

Thoughts from Father Michael ... “New Beginnings 2018”

January First begins a new calendar year, but more importantly it is the Eighth Day of Christmas – the Eighth Day of Christ’s earthly life – and the day we celebrate His circumcision. For on this day Mary and Joseph took the infant Jesus to the Temple to fulfill one of the requirements of the Mosaic Law. This rite God prescribed to become a participant of the Covenant God made with Abraham. In doing so Christ began to inaugurate the New Covenant He was sent to establish with His death and Resurrection.

The Twelve Days of Christmas sets the tone for this special New Beginning – a New Covenant between God and Man. Clearly, a joyous occasion for as the Prophet Isaiah announced seven centuries before “a people who walked in darkness have [now] seen a great light.” One of the verses –called a sticheron - chanted during the Festal Vesper Service of the Nativity of Christ is the following:

Come, let us rejoice in the Lord, proclaiming the present mystery;  
for He hath broken the middle wall of partition, and the flaming  
spear shall turn about, and the Cherubim shall admit all to the  
Tree of Life. As for me, I shall return to enjoy the bliss of paradise  
from which I was driven away before, by reason of iniquity;  
for the likeness of the Father, and the Person of His eternity,  
which is impossible to change, hath taken the likeness of a servant,  
coming from a Mother who hast not known wedlock; free from  
transubstantiation, since He remained as He was, true God,  
and took what had not been, having become a Man for His  
love of mankind. Wherefore, let us lift our voices unto Him  
crying, O Thou Who wast born of the Virgin, O God, have mercy on us.

There is a great deal of theology in this one sticheron. It starts by recalling Adam and Eve’s banishment from the Garden of Eden after they disobeyed God by eating of the Tree of Good and Evil. To prevent their return to the Garden, God placed a heavenly body – a Cherubim - with a flaming sword to guard its entrance [Genesis 3:24]. Christ now reopens the gate of Paradise by allowing the Cherubim to admit us. Remember there were two trees planted in the Garden, one was the Tree of Good and Evil and the other was the Tree of Life. God did not want Adam and Eve to get to the Tree of Life after eating the forbidden fruit. Now, Christ begins His visit to earth by re-opening the gates of Paradise and allowing us to partake of the Tree of Life –Himself - and to enjoy its bliss. The remaining section of the sticheron describes His taking on the flesh of human nature without giving up His divine nature, another critically important tenet of our faith.

How do we “lift our voices” with the heavenly host to celebrate this cosmic event?

Well as is customary with a New Year we take stock of ourselves and make resolutions. Usually these resolutions tend to deal with losing weight, staying or getting fit, finishing projects we started, and setting goals for ourselves we hope to achieve. It is equally

important to make resolutions about our spiritual lives. Just how are we to uphold our share of the New Covenant? What is expected of us?

In our current corrosive, adulterous, and corrupt generation we have the responsibility to be the salt of the earth that seasons the culture, and the leaven that raises and gives life to the loaf. In each generation of Christianity the faithful have kept the faith even as the faithful Hebrews did before the coming of the Messiah. We are their legacy. If they had not endured and stayed true to the Living God, in all likelihood we would not be here today. Our role is to emulate their commitment to stay in communion with God to become a beacon for the current generation, and for our children and grandchildren, and their descendants. We have an awesome responsibility. Yet, we will not be left orphans as God is with us – Emanuel – and His Holy Spirit who is in all places and fills all things is there to guide us; i.e. all of us acting together. How do we tap into this dynamic so that we do not succumb to the powers of darkness and be led astray?

Firstly, we need to exercise our spiritual muscles. Just as staying fit physically requires daily workouts and dieting, so too staying fit spiritually requires daily prayers and fasting.

So our New Year's resolutions for a spiritual wellbeing should include praying more, reading Scripture daily as well as religious articles and books like the writings of the Fathers and Mothers of the Church and the lives of the saints, and attending as many worship services during the week as our schedules permit. Moreover, we should ask each other about our struggles to stay focused on God. We should make time to discuss, yes and sometimes argue, with each other (including priests) about living a godly life.

Secondly, let us not be carried away by the latest fads and fashions. Let us sharpen our capacity for discernment so that we can separate the wheat from the chaff. For like our ancestors we live in a time described by the Prophet Isaiah.

Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity,  
off spring of evildoers, sons who deal corruptly!  
They have forsaken the Lord, they have despised the  
Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged. (1:4)

Isaiah goes on to state men will join field to field and forget the poor (5:8), women will wear expensive jewelry and clothes and reap disaster (3:16 – 4:1), and immature men will lead us (3:4).

Just as our faithful ancestors endured the evil days of their time, so must we endure ours. Not only does Isaiah describe the ills and evils of his day, he also provides hope that a new day will dawn. With God there is always hope. The new day has dawned with Christ's Nativity.

As we thank God for sending His only begotten Son to free us from death and to

inaugurate a New Covenant, let us rejoice and be glad, take stock of our lives, and act to show our thanks for His Nativity, His Circumcision, His Presentation to the Temple, and His Baptism by lifting our voices in prayer and worship.

Christ is now in our midst. Glorify Him!