

ADVENT - The Nativity Fast - the Fast of Philip

The Nativity/Theophany Season in the Orthodox Church begins with a 40 day Fast called Advent. It begins the day after the Feast of St. Philip the Apostle and is sometimes called "the fast of Philip." When we read the Gospel for this Feast of St. Philip we can begin to see why this Feast comes the day before Advent.

Read the Gospel lesson for this day. It is from St. John's Gospel, Ch. 1: 43-51. Who did Philip tell Nathaniel to come and see? Whom did Philip find? Philip invited Nathaniel to come and see Jesus, the Son of Joseph, the carpenter. In other words he invited him to come and see the man Jesus. Isn't this whom we see on the Feast of the Nativity? When Nathaniel finally saw Jesus, whom did he recognize Jesus as? He, Nathaniel, recognizes Him as the Son of God. He sees Him not merely a man, but as God in human flesh, as the Son of God.

Advent is our preparation to COME AND SEE Christ, the man, born in a manger on the Feast of His Nativity. When we come to Church and hear the hymns of the Pre-Feasts and the Feasts we are invited to COME AND SEE a little further like Nathaniel did. We are invited to see Him as the Son of God. We will see Him as the Son of God in the Feast of His manifestation, the Theophany. The word Theophany means the manifestation or the making of God known. To do this requires hard spiritual preparation. We cannot see this with our physical eyes. We see it only by the grace of the Holy Spirit through our "spiritual eyes." If we participate in the pagan celebrations that are going on in the world around us, our spiritual eyes will be blind and we will not recognize Jesus and who He is.

Because it is a fasting period, our preparation consists of three important things: prayer, fasting and almsgiving, and coming to church for Liturgy.

Why do we fast? Doesn't this make us miserable? It will if we fast for the wrong reason. We fast to help us realize that the excess of things we lust, or want very badly, are not really necessary for life here in this world and surely not necessary for eternal life in the Kingdom of God. When we are always busy chasing after the material things, food and fun, we forget about God, His Son, Jesus, the Church and what the real purpose of our life is. We are too busy satisfying our selves with those things. Running after food and drink, entertainment, watching TV, going to movies, parties, etc. steers us away from thinking about God, His incarnate Son and our salvation. Fasting from those things turns our attention to the more important things such as:

CHRIST AND WHO HE IS; WHAT HIS COMING MEANS TO ME; WHAT HIS CHURCH IS ALL ABOUT? WHY I AM PART OF HIS CHURCH? WHY AM I HERE IN THIS WORLD? WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF MY LIFE?

Fasting is a means to turn our attention to these and other spiritual things.

Fasting is especially important before these feasts in today's world. Today's world emphasizes having fun and getting all excited about parties and gifts and presents. These things may not be evil in themselves, but the world we live in places so much emphasis on these things that they push the real meaning of the season aside. As Orthodox Christians then, we must fast from those things before the feast to help us to realize that they are not lasting. Only one thing is and that is Christ and what He brings to us through the celebration in these feasts. What we celebrate is REAL and eternal. What the world celebrates is temporary. We celebrate the coming of the One who is REAL and gives REAL life.

Fasting without prayer is useless except maybe to lose a few pounds. If we fast and do not pray our fast will be in vain. Prayer puts us in daily communion with God the true source of life. Through prayer we begin to know why we fast. Prayer keeps God present before us and we fast because we want to come closer to God, to become humble and to be a servant as His Son the perfect servant, and not to be so concerned about what I eat and drink and what I wear and what I do.

Prayer and fasting will lead us to be less concerned with our own wants (lusts). It helps us to see the other person and what the other needs. It makes us realize that we are to be a servant just as Christ was. Fasting leads the realization of the need to help others. It might be a kind word. It might be giving money or clothing or sharing our time with those in need. This is almsgiving and it is a natural outgrowth of fasting and prayer.

Coming to Church for the services before the Feasts and for the Feasts makes the Feasts real and present to us. When we come to Church we enter into the joy of the Lord. To do this we must COME and SEE. In the liturgy we come and