

Reading Scripture
in the Orthodox Church
The Festal Cycle

*To
Father
Florin
Boitan
who
taught
me
the
sense
of
festal
joy*

**Reading Scripture
in the Orthodox Church
The Festal Cycle**

Doru Costache

AIOCS Press
Sydney, 2019

Reading Scripture in the Orthodox Church
The Festal Cycle

by Doru Costache

Text copyright © 2019 remains with the author

All rights reserved. This text is copyright. Except for brief quotations in critical publications and reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior permission of the author.

The Australian Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies
AIOCS Press <https://aiocs.net/>

ISBN 9780648440116 (paperback)



A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

The publication of this book was made possible by a grant from the Australian Research Theology Foundation Inc. and the generous gift of a private sponsor who wished to remain anonymous.

Cover design and layout by Ion Nedelcu

The Second Day of Christmas

26 December

HEBREWS 2:11–18 To perform his duties as our high priest and in order to help us, living in the fear of death and subject to temptation, the Lord became one of us. (Through the incarnation) he partook of the same nature, sharing in our flesh and blood, being like us in all respects. As such, he experienced temptation and suffered death. Strengthened by these experiences, as a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, he helps the descendants of Abraham. These are the believers who experience temptation and live the fear of death. (As a result of his incarnation and ministry), we are all of one source (and so one holy family), sanctifier and sanctified together.

MATTHEW 2:13–23 After the departure of the magi, the angel told the holy family in a dream to seek refuge in Egypt. Thus the prophecy was fulfilled (Hosea 11:1) that God's Son was called from Egypt. Meanwhile, upon the order of the enraged king Herod, soldiers killed all the young boys of Bethlehem aged two and younger, hoping that one of them was the Messiah. This tragedy was foretold by Jeremiah (31:15). After the death of Herod, the angel appeared again to Joseph in a dream, instructing the holy family to return to the land of Israel. Fearing the successor of Herod on the throne of Judea, they sought refuge in Nazareth. Thus the (anonymous) prophecy that (the Messiah) was to be called a Nazarene was fulfilled.

WISDOM The double Christmas narrative continues. The events following the departure of the magi from the East are rendered in simple prose, but not devoid of dramatic content. When Christ, the light of the world, began to shine on earth, the forces of darkness, upsurging from humankind's untamed subconscious, offered murderous opposition. Representing the worst within us, Herod, in his mad desire to maintain power for himself and his lineage, proceeded to have the Messiah, the heir of David, killed. In the process he committed a genocide: the kill-

ing of the innocent, pure sacrifices, like Abel, destroyed by humankind's darkened soul. An angel of God sent the holy family to Egypt and later announced to them when it was safe to return. This was perhaps the same angel of annunciation and who revealed the name of Yeshua, Jesus, "the Lord who saves." And so the Anointed one, the high priest of our salvation, was able to continue his journey on earth. This is where the second narrative—the topic of adoption—comes into view. Christ's incarnation was instrumental to his effectiveness as our saviour. This task required him to know human nature from within (John 2:24–25) and to strengthen our race to withstand the storms of temptation (Hebrews 4:15–16). As one of us, he freed us from the fear of death which enslaved us, since he tasted it and vanquished it. And in becoming one of us, our brother, we all become one family, born from the same source, namely, from above (John 1:12–13). The distinction between the sanctifier and the sanctified remains, but the features of both sanctifier and sanctified are the same. This is the tremendous mystery of Christmas: the purpose of he who was born for us is to make us as he is. Thus human darkness is transformed into light (1 Peter 2:9–10). Thus the evil, murderous conscience of humankind is purified and enlightened. Glory be to him!

MESSAGE Against all odds, God's plan of salvation works. The Saviour was kept safe and we, his believers, emerged from the darkness into the light of the kingdom.

KEYWORDS darkness, evil, fear, freedom, temptations

The Third Day of Christmas 27 December

ACTS 6:8–15; 7:1–5,47–60 Full of grace and power, Stephen performed many wonders and signs. The members of the diaspora synagogue of the Libertines argued with him, but they did not prevail, for the Spirit was with him. Then they sent false witnesses to lie about him (as their

KEYWORDS contemplation, humility, icon, service, transformation

The Entry of the Lady in the Temple

21 November

HEBREWS 9:1–7 A description of the holy tent of the first covenant: its two parts, the sacred objects therein, particularly the ark of the covenant containing the golden urn holding the manna. Throughout the year, priests would officiate in the first part of the tent, whereas the high priest would enter only once a year in the second part, the Holy of Holies.

