

Focus on the Faith

The Adoration of the Magi By Archpriest Basil Rhodes

Joseph and the Most Holy Mother of God with the Infant Jesus were still in Bethlehem when Magi came to Jerusalem from a distant land to the east (Persia or Babylon). Learned men, engaged in observing and studying the stars, were called Magi or wise men. At that time, men believed that, at the birth of a great man, a new star appears in the sky. Many pagans within the confines of Persia had learned from the dispersed Jews of the coming of the Messiah, the Great King of Israel. From the Jews, they could even have learned the following prophecy of Balaam relating to the Messiah: *I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Scepter shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab* (Num. 24:17). ("Moab" is understood here as a personification of the enemies of the Messiah.) The Persian Magi thus expected that, when the promised King would be born, a new star would appear in the sky. The prophecy of Balaam spoke of a star in the spiritual sense; nevertheless, the Lord, in His mercy, to bring the pagans to faith, gave a sign in the sky in the form of the appearance of an extraordinary star. Having seen it, the Magi understood that the expected King had been born.

After a protracted and long journey, they finally reached Jerusalem, the capital of the Jewish kingdom, and began to ask: Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. These words from such conspicuous strangers, stirred up many of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, including King Herod, to whom the arrival of the exotic eastern scholars was immediately reported. From the first days of his accession, Herod's throne had been shaky. The people hated him as a usurper of the Davidic throne and a tyrant. The last years of Herod's life were complicated still more by personal adversities and bloody reprisals. He became extremely suspicious, and for the least cause executed enemies both real and

imagined. Thus perished several of Herod's children and even his wife, whom earlier he had loved ardently. Sick and decrepit, Herod now resided in his new palace in Sion. Having heard of a King Who had been born, he became particularly agitated. Vulnerable in his old age, he feared that his rule would be overthrown and handed over to the new-born King.

In order to clear up just who this new pretender to the throne was, Herod gathered all the priests and scribes - men that knew the books of Sacred Scripture well - and he inquired of them where Christ should be born. They answered: In Bethlehem of Judea: for thus it is written by the prophet Micah. Then Herod privately summoned the Magi, found out from them the time of the appearance of the star, and sent them on to Bethlehem. Feigning piety, the cunning Herod said to them: "Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also." In fact, Herod was going to use their report to put the Infant to death. The Magi listened to King Herod without suspecting anything, and went to Bethlehem. There again that star appeared, which they had seen before in the east. Moving across the sky, it went before them, indicating the way. In Bethlehem, the star stopped over that spot where the Infant Jesus was, Who had been born.

The Magi went into the house and saw the Infant Jesus with His mother. They bowed down to the ground before Him and presented to Him their gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh (a precious aromatic oil). In the gifts of the Magi, one may see the following symbolic significance. They brought gold to Him, as to a King (as tribute or taxes); frankincense, as to God (incense is used at divine services); and myrrh, as to a Man Who must die (the dead were anointed with oils mixed with aromatic myrrh). Having worshipped the King awaited by all, the Magi would have returned to Jerusalem and to King Herod. However, an angel appeared to them in a dream, revealing Herod's perfidious designs, and commanded them to return to their own country by another way, without passing through Jerusalem. Tradition has preserved the names

of the Magi, who afterwards became Christians: Melchior, Gaspar and Balthasar.

Thus, the first to worship the Savior Who had been born were shepherds, nature's true children, who could open up before Him only the treasure of their hearts, full of simplicity, faith and humility. Significantly later came the Magi from the East, imbued with erudite wisdom, who laid down gold, frankincense and myrrh, together with reverent joy, before the Divine Infant. They had had to make a long journey to reach Judea, and even from Jerusalem they were not immediately able to find the birthplace of the King of the Jews. Does this not indicate that both simplicity of heart and profound, conscientious erudition lead equally to Christ? But the first way is more direct, short and sure than the second. The shepherds were guided directly by angels, while the Magi were "taught" by an unreasoning star, and, through Herod, by the scribes and the Jewish elders. Not without difficulties and dangers did they attain their desired goal, and they did not hear the heavenly harmony that sounded over the earth - *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will among men.*

From the Holy Fathers

How We Must Understand "Emmanuel."

