdom.

Archim. B. L

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2019 SUNDAY BEFORE

NATIVITY, *Forefeast of the Nativity of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ Anastasia the Great Martyr, Chrysogonos, Theodota, Evodias, & Eutychianus, the Martyrs. The opening of the gates of the Great Church of God*

TONE OF THE WEEK : *Second Tone*

EOETHINON : *Fifth Orthros Gospel*

EPISTLE READING: *St. Paul's Second Letter to Hebrews 11:9-10; 32-40*

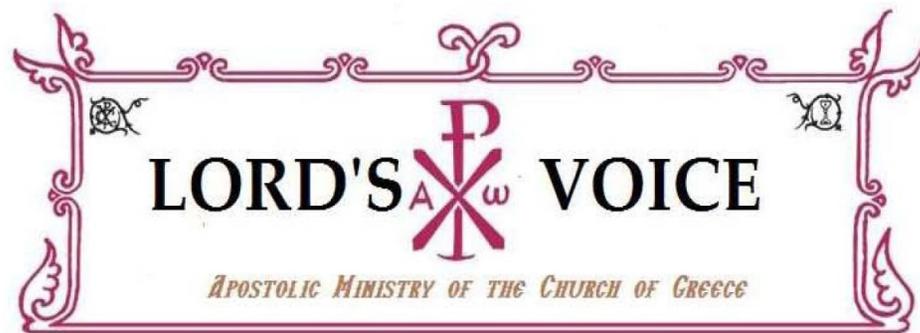
GOSPEL READING: *Matthew 1:1-25*

**SUNDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2019 SUNDAY AFTER NATIVITY ,
14,000 INFANTS (HOLY INNOCENTS) SLAIN BY HEROD IN**

BETHLEHEM, *Our Righteous Father Marcellus, Abbot of the Monastery of the Unsleeping Ones, Our Righteous Father Thaddeus the Confessor*

EPISTLE READING: *St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians 1:11-19*

GOSPEL READING: *Matthew 2:13-23*



67TH YEAR DECEMBER 22, 2019 PAMPHLET #51 (3473)

FAITH AND PROMISES

On the Sunday before Christmas our Church celebrates the memory of all those who pleased God, from the first created humans down to holy Joseph, the betrothed of the Most Holy Theotokos. This “God-chosen choir of saints”, as one troparion of the feast says, with the holy patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob presiding, prepares us to receive the newly born Christ. Luxurious clothing and very expensive decorations are not necessary, they tell us. Only two things are needed, according to another troparion: a “hospitable manner” and “high faith”.

The faith of the Patriarchs

The Patriarch Abraham was eminently adorned with these two virtues. With the first, he was granted to offer hospitality to the unincarnate God the Word himself, in the form of an angel and “in typos,” the entire Holy Trinity. He cultivated the second, faith, to such a degree, that he was granted to become the father of all those who believe, and for Christ himself to name paradise, “the bosom of Abraham”. Rather, there is no person like Abraham, who “passed” so many difficult exams of faith with an excellent grade. Today’s Epistle Reading begins with a wonderful hymning of his “high” faith

THE EPISTLE ST. PAUL'S 2ND LETTER TO HEBREWS 11:9-10

BRETHREN, by faith Abraham sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city which has foundation, whose builder and maker is God.

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets - who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

Women received their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and scourging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated - of whom the world was not worthy - wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect

God "took him up" from Mesopotamia and, without even knowing where he is going, He brought him to Palestine, with the promise to grant him this land. He left his homeland, where he was eminent, he left all his immovable estate, his friends, his relatives, as also the Tombs of his forebears, with a perspective of never returning again. And years later, when his wife Sarah died, he was forced to buy her tomb, he, whom God had promised all that land, he did not have his own yet "not even a place of three spans", since he was still living in tents. But also the fellow inheritors after him, of the divine promise, Isaac and Jacob lived in

tents, as if in a foreign land, without however ever losing their faith and trust in God.

"They worked righteousness"

The wonderful thing is that these forefathers, even though a promise had been given them of earthly goods, did not pay attention to them, but sought the future heavenly city. Whereas we, despite the fact that the newly born Messiah, in all ways, spoke to us and opened to us the road for the Jerusalem above, we continue seeking the things below and earthly things. "Shame on us!", the sacred Chrysostom bitterly cries out. "Let us be ashamed", because whereas "God is discussing about the city above, we are seeking the one herein".

However, aside from the bright example of the holy Patriarchs, the Apostle Paul also commemorates many other contestants of faith, who may not have shown with their bright life, but they radiated with their faith. Faith is not the reward of a pure life, but a gift to humble souls. And sometimes, sin leads to humility and to an elevating crushing. Faith is not the fruit of a sinless lifestyle, but - if the repenting "person crushed in spirit" should want it - he may become the stimulus and awakening power for a virtuous lifestyle and crown of holiness. The chief example is the great Prophet David whom Paul commemorates, who was honored as the genitor in the flesh of Christ. And David is a chief example of faith, because more than all the other achievements of faith, the victories against the enemies, the taming of the lions, the deliverance from fire, the murderous sword or even from illnesses, more so from a martyr's death, from patience and every type of deprivation and hardship, more than all these things, the basic presupposition, but also safe fruit of faith, is "the working of the righteousness" of God, in other words, a healthy and firm repentance.

Presuppositions of participation in the final promise

The almost hieromartyr Sapphirus, even if he forbore tortures for his faith in Christ, in the end, also lost the crown of holiness and his soul,