



SUNDAY BEFORE NATIVITY

December 24

THE GOSPEL READING

Matthew 1:1-25

[The Genealogy of Jesus and the Virgin Birth of Christ]

The book of the Genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asa, and Asa the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amon, and Amon the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon. And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.

So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from



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David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus.

THE SERMON

The genealogy of our Lord, always read on the Sunday before the Nativity, reminds us of two fundamental truths. First, the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, Who is the Logos, took upon Himself our human nature. He was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was named Jesus, who is the Christ, that is the Messiah. He entered human history, and although He was "begotten of the Father before all ages," as we say in the Creed (the symbol of faith), He took for Himself a human Mother and, therefore, also grandparents, great-grandparents, and other family relationships. He is truly Emmanuel, meaning "God with us." He unites in Himself history and eternity, God and man, heaven and earth. He unites past, present, and future.

The second truth we learn is that God took on human nature to save us. He is named Jesus, meaning "God saves." As the Son of God and God Himself, He has always existed and therefore has no genealogy. However, as the Son of the Virgin, He was born in time and space, and He has a human genealogy through her, even though He has no biological human father. He is a Son without a human father, Who is begotten of God the Father before all ages. He becomes incarnate for our salvation.

From the beginning, the Gospel of Matthew emphasizes that this is the "genealogy of Jesus Christ." The word Christ (Χριστός) is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah. "Christ" and "Messiah" both mean the "Anointed One," that is the One who is anointed with the Holy Spirit to be Prophet, Priest, and King to His chosen people. His genealogy, therefore, locates Him in the history of humanity, particularly in the context

of Jewish history, in which He was born.

Why is the genealogy presented in this Gospel reading so important? How does it speak to us today? Genealogies were very important to the Jewish people because they established their identity as the people of God. Similarly, the Church is also validated, in part, by its history, particularly its “apostolic succession.” This succession — a type of ‘genealogy’ — links our present hierarchs with the very first apostolic hierarchs. The Apostles appointed Bishops as their successors, who in turn appointed their own successors, and so on. We have these genealogical records intact, which means the Church recognizes communion and canonicity among the hierarchy.

For instance, records show that His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew is the 270th successor to the Apostle Andrew. This succession is also seen in spiritual ways, especially in monasticism, as there are spiritual lines from saints to elders (in Greek, Γέροντες) and likewise to their spiritual children. These are not genealogies of ecclesiastical or administrative authority but rather of spiritual grace and virtue. A holy person with a particular spiritual gift called charisma (in Greek, χάρισμα) is likely to pass on that gift to spiritual children through their teachings and spiritual training.

Saint Athanasius of Alexandria says, “The Word was made man so that we might be made divine. He displayed himself through a body, so that we might receive knowledge of the invisible Father.” Again, as Saint Gregory the Theologian says, “The deity is made man, so that manhood may be deified.” Jesus becomes “God with us” in such a manner, that He is closer to us than we are to ourselves.

Baby Jesus was born in a cave and placed in a manger (feeding trough). In the original Greek, it was a “fatni” (φάτνη), where the food is placed for animals to eat. The Bread of Life came to be our food from the beginning, as we receive His Body and Blood in Holy Communion.

The Lord Jesus, the Creator and Sustainer of all things comes to redeem the world, but He comes not in His unveiled glory. He is born not in a palace fitting for a King, but in a humble place — a manger. The King of Kings comes in *humility*. He comes as a Baby who needs to be cared for, fed, nourished, protected and loved. God becomes a Man, so He does not merely relate to humanity externally, as it were, as One whom we only encounter as a stranger. Without ceasing to be God, He who is without sin takes humanity upon Himself completely so that He can live not only with us, but also in us.

As the Baby Jesus is born, He is wrapped in cloths and laid on a manger. As depicted in the Nativity icons, the same kind of cloths would be used later for His burial. Jesus Christ came to live and to die for us and to rise from the dead to destroy the power of death. He is placed in a manger, the feeding place for livestock. He is born in Bethlehem, which, in the Hebrew language, means the House of Bread. Bethlehem becomes indeed the house where Jesus, the Bread of Life, is given for the life of the world.

Christmas is a great time to join with family and friends, to give and receive gifts. The greatest gift we can give each other, however, is love. God’s greatest gift has been

given to us, His only Son, because He is love. The gifts the wise men brought Jesus had symbolic significance. The gift of gold symbolizes that Jesus is the King of Israel, even of the entire universe. The gift of frankincense symbolizes that Jesus is God, since incense is for worship, and only God may be worshipped. The dead were anointed with myrrh, as Jesus was at His burial. Therefore, the gift of myrrh symbolizes that the great King had come to die as the perfect sacrifice for us to redeem us through His Resurrection from our sins.

Humanity has been redeemed in Christ. Christ has sanctified birth, and He has sanctified death. He has sanctified riches and poverty, time and space, history, and all peoples. When we struggle, and we feel like we live merely to survive, Christ assures us that His birth opens the possibility for us to be born anew to abundant life in Him each day. The Incarnation reminds us that Christianity is not merely a set of timeless ideas but a Faith of flesh and blood, which redeems the soul, the heart, and the whole body. Christ Jesus redeems women and men, the elderly and the young, the rich and the poor, and people from all races, from every tribe, tongue and nation. He redeems the whole cosmos.

Let us open our hearts to the King of Glory so that He may enter and be born in our lives. Let us bring Him forth as the Light of the world. He is our life. May our hearts become more spacious than the heavens, for the Creator of the universe, the Son of God, lives in us. The Light has shone in the darkness, and our lives are enlightened and redeemed by His Birth. The Lord Jesus comes to us, who are His own. As we receive Him, we become children of God. As He is born in us, through Him we are born to a new life by the Holy Spirit.

Christ is born, and we are brothers and sisters with Him. The Eternal God has united Himself with us, joining Himself with our history, heritage, and humanity in His birth of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. Let us now, in love and gratitude, join ourselves to Him — through prayer and love toward God and neighbor — so that we might rejoice together in the wonder of His Birth!