By St. Cyril of Alexandria
Taken from the "Scholia on the Incarnation of the Only-Begotten One"

God the Word is named Emmanuel, because He laid hold of the seed of Abraham and partook of flesh and blood. Now Emmanuel is interpreted, God is With Us. But we confess that the Word of God was not simply with us "locally" (for in what place is God not, Who fills all things?) Nor is He merely seen to come to us by way of His help (for thus was it said to Joshua, "As I was with Moses, so I will be, with thee also" (Joshua 1:5), but He became Emmanuel because He was made in our

condition, i.e. in human nature, without forsaking His own Nature, for the Word of God is Unchangeable in Nature.

But why was it, when God said to Joshua, "As I was with Moses, so I will be with thee," that he was not called Emmanuel? This is the reason: because He is said to be thus (a helper) to all of the saints. We therefore say that He, God the Word, became "with us," at that time of which Baruch says, "He did show Himself upon earth and conversed with men, and found out all the way of instruction and gave it to Jacob His servant and to Israel His beloved, for He is our God and there shall none other be accounted of in comparison with Him" (Baruch 3:25-38.) As far then as pertained to His being God by Nature, He was not with us; for incomparable is the difference between Godhead and manhood and exceeding great the difference of the natures.

And therefore the Divine David was calling to Mystic relationship God the Word Who had not as yet come to us and saying in the Spirit, "Why standest thou afar off, O Lord? why dost thou overlook us in times of need, in affliction? (Psalm 10:1 LXX)" Therefore He stood not far away from us, but was with us, Who while He remained what He was, took hold of the seed of Abraham, as I said; accepted moreover the form of a servant, and was beheld as Man upon the earth.

But Christ and Emmanuel signify to us the Same Son, the One, because....He was with us in the way I have explained, whereof the Prophet Isaiah tells us saying, "Behold a Virgin shall conceive and bear a Son and shall call His Name Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14.)" For when the holy Virgin conceived by means of the Holy Spirit, but bare according to the flesh a Son, then too was He called Emmanuel; for the Incorporeal was with us by birth in the flesh, and that took place which was told by David, "God, our God shall appear manifestly, and shall not be silent," (Psalm 50:1), and I Who speak am at hand. For the Word Who spoke through the Prophets as yet Incorporeal, now becomes Corporeal.

Matushka's Corner

Christmas Traditions - The Advent Wreath

By Mat. Ioanna Callinicos Rhodes

The Christmas Season is upon us once again and we find ourselves in the Nativity Fast, beginning On November. In the West it is known in the West as Advent. It is a four week fasting period beginning on December 1. One tradition that exists in the West is that of the Advent Wreath. It is a wreath that contains four candles that are evenly distributed around the wreath. and a fifth candle in the center. Each candle having its own significance. It is such a beautiful tradition that anticipates the Nativity of Christ with the lighting of each candle on each Sunday preceding Christmas. There are four purple candles and one pink or rose candle, which is lighted on the third Sunday, signifying the midpoint of Advent, This candle is the reminder the journey is half over and we are getting closer to the Light of Christ, entering the world of darkness. This is one of those Western Customs that we can easily take, adopt and make Orthodox, by just adding three more candles one for the first day of the Nativity Fast, and two more for the two extra weeks .

