

SUNDAY BEFORE THEOPHANY

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

We continue to walk spiritually at Christmas time with the newborn Jesus Christ. We recently met Jesus, who was born in a poor stable in Bethlehem. Today we meet Jesus Christ as an adult, preparing for his missionary work and his first sermon, "...repent and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:15) He goes to the Jordan River to be baptized by John the Baptist. John the Baptist prepared people for the encounter with Christ, the Messiah, by saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie." (Mark 1:7)

We can see the transition from the manger in Bethlehem to the Jordan, from the baby Jesus, to Jesus in adulthood. In Bethlehem, the birth of Jesus was announced by the stars, the singing of angels, and the visits of shepherds and wise men. In the Jordan River, Jesus is revealed to people by John the Baptist and the voice of the Heavenly Father, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Mt. 3:17)

Why was John's sermon so effective that crowds of people came to listen to him and receive Baptism? He was a man who sincerely loved God and lived by faith in salvation. Not only his words, but his whole life was a confirmation of his relationship with God. The desert in which he lived, his camel-hair clothes, his meager food — acrid and wild honey — all testify to his great simplicity and involvement in the suffering of the people and their poverty.

Most of the sayings of today's Gospel reading speak of John the Forerunner and are addressed to all of us, because the word of Scripture is always relevant and alive. This gospel calls us to prepare our souls for the coming of Christ. To prepare them as John the Forerunner urged them to do, through repentance. The Church today tells us not to delve into the cares of life, but to draw closer to Christ, who came into the world for our salvation.

John Chrysostom called Christians to a pious celebration of the beginning of the year. Here is what he says, "A Christian should not celebrate at the appointed time, not on the first day of the month, not only on Sunday, but spend his whole life in constant celebration." So how should we celebrate? Let's listen to the Apostle Paul, who says, "Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." (1 Cor. 5:8) That is how we Christians should celebrate the beginning of the new year.

It is because we are concerned with various worries of life that we forget about the true essence of these Christmas and New Year holidays. The Church addresses us with the words of the Gospel of Mark, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." (Mark 1:3) Let us purify our hearts and souls from the cares of life and follow Christ, so that together with the Apostle Paul, who addresses us today, we may say, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day...." (2 Tim. 4:7-8)

Thank you all, dear believers, for your prayers and for your continued support. May your hearts be filled with holy peace and God's love.

Happy New Year!

Fr. Serhii Deiak

Circumcision of our Lord, Basil the Great Archbishop

Today we have a triple Feast, the Lord's Circumcision, or the naming of Jesus, the Holy Father of our Basil the Great, and the New Year.

The Old Testament circumcision was a type of New Testament baptism. The Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph tried to fulfill every command given by the Lord to their people, so on the eighth day, the baby boy was named Jesus. The name Jesus is very dear to every Christian: in him is all our hope; our help in every moment of life, especially in difficult moments. We read about the great power of this name in the books of Scripture. The Holy Apostle Paul writes of the name of Jesus to the Philippians, "Therefore God has highly exalted him bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth." (Phil 2:9-10) Therefore, the name of Jesus must be pronounced with great piety.

The Feast of the Circumcision of the Lord coincides with the Feast of the New Year. We leave the old year with its memories and start the new with its hopes and expectations. We know the past and can no longer change it. It already belongs to history and the future is completely open. What will happen tomorrow? We can't say anything for sure.

God's providence does not reveal the future to us, because not only do we not need it, but it can harm us. Does a person need to know that illness and sorrow await him, that the human body is inevitably susceptible to disease, withers and suffers from senile weakness and infirmity? Does a person need to know whether he will live next year in abundance or poverty, if we are born naked, as the word of God says, and leave this world naked?

He will never come back to us last year. It is like a river that carries everything that floats on it into the sea, so this past year will take with it everything we lived, thought, breathed. Never a year or even an hour or a minute goes back.

We meet the new year with a feeling of gratitude to the Lord God for everything that our Lord sent last year: for the sun, for light, for warmth, for the harvest, for health, for recovery from illness, for protecting us from all adversity - for we thank God for all this with the words and feelings of our believing heart.

Dear brothers and sisters, we pray to the Lord that He will send His Father's blessing this year. In this New Year we will be less sick, that all troubles and misfortunes will pass us by, that God's peace will be with us, in our families, in our homes, and to all those for whom we pray.

Happy New Year!