

Nativity of Christ

The celebration of the feast of the **Nativity of Christ** in the Orthodox Church is patterned after the celebration of the feast of the Lord's Resurrection. A fast of forty days precedes the feast, with special preparatory days announcing the approaching birth of the Saviour. Thus, on St. Andrew's Day (November 30) and St. Nicholas Day (December 6) songs are sung to announce the coming birthday of the Lord.

Adorn yourself, O Cavern. Make ready, O Manger. O Shepherds and wisemen, bring your gifts and bear witness. For the Virgin is coming bearing Christ in her womb. . . (Vesperal Hymn of St. Nicholas Day)

On the eve of Christmas, the **Royal Hours** are read and the **Divine Liturgy of St. Basil** is served with **Vespers**. At these services the Old Testamental prophecies of Christ's birth are chanted, emphasizing the prophecy of **Micah** which foretells Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Saviour, and the prophecies of **Isaiah** about the appearance and character of the Messiah:

The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel, which translated is, God with us. (Isaiah 7:14-15)

God is with us, understand all ye nations, and submit yourselves, for God is with us. (Isaiah 8:9)

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulders, and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. (Isaiah 9:6-7)

The **Vigil of Christmas** begins with **Great Compline**, highlighted once again by the solemn chanting of **God is with us** and the words of the prophecy of **Isaiah**.

At the Compline there is also the singing of the Troparion and Kontakion of the feast along with the special hymns glorifying the Saviour's birth. There are also the special long litanies of intercession and the solemn blessing of the five loaves of bread together with the wheat and the wine of which the faithful partake and the oil with which they are anointed. This part of the festal vigil, which is done on all great feasts, is called the litya (in Greek, the artoklasia or the breaking of the bread).

At the beginning of the Christmas Matins, which together with the Compline form the Christmas Vigil, the six matinal psalms begin as usual with the words: Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will among men. (Luke 2:14)

At the Christmas services these words of the angelic song are normally sung with great solemnity rather than being chanted as at the daily service. The Christmas Matins proceed as usual. The gospel reading from Matthew (1:18-25) tells of the birth of Christ, and all of the hymns and verses glorify his appearance on earth.

Christ is born, glorify him. Christ is from heaven, go to meet him. Christ is on earth, be ye lifted up. Sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing out with gladness, all ye people. For he is glorified. (First Ode of the Christmas Canon.)

The Christmas Liturgy begins with psalms of glorification and praise. The troparion and kontakion mark the entrance with the Book of the Gospels. The baptismal line from Galatians 3:27 once again replaces the Thrice-Holy. The Epistle reading is from Galatians.

But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And

because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So through God, you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir. (Galatians 4:4-7)

The Gospel reading is the familiar Christmas story from **Matthew (2:1-12)**, and the liturgy continues in the normal fashion. A specific two-day celebration follows, dedicated to **Mary the Theotokos** and **St. Stephen, the First Martyr**. The period of Christmas rejoicing extends to Epiphany during which time the Christmas songs are sung and fasting and kneeling in prayer are not called for by the Church.

The feast of Christmas is formally entitled the **Nativity in the Flesh of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ**. At Christmas we celebrate the birth as a man of the Son of God, the one who together with the Father and the Holy Spirit is truly God from all eternity. Thus, we sing in the Church.

Today the Virgin gives birth to the Transcendent One, and the earth offers a cave to the Unapproachable One! Angels, with shepherds, glorify Him! The wise men journey with the star! Since for our sake the Eternal God is born as a little child. (Kontakion)

The feast of Christmas was not a separate Church feast for the first four centuries of Christian history. It was celebrated with **Epiphany** in the one great feast of God's appearance on earth in the form of the human Messiah of Israel. The Nativity began to be celebrated as such on the twenty-fifth of December in order to offset the pagan festival of the Invincible Sun which occurred on that day. It was established by the Church quite consciously as an attempt to defeat the false religion of the heathens. Thus, we discover the troparion of the feast making a polemic against the worship of the sun and the stars and calling for the adoration

of Christ, the **True Sun of Righteousness** (Malachi 4: 2), who is himself worshipped by all of the elements of nature.

Thy Nativity, O Christ our God, has shone to the world the light of wisdom! For by it, those who worshipped the stars were taught by a star to adore Thee, the Sun of Righteousness and to know Thee, the Orient from on high (Luke 1:78, translated as Dawn or Dayspring). O Lord, glory to Thee! (Troparion)

Thus, the feast of Christmas is the celebration of the world's salvation through the Son of God who became man for our sake that, through him, we might ourselves become divine, sons of God the Father by the indwelling of his Holy Spirit in us.