The wreath itself is very symbolic because it is a circle it represents the eternal, unending love of God. The greener represents eternal life because it is ever, green, and undying. Now as far as the candles they too, have symbolism. The **first** candle symbolizes **Repentance**. which is lit on November 15th, the beginning of the Nativity Fast, because with repentance comes fasting. The **second** candle lit on the first Sunday of the Fast is symbolic of the **Theotokos**. It is the Sunday that is closest to the Feast of the of The Presentation of the Theotokos into the Temple, November 21st. . As She dedicates her life to God, so must we. The **third**, candle is lit on the second Sunday of the Fast, and symbolizes **Thanksgiving**. It is time of harvest and we are grateful to God for His bountiful gifts to us. Usually it is the closest Sunday to Thanksgiving. The **fourth**, candle is lit on the third Sunday of the Fast and it is called

the **Prophecy Candle**. It is dedicated to all the Prophets of the Old Testament, who for told of the coming of Christ. The **fifth**, candle, honors Bethlehem. It is the **Bethlehem Candle**, which is lit on the fourth Sunday of the Fast, and represents, the place of Christ's birth. it reveals His Incarnation and becoming a man for our salvation. The **sixth** candle is lit on the fifth Sunday of the Fast, and acknowledges the Angels. This is known as the **Angel Candle**, because the Angels are the final heralds of Christ's coming into the world to save us. The **seventh**, candle is lit on the sixth Sunday of the Fast and it is known as the **Sheppard's Candle**. It recalls what the shepherds witnessed and believed, then revealed to others what had happened to them. The **eighth**, last and final candle is in the middle of the wreath, and is the **Christ Candle**. it images **Christ as the Light of the World**. it is lit on Christmas Day.

There are seven equidistant candles, on the wreath with a larger white candle in the center of the wreath. The one candle on the wreath is green, which is lit on the first day of the Fast is connected to the greenery of the wreath. The other six are the Royal Purple (dark burgundy or maroon colored candles). They stand for the royalty of Christ. They symbolize the humility and repentance, which the condition in which we must find ourselves as we await the coming of the Lord. The large central white candle which is free-standing reveals the Christ's purity and perfection and the Giver of Light.

Upcoming Events

December 5 - Luncheon to Support Our Lady of Kazan Skete

Come all ye merry Gentlemen (and Ladies) to our fundraising luncheon for Our Lady of Kazan skete on December 5. The nuns from this skete bake our proshpora among many good works that they do. There are about 10 nuns who live in an old house with a small chapel in which they pray for us and for all.

St Nicholas has a special bond with these prayerful nuns. They welcome us to visit them, stay for a private retreat, pray with them - whatever our needs are. During a visit one feels as if the cares of the world fade away and there is a special prayerfulness that can be very enlightening. For many years women from St. Nicholas have visited them to pray and to help with their multitude of tasks. They grow fruits and vegetables and need help keeping up a large gardens. Men from St Nicholas have visited to help with handyman tasks but much more is needed. Several of the nuns are elderly and ill.

For 2010 St Nicholas Saratoga has designated the skete as the charity to which we are donating. Please come to the luncheon. We will be having salmon and all the fixings. Several people have volunteered to help make the lunch. We are hoping for 50 people to come join us. If you aren't able to attend, please consider a donation in support of these wonderful nuns.

December 5 – Homeless Shelter

As in years past St. Nicholas is serving dinners to the homeless at the Sunnyvale Armory the first Sunday of December, January, February and March. Ann Worobey is arranging this as in the past. She needs people to cook the turkeys that will be served as well as side dishes. Also people are need to serve between 6pm and 8pm. A sign-up list in the Narthex is available. Please contact Ann with any questions.

December 24 - *Kutiya* and Caroling,” – To Be or Not To Be?

Kutiya and Caroling,” a tradition for a number of years here at St. Nicholas following the Vigil on Christmas Eve, has sadly been excluded from the schedule this year. The reasons are that the parishioners, who used to organize the event, decorate the Hall, prepare the *kutiya*, punch and snacks, as well as organize the clean-up, are largely no longer here. Some members of the choir, whose voices are already maxed-out from the Vigil Service, are reticent to sing much afterwards, wanting to save their voices for the Nativity Divine Liturgy. If, however, we have some parishioners who might like to take on these tasks: i.e. organizing,

prepping, decorating, leading the singing in some wonderful, traditional carols, etc., please let Fr. Basil know right away! Thanks