



## **SUNDAY BEFORE NATIVITY**

**December 18**

### **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.*



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*So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from 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, God in the person of Jesus Christ took upon Himself our human nature and our human history when He became incarnate of the Theotokos, the Virgin Mary. Although "begotten of the Father before all ages," as we say in the Creed, 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 form 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 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.

The entire Old Testament – the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, including the Psalms we chant in our services – all prophesy about the coming of Christ. In this passage, Matthew especially mentions the prophecy of Isaiah: “Behold, a Virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and His name shall be called *Emmanuel* (which means, *God with us*).” In Christ, God is “with us” not only because He is present everywhere but because He takes us, in all of our humanity, our sins (because He, as the Son of God, is without sin) upon Himself and to Himself.

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 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. Such as, a holy person who is renowned for humility is likely to produce a spiritual child who is also humble, and so on. All of us, together as the people of Christ, belong to “one flock, one Shepherd.” All of us belong to Christ and His Church.

We read in the passage that the Theotokos was betrothed (in other words, engaged) to Joseph, but before they were married, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Joseph decided to divorce her quietly to protect her. We see in Joseph a natural human doubt, for although he might have known the prophecy that “a virgin shall conceive and bear a son” (Isaiah 7:14), he did not realize that the greatest prophecy of all time was being fulfilled in his own household. However, the angel of the Lord assured Joseph that the Son in the Virgin’s womb was conceived supernaturally by the Holy Spirit, as foretold by the prophet Isaiah.

Joseph was a pious man of faith, so he could discern that the angel spoke truly. Discernment is a spiritual sense that grows through faith, and being faithful, Joseph responded in obedience, which is the product of faith. Even though he was still free to divorce her, Joseph chose to believe and obey. Joseph represents all of us because, in our human frailty, we struggle to understand how God can be Man and how a Child can be conceived by the Holy Spirit. It is a marvel of marvels – a miracle.

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 (in Latin, interior intimo meo). 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 Church, at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, affirms that Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God, confessed to be “in two natures, unconfusedly, immutably, indivisibly, inseparably united . . . no separated or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son.” This explicitly explains the significance of Christ’s incarnation. He is truly and fully one of us without ceasing to be God. He unites God and humanity. This is the foundation of Christianity – the bedrock of our Faith.

The genealogy of Christ shows us how God entered human history, having prepared the way before and through the birth of our forefathers. He took upon Himself our human nature and our whole human history to unite us to Himself. He is with each one of us in our humanity, our history, our families, our lives, and our struggles. He is always near and promises never to leave or forsake us. By being united to Him, we also become part of His genealogy, for He becomes our Lord, our Father, and our Brother.

Christ is born, and we are sisters and brothers 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!