LUKE 10:38–42; 11:27–28 Martha endeavoured to set up a great feast in honour of Jesus while her sister Mary sat at the Lord's feet, listening to his words. In the rush of hospitality, Martha asked the Lord to order Mary to help her, but he pointed out that Martha's festive worries were no match for Mary's choice to listen to him. No one could take from Mary the joy of listening to the Word, whereas Martha's worries lead nowhere. At hearing this, a woman praised the Lord by blessing his mother. Jesus replied that blessed are those who obey God's word.

WISDOM Today, as every year, the Orthodox begin to chant at matins a string of hymns known in Greek as *katabasies* (intoned by the chanters who, to do so, step down from their high chairs). The first of these hymns consists in an exhortation to welcome Christ into the world: "Christ is born, glorify him! Christ from heaven, meet him. Christ on earth, arise. Sing to the Lord all the earth and in merry spirits, O you peoples, praise him for he is glorified." This and the ensuing hymns are sung from today till Christmas, constituting a hallmark of the Advent in Byzantine iteration. Saint John Damascene (d. 749) composed these hymns in the eighth century by stylising the poetic prose of Saint Gregory the Theologian's (d. 390) Christmas sermon, probably for the year 380. What matters is that today we enter a mystical stage of our Christmas preparation, which began with fasting a week earlier on 14 November. According to

the above hymn, we are called to react to Christ's birth by arising from our brokenness, weaknesses, failures, and sins. We are summoned to rejoice in the presence of the Lord, perhaps in the same sense in which Saint Patrick's (fifth century) 'Breastplate' articulates enjoyment of his omnipresence: "Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise, Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me, Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me." We must befittingly prepare ourselves in order to glorify the Lord who has come and who will come (according to the two possible readings of the Aramaic *Maranatha*, "Come, Lord" and "The Lord has come" at 1 Corinthians 16:22). To guide us to this experience, we are given an example of preparation for the Lord as well as a revelation of the outcomes of meeting him. Indeed, it is for these reasons that we celebrate the transformation of the Virgin Lady in the temple of the incarnation. The apocryphal story which serves as a pretext for today's festival—from the *Gospel of James* 7–8—speaks of her entry in the temple where, according to the passage from Hebrews 9 above, she could not actually enter. But in establishing this festival the Church interiorises the apocryphal story by inviting us to contemplate the Virgin Lady become, through practical virtue (signified by Martha) and contemplation (signified by Mary), the temple of God's dwelling. She did not enter the Jerusalem temple. She became the temple of the Lord incarnate. She is the tent of the covenant: the outer room of the priests by her practicing virtue; the inner room of the high priest through her contemplative disposition; the golden urn by containing Christ, the true manna from heaven (John 6:32–33). In her footsteps, through the praxis of virtue, contemplation, and prayerful union to God, we become true temples of divine presence (1 Corinthians 3:16–17; 6:19). As Saint Symeon the New Theologian (d. 1022) shows, "when we believe wholeheartedly and fervently repent, we conceive the Word of God in our hearts, like the Virgin" (*Ethical Discourses* 1.10). Elsewhere in the liturgical calendar, Palm Sunday points to our transformation into God's temples by way

of a historical event, the Lord's entry in Jerusalem. We must walk, then, on the path as true children of Christmas.

MESSAGE As the Virgin Lady became a temple of the Lord's presence, so we believers should walk in her footsteps to become true temples of God.

KEYWORDS contemplation, presence, temple, union, virtue

The Dormition of the Lady 15 August

PHILIPPIANS 2:5–11 Believers should emulate Christ's mind, or rather his way of thinking. As his action (that is, the incarnation) revealed, his mind was humbly set. For, being glorious in the divine form before the incarnation, he did not begrudge being like one of us and so he put on the slave's form of our fallen nature. He further descended obediently (to the will of God) unto death, like one of us, but his death was on a cross, dishonourable. On account of his humility, God exalted him to the extent that only those who acknowledge his (divine) name as Lord will be able to praise (thus, know) God (and so inherit eternal reward).

LUKE 10:38–42; 11:27–28 Martha endeavoured to set up a great feast in honour of Jesus while her sister Mary sat at the Lord's feet, listening to his words. In the rush of hospitality, Martha asked the Lord to order Mary to help her, but he pointed out that Martha's festive worries were no match for Mary's choice to listen to him. No one could take from Mary the joy of listening to the Word, whereas Martha's worries lead nowhere. At hearing this, a woman praised the Lord by blessing his mother. Jesus replied that blessed are those who obey God's word.

