SUNDAY BEFORE NATIVITY
December 19

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 Sala-
thiel 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
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

In the genealogy of our Lord, which is always read on the Sunday before the Na-
tivity, we are reminded of two very important truths. First, that God the Son took upon
Himself not only our human nature, but also our human history when He became incar-
nate of the Theotokos. That is, 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 relations. He is truly Emmanuel, meaning “God with us,”
and He unites in Himself history and eternity, God and man, heaven and earth, past,
present, and future. The second truth that we learn is that this was done for the purpose
of saving us, for He is named Jesus, meaning “God saves.” As the Son of God, and God
Himself, Jesus has always existed and therefore has no genealogy; as the Son of the
Virgin, however, He was born in time and has a human genealogy through her (though
he has no biological human father).

The Gospel of Matthew emphasizes, from the beginning, that this is the “gene-
alogy 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 genealogy in the Gospel of Matthew is divided into three sets of fourteen generations. The number fourteen was symbolic for the Jews and represented completion. The first generational set is from Abraham to David; that is, it begins with the father of faith to whom the promise of the Seed (Christ) was given (see Genesis 17:7, 22:18; Galatians 3:16, 29). As we read in the corresponding Epistle, “By faith Abraham sojourncd in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise . . . And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect” (Hebrews 11:9, 39-40). Something “better” has come, and that is Jesus Christ. Notice also that Matthew inserts four women into the list of men: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and “the wife of Uriah” (that is, Bathsheba). The common thread between these women is that they have associations with Gentiles – that is, non-Jews – and thus their inclusion prefigures Christ’s redemptive work for all men and women (Galatians 3:28), and indeed for all people (Revelation 7:9).

The second generational set runs from the reign of King Solomon to the Babylonian Exile in 587 BC, and the third and final set runs from the return of the exiles from Babylon to the birth of Jesus Christ; at which time the Jews were ruled not by kings, but by high priests. Saint John Chrysostom suggests that, “[Matthew] has divided all the generations into three portions to indicate that not even when their form of government was changed did they become better.” In other words, we must not place our hope in men, but in God, Who is the fulfillment of our hope.

Christ accomplished this fulfillment – that is, His incarnation – through the Theotokos, as we hear in this Gospel reading. As Saint Cyril of Alexandria says, “We confess the Holy Virgin to be the Mother of God (Theotokos) because God the Word took flesh and became man and from his very conception united to himself the temple he took from her;” and again, “This was the sentiment of the holy Fathers; therefore they ventured to call the holy Virgin, the Mother of God (Theotokos), not as if the nature of the Word or his divinity had its beginning from the holy Virgin, but because of her was born that holy body with a rational soul, to which the Word being personally united is said to be born according to the flesh.”

The entire Old Testament – the Law, the Prophets, 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)” (7:14). In Christ, God is “with us” not only because He is present everywhere,
but because He takes us, in all of our humanity (except sin), upon Himself and to Himself. As Saint Athanasius says, “The Word was made man in order that we might be made divine. He displayed himself through a body, that we might receive knowledge of the invisible Father. He endured insult at the hands of men, that we might inherit immortality.” Again, as Saint Gregory the Theologian wrote, “The deity is made man, so that manhood may be deified. We worship the Crucified God who has ascended in his deified body.” Therefore, He becomes “God with us” in such a manner, as Saint Augustine said, that He is closer to us than we are to ourselves (“interior intimo mea”).

Why is the genealogy presented in this Gospel reading so important? How does it speak to us today? First, genealogies were very important to the Jewish people because they established their identity as the people of God (through the witness of their ancestors who were faithful to God). Similarly, the Church is also validated, in part, by its own 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 example, 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 with regards to 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 χάρισμα in Greek) is likely to pass on that gift to spiritual sons and daughters through their teachings and spiritual training. For instance, a holy person who is renowned for humility is likely to produce a spiritual son or daughter who is very humble, and so on. What is most important to note, however, whether we consider the genealogy we read in Matthew, the ecclesiastical genealogy of our hierarchy, or the spiritual genealogy of our saints and elders, is that all of these are meant to emphasize and celebrate our connection with Christ (which is not exclusively personal, but also shared). All of us together belong to “one flock, one Shepherd” (John 10:16) – all of us belong to Christ and His Church.

After the genealogy, 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, however, being concerned that she would be accused of an affair (because they had never been together) and not wanting her to be punished by the authorities (according to the laws of the time), resolved to divorce her quietly. However, as Joseph considered this, 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” (Matthew 1:20). The English word angel comes from the Greek word ἄγγελος, which means “messenger”; and so, God has often sent
messages to His people through them. However, in and through Jesus Christ, we have a more direct and intimate communion with God. Christ made theosis (also known as deification) possible – that is to say, our union with Him in body and soul, so that, though human, we also become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:14).

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 know 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 was able to 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. As Saint Porphyrios says, “Obedience shows love for Christ. And Christ especially loves the obedient.” Joseph is a model of obedience that we should all aspire to follow more closely, as we all should strive toward a deeper and more genuine love for Christ. 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!

This is a fundamental dogma of the Church; an infallible doctrine and teaching that has been affirmed by our Ecumenical Councils: “Following the Holy Fathers we teach with one voice the Son of God and our Lord Jesus Christ is to be confessed as one and the same Person, that He is perfect in Godhead and perfect in manhood, very God and very man, of a reasonable soul and human body consisting, one in essence with the Father as touching His Godhead, and one in essence with us as touching His manhood; made in all things like unto us, sin only excepted . . . This one and the same Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, must be confessed to be in two natures, unconfusedly, immutably, indivisibly, inseparably united . . . not separated or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son.” This was declared at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD and more explicitly explains the significance of Christ’s incarnation; He is truly and fully one of us and truly and fully God – and thus unites God and man with one another. 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 not only our human nature (without sin), but our whole human history, so as to unite us to Himself. He is Emmanuel, God with us – with each one of us; in our humanity, our history, our families, our lives, and our struggles. He is always near, and He promises never to leave us or forsake us. We also, by being united to Him, become part of His genealogy, for He becomes not only our Lord, but our Brother (John 20:17), for “as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those
who believe in His name” (John 1:12). As Saint Gregory Palamas says, “Just as a new-born infant has received potential from his parents to become a man and heir to their house . . . so a person born again in the Spirit through Christian baptism has received power to become a son and heir of God, a joint-heir with Christ.”

Christ is born! – and we are sisters and brothers with Him! The Eternal God has united Himself with us, joining Himself with our very history, heritage, and humanity in His birth of the Holy Spirit and the Theotokos. 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!