

St Nicholas Con't

There is the ancient Byzantine embordered image of the saint, brought to Moscow from Novgorod, and the large icon painted in the thirteenth century by a Novgorod master.

Two depictions of the wonderworker are especially numerous in the Russian Church: Saint Nicholas of Zaratisk, portrayed in full-length, with his right hand raised in blessing and with a Gospel (this image was brought to Ryazan in 1225 by the Byzantine Princess Eupraxia, the future wife of Prince Theodore. She perished in 1237 with her husband and infant son during the incursion of Batu); and Saint Nicholas of Mozhaik, also in full stature, with a sword in his right hand and a city in his left. This recalls the miraculous rescue of the city of Mozhaik from an invasion of enemies, through the prayers of the saint. It is impossible to list all the grace-filled icons of Saint Nicholas, or to enumerate all his miracles.

Saint Nicholas is the patron of travelers, and we pray to him for deliverance from floods, poverty, or any misfortunes. He has promised to help those who remember his parents, Theophanes and Nonna.

Saint Nicholas is also commemorated on May 9 (The transfer of his relics) and on July 29 (his nativity).

Knowing the Master's Manger **By Fr. Lawrence Farley**

In the opening verses of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah we find the following words: "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord has spoken: 'Sons have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against Me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's manger, but Israel does not know; My people does not understand'" [Isaiah 1:2-3]. With these words the prophet begins his extended denunciation of his people, calling Israel back in repentance to loving fidelity to their covenant God.

They needed to be called back. At that time in around the seventh century BC they not only worshipped Yahweh their God, but also Baal, the fertility god, the god of the storm and of rain and life. Doubtless they regarded it as a kind of syncretistic ecumenism, a broadness of sympathy and generosity of devotion. They probably also regarded it as keeping up to date: Yahweh might have been appropriate for the time of their desert sojourn, but for their life in agricultural Canaan, they needed now a more agricultural god. Yahweh might have been okay for the Bedouin part of their history, but Baal was more suited for their settled life on the land. Anyhow, Israel then worshipped

both Yahweh and Baal, and attributed their agricultural prosperity primarily to the latter.

What the majority in Israel considered ecumenical broadness of mind, Isaiah considered simply as apostasy and unfaithfulness. Yahweh was their God, and Baal, the god of Canaan, had nothing to do with them. Devotion to Baal therefore was pure adulterous idolatry, a spiritual defection from their true Husband and Protector. Adultery, as everyone then knew, was punishable by death. What else then could Israel expect for its apostasy?

The prophet Isaiah therefore began his ministry by calling Israel to recognize this fact. But he did not just announce judgment and destruction, but also called Israel back to repentance and forgiveness and life. Yahweh their God did not desire their death, but their repentance. He was willing to sit down and reason with them, and promised that if they would but repent, though their sins were like scarlet, they would become white as snow [Isaiah 1:18].

For now, though, Isaiah began by pointing out their ingratitude. Any father in those days could legitimately expect gratitude and obedience and respect from his sons. But though Yahweh had reared and brought up Israel, giving them life and protecting them as a father did his sons, He received no gratitude, obedience, or respect from His people. And it was worse than that—even dumb animals knew where their food came from. The ox knew its owner, and the donkey knew its master's manger, and they waited by that feed trough every day for the master to pour in food for them to eat. Both ox and donkey (the usual domestic beasts of burden) knew the sound of their master's footsteps, and had gratitude to him for filling the manger. They knew who to thank for their food, and prosperity, and life. But Israel somehow did not know who to thank. Israel was dumber than their farm animals. They regarded their food and agricultural prosperity not as coming from Yahweh, but as coming from Baal. Israel did not know their master's manger.

This ox and donkey, by the way, found their way into the Nativity icon and into every Christmas scene ever since. When we see the Nativity scene, either eastern or western, we see the ox and the donkey standing by the manger over the newborn Christ. Why? Neither Saint Matthew nor Saint Luke mention any animals in their narratives. But the Church, reading this prophecy of Isaiah, beheld the Master's manger and thought of Jesus. For what was the Master's manger to which the prophet here referred? Surely it was the manger into which the newborn Christ Child was laid! Thereafter the place of the ox and the donkey was assured in any picture of the Nativity of Christ.

The prophet Isaiah speaks to us today as well, for we no less than ancient Israel have trouble knowing the Master's manger. We also fail to see that our life,

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strength, prosperity, and food come from God. We imagine that our ability to find food and earn our daily bread comes from ourselves. We get up each morning and go to work and labor hard at our forty hour a week jobs to earn our living. Surely our food comes from ourselves? We forget that the strength and health by which we labor come as gifts from God. More than that, our very ability to rise every morning and get out of bed come as gifts from God. For one day we will not rise from our beds, but the doctor will come and pronounce us dead and draw the sheet over our faces. No labour for us that day. That day will mark the end of God's gift of life to us.

All the more reason today to know our Master's manger, and to recognize that all that we have comes from Him. Oxen and donkeys know who their true benefactors are, and we should be at least as smart as they are. As we bend over our daily mangers and sit at our tables to eat our daily bread, let us give thanks to God, and know that all that we have and ever will have comes from Him.

Sanctifying Time through the Feasts of the Church **by Fr. Steven Kostoff**

We recently celebrated one of the Twelve Great Feast Days of the Church's liturgical year—the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple. The festal cycle of the Church sanctifies time. By this we mean that the tedious flow of time is imbued with sacred content as we celebrate the events of the past now made present through liturgical worship. Notice how often we hear the word “today” in the hymns of this feast: “*Today* let us, the faithful dance for joy....” “*Today* the living Temple of the holy glory of Christ our God, she who alone among women is pure and blessed....” “*Today* the Theotokos, the Temple that is to hold God, is led into the temple of the Lord....”

Again, we do not merely commemorate the past, but we make the past *present*. We *actualize* the event being celebrated so that we are also participating in it. We, “*today*,” rejoice as we greet the Mother of God as she enters the temple “in anticipation proclaiming Christ to all.” Can all—or any—of this possibly change the “tone” of how we live this day? Is it at all possible that an awareness of this joyous feast can bring some illumination or sense of divine grace into the seemingly unchanging flow of daily life? Are we able to envision our lives as belonging to a greater whole: the life of the Church that is moving toward the final revelation of God's Kingdom in all of its fullness? Do such questions even make any sense as we are scrambling to just get through the day intact and in

one piece, hopefully avoiding any serious mishaps or calamities? If not, can we at least acknowledge that “something” essential is missing from our lives?

I believe that there a few things that we could do on a practical level that will bring the life of the Church, and its particular rhythms, into our domestic lives. As we know, each particular feast has a main hymn called the *troparion*. This troparion captures the over-all meaning and theological content of the feast in a somewhat poetic fashion. As the years go by, and as we celebrate the feasts annually, you may notice that you have memorized these troparia, or at least recognize them when they are sung in church. For the Great Feast of the Entrance of the Theotokos Into the Temple, the festal troparion is the following:

Today is the prelude of the good will of God, of the preaching of the salvation of mankind.

The Virgin appears in the temple of God, in anticipation proclaiming Christ to all.

Let us rejoice and sing to her: Rejoice, O Fulfillment of the Creator's dispensation!

The celebration of a Great Feast of the Church is never a one-day affair. There is the “afterfeast” and then, finally, the “leavetaking” of the feast. So this particular feast extended from November 21 until November 25. A good practice, therefore, would be to include the troparion of the feasts in our daily prayers until their leavetakings. That can be very effective when parents pray together with their children before bedtime, as an example. Perhaps even more importantly within a family meal setting, it would be appropriate to sing or simply say or chant the troparion together before sitting down to share that meal together. The troparion would replace the usual prayer that we use, presumably the Lord's Prayer. All of this can be especially effective with children as it will introduce them to the rhythm of Church life and its commemoration of the great events in the life of Christ and the Virgin Mary. Do you have any Orthodox literature in the home that would narrate and then perhaps explain the events and meaning of the Great Feast Days? Reading this together as a family can also be very effective. A short Church School session need not be the only time that our children are introduced to the life of the Church. The home, as we recall, has been called a “little Church” by none other than Saint John Chrysostom. Orthodox Christianity is meant to be a way of life, as expressed by Father Pavel Florensky in *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*: “The Orthodox taste, the Orthodox temper, is felt but is not subject to arithmetical calculation. Orthodoxy is shown, not proved. That is why there is only one way to understand Orthodoxy: through direct experience... to become Orthodox, it is necessary to immerse oneself all at once into the very element of Orthodoxy, to begin living in an Orthodox way. There is no other way.”