WISDOM Today's readings are the same as those for the festival of 8 September. Correspondingly, we should return to that reflection while we replace birth or nativity with dormition or death. Today we celebrate

the words of the fourth-century author known as Saint Macarius the Great, “although the (Christian) crowds, similar to the people of the world, (believe that) the difference and distinction refers to forms and signs, the strange (characteristic) of (true) Christians does not consist in outward forms and signs” (*Spiritual Homilies* 5.4). In order to be the new creation, Christians must undertake personal transformation through internalising the cross. The new creation is born when believers learn from the Lord to descend from their pedestal of glory, crucifying their own mind and heart out of love for everyone, indeed for the world, so that they may serve all as the Lord did. That is how Saint Paul honoured the cross of Christ, by looking at people and at the world through the lens of the cross, through the remaking of his own life (Galatians 6:14). We too must revere the cross—or rather the One who on the cross revealed to us the mystery of salvation—by becoming the new creation.

MESSAGE To revere the cross truly is to walk in the footsteps of the crucified Lord, by adhering to the way of thinking and living of Christ himself.

KEYWORDS crucifixion, eternal life, external signs, internalisation, salvation

The Elevation of the Holy Cross

14 September

1 CORINTHIANS 1:18–24 The message of the cross perplexes many. A crucified God scandalises and attracts mockery on the part of those who, adhering to worldly wisdom, cannot accept that a humble and compassionate God is able to die for his creation. But worldly wisdom has never led anybody to the true God. Although crucified and derided, the true God loves God’s people and saves them through the very foolishness of the cross. For believers, Christ crucified is no less than the very power and wisdom of God.

JOHN 19:6–35 Following the crowd's request to have him crucified, Pilate asked Jesus who he was, expecting to hear a defence. But the Lord was quiet. He assured Pilate that everything that was unfolding was happening by the will of God. Upon hearing this, Pilate attempted to convince the crowd to change its mind, but in vain. So he surrendered Jesus to the soldiers, who then led him to Golgotha where they crucified him together with two others. Pilate had a trilingual inscription placed on Jesus' cross, attesting to his royal status. Jesus' mother, along with Clopas' wife Mary and Mary Magdalene, were near the cross. Jesus entrusted his (unnamed) beloved disciple to the care of his own mother and his mother to the care of the disciple. When the soldiers noticed that he died, they pierced his side with a spear and blood and water gushed from the wound. The writer of this true account witnessed these events.

WISDOM When we contemplate the narrative of the passion and see the Lord's endurance, we also realise the extent of human evil. Those who demanded the death of an innocent and beneficent man were of darkened mind and evil heart. The story, therefore, is not only about the Lord's crucifixion, but the humankind itself, which had crucified him. But, above all, the narrative teaches about the Lord's patience, humility, love, and serenity. Despite the enraged crowds which demanded his death, he remained in charge of his own destiny. He could have begged Pilate to spare him, who would have done so. He could have cursed them, but he did not. Such was the strength of the innocent One, the creator and saviour, unjustly condemned by his children (John 1:10–11). Regarding humankind, the story teaches of its depravity, its twisted thinking and feeling, its injustice and cruelty. For the sake of their religion, the crowds killed a supposed blasphemer. Such is the deadly nature of religion when its followers are blinded by vicious passions. And Saint Paul rightly added that it was not just religious fanatics who misunderstood the Lord; wise men of classical learning did the same (1 Corinthians 1:22–23). Not much has changed in two thousand years since those events. Religious zealots, Christian and otherwise, who disagree with the good news of love for all, still hate Christ and Christians, as do the arrogant intelligent, who cannot make sense of his humility. Dostoyevsky's parable of the Grand

Inquisitor captures perfectly this attitude towards Christ in depicting the passive crowds and the cynicism of the intelligent. But the serene conduct of the misjudged and crucified Lord is a sublime lesson for life, the highest philosophy. His disciples are not spared either, facing ridicule, marginalisation, persecution, and death (Romans 8:36); they too emulate him, the only acceptable example. They shed tears and show compassion for the enraged and murderous humanity, as from the Lord himself (Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60).

MESSAGE The good news of the crucified Lord is that God's love embraces all; this is the paradigm the believers must heed.

KEYWORDS crucified, death, humility, love, religion

Saturday after the Elevation of the Holy Cross

1 CORINTHIANS 1:26–2:2 Paul did not preach at Corinth in lofty discourses; he preached Christ crucified. In this light, the Corinthians should understand that God does not work through lofty means. If people must boast, they should do so in the Lord, acknowledging his counsel and deeds. The Corinthians, now members of God's family, are the very proof of God's wisdom, for none of them was noble, powerful, or wise by human standards. As chosen members of God's people, the Corinthians must act accordingly, heeding the divine call.

JOHN 8:21–30 In a veiled manner, Jesus told the Jews about his crucifixion as his being lifted up by them because of the words of the Father which he conveyed. For him, the crucifixion was a "going away" where they could not follow because they were from below, of this world, whereas he was from above, not of this world. The listeners were puzzled at his words, but the Lord seemingly expected them to understand his allusions (to the Old Testament messianic prophecies). Because they did not