Sermon – 15th Sunday after Pentecost – Leavetaking of Nativity of the Theotokos
September 25, 2022

Christ is in our midst.

Ah, the riches of three Gospel readings and three excerpts from St. Paul. Let's take these occasions one at a time, last to first.

Today is the last day of celebrating the Feast of the Nativity of the Theotokos, the first major feast of the Church's New Year. St. Gregory Palamas tells us,
> If . . . you are looking for a season especially suited for <u>beginning a good work</u>, then it is autumn, particularly this month, which is our first month and the start of the year, when our <u>salvation</u> had its <u>origin</u>, as we <u>celebrate</u> today. This sacred feast and holiday that we are keeping is the first to commemorate our recall and re-creation according to grace, for on it all things began to be made new, enduring precepts began to be brought in instead of temporary ones, the spirit instead of the letter, the truth instead of shadows. (Palamas, pp. 333-334)

The Vigil for the Feast, both last week and last night, opened and closed with the prayer,
> This is the day of the Lord: <u>rejoice, ye people</u>. For lo, the <u>Bridal Chamber of the Light</u>, the <u>Book of the Word of Life</u>, has come forth from the womb, and the <u>East Gate</u>, newly born, awaits the entrance of the Great Priest. She alone brings into the world the one and only Christ, for the salvation of our souls. (Festal Menaion, pp. 101, 126)

Mary is the bridal chamber wherein Christ the Bridegroom is united with His Bride (Humanity) and becomes Emmanuel, God with us and God *as* us. (https://www.holytransfig.org/post/the-nativity-of-mary-theotokos) And we know that the East Gate refers to the prophecy in Ezekiel that is read during the Vigil of every feast of the Theotokos:
> Then He brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary that faces towards the east, but it was shut. So the Lord said to me, "This gate shall be shut. It shall not be opened, and no man shall pass through it, because the Lord God of Israel will enter by it; . . . " (Ezekiel 44:1-2)

We are familiar with many other prophetic metaphors for the Theotokos, such as "the mountain", "the fleece", and "the candlestand." (https://dce.oca.org/resource/1954/) But I am not aware of any prophetic metaphor referring to the Theotokos as a Book: "the Book of the Word of Life." And yet, how appropriate. Christ is the <u>Word</u> in all the fulness of meaning.

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. (John 1:1,3)

And the Word became flesh through the Theotokos and dwelt among us. So – as the physical carrier of the Living Word, Mary indeed is a Book. In some translations of the same prayer she is referred to as a "living Bible." Without Mary's assent we would not have the physical presence of the Word.

St. Gregory continues,

> "Today a paradoxical book has been made ready on earth, which in an indescribable way can hold, not the imprint of words, but the living Word Himself; not a word that perishes as soon as it is formed, but the Word who snatches those who draw near Him from perdition' not a word made by the movement of a man's tongue, but the Word begotten of God the Father before all ages." (Palamas, p. 334)

In the hymnography of Holy Friday, Mary gives voice to this interplay of words and the Word. Seeing Jesus on the way to Golgotha, she cries out, "Whither dost Thou go, my Child? Is there another wedding feast in Cana? . . . Shall I go with Thee, my Child, or shall I wait for Thee? <u>Speak some word to me, O Word</u>; do not pass me by in silence." (Triodion, Holy Friday Compline, Canticle Six, p. 619-620)

When we are in the presence of a Holy person, it is traditional to ask, "Give us a word." In the second Gospel reading today, from St. Matthew's Gospel, a lawyer asks Jesus for a word, "What is the greatest commandment?" "To love God with your whole heart and with your whole soul and with your whole mind. And the second is like it – to love your neighbor as yourself." In St. Luke's account the lawyer continues with, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replies with the example of the Good Samaritan. Based on this parable, an unattributed footnote on this passage in the Orthodox Study Bible points out that,

How much we love ourselves is not the standard by which Christ is calling us to love others. Rather, we are called to love our neighbor as being of the same nature as we ourselves are, as being created in God's image and likeness just as we are. As the Fathers teach, we find our true self in loving our neighbor. (OSB, p. 1312. Note on Matt. 22:39)

That is, we are called to see others as true extensions of ourselves, for we are all one in Christ.

Today we also anticipate the celebration on Tuesday of the Elevation of the Life-giving Cross, commemorating the discovery and lifting up of the wood of the Cross by St. Helen, mother of St. Constantine the Great, in 326 A.D. Constantine is perhaps best known for being the first Roman Emperor to endorse Christianity, traditionally presented as a result of an omen — a chi-rho in the sky, with the inscription "*By this sign shalt thou conquer*" — before his victory in the Battle of Milvian Bridge in 312. (https://orthodoxwiki.org/Constantine_the_Great)

The Cross is the standard we bear in our struggles in this world. St. Paul tells us that,

God has made foolish the wisdom of the world. (1 Cor 1:20) The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Cor 1:18) The Jews request a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Cor 1:22-24)

"This is the day of the Lord: rejoice, ye people." Let us go forward in faith, hope, and love. (1 Cor 13:13)

Through the prayers of our Holy Fathers, O Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy on us. Amen