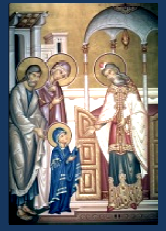


Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



Dear Brothers and Sisters:

On this joyous Nativity Morning I greet you with the time-honored salutation: "Christ is born!"

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There is an incredible and amazing simplicity about the Feast of the Birth of Christ, the Incarnation of the Son of God. In the form of a helpless baby, God—who could have come in power and majesty to this world—made Himself very "small" for us, so as to make it easier for us to approach Him, kneel before Him, adore Him, and, above all, *love* Him. And it is our love that this Lord Jesus wants from us more than anything else, not just today, but everyday and

always. But who cannot love a newborn child?—only the most cold-hearted.



By thus becoming a small child, the Word of God, the Eternal Logos, the "light of the world," as St. John the Evangelist called Him at the beginning of his Gospel, became something that we weak and fallible human beings could actually begin to grasp in a modest way, while at the same time not losing our sense of the deep mystery before us. From the moment of His

birth, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is no longer distant and far removed and beyond the reach even of children. He now begins to reveal Himself in His fullness, and we see that that fullness is expressed in the one word: love—as St. John also tells us: "God is love, and he that dwells in love dwells in God, and God in him."

Of course we don't mean the sentimental, emotional kind of "love" that has been so much promoted by the entertainment media of the West over the last century. Rather what is

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meant is that love which is self-sacrificing and completely selfless and giving of itself to others, even unto pain and death, if necessary.

But the incarnate love of the Christ Child, this “smallness” and “simplicity,” comes to us, finally and ultimately in the “smallness” and outward “simplicity” of the Eucharist itself—Holy Communion—wherein we receive Jesus Christ, Body, Soul and Divinity, in every Divine Liturgy. We receive the God-Man who suffered, died, and was resurrected for our sins, and we receive the small baby who was born on this day in Bethlehem—a newborn infant, yet at the same time also the Lord of Hosts. We receive the Holy One of Israel, who walked this earth, worked miracles, and, finally, was assumed into Heaven.

This *tremendous* “simplicity” (and it really *is* possible for simplicity to be “tremendous”!), this simplicity, given to us at the very opening of the drama of salvation two thousand years ago, reminds us of the simplicity of the whole Gospel and the message given to us and preserved so carefully, so lovingly, and so cautiously by the Church since then, but which is so disdained in our secular world today where so very many people now no longer remember or know what Christmas is about. According to recent troubling studies and polls, a growing number now think of Christmas as being about family time, or being generous to those less fortunate. Not

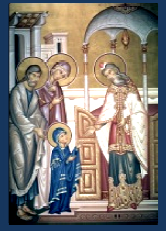


that there is anything wrong with those values. But this is really not what Christmas is about!

The Orthodox icon of the Nativity of Christ is remarkably different from the Western Christian representation shown on Christmas cards, with its depiction of the Holy Family. For us, this icon shows very profound and deep theology, as well as reflecting quite accurately the Gospel accounts of the birth of Christ and the events surrounding it. But one

Sunday Sermon

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of the things I want to especially point out to all of us this morning is the fact that the Holy Fathers of the Church always saw a special significance or symbolism in the swaddling clothes of the Christ Child in the icon. Our knowledge that the Lord Jesus was wrapped in this way comes from the Gospel account itself, where the angel tells the shepherds: "...for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in *swaddling cloths* and lying in a manger." (Luke 2:11-12)

Curiously, in the art of the Christian West, Jesus is usually shown naked, but in Orthodox sacred art He is carefully and thoroughly wrapped in swaddling clothes—and in these "swaddling clothes", the Church Fathers believed (and we continue to believe), is seen a foreshadowing of the burial shroud of the Lord. Similarly, the cave of the manger in the icon resembles the tomb that awaits Him at the end of His mortal life, from which He will rise on the third day. In other words, the icon of the Nativity portrays the full destiny of this Divine Child, and the plan of salvation for us all. Thus, this icon, as another has said, is also for us "a map of our souls."

Brothers and sisters: let us this day, and every day, keep this sacred "map" close in our minds and hearts, for it is a sure guide to the eternal kingdom, over which rules our Lord, God, and Savior, Jesus Christ, to whom be glory, honor, and worship, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Christ is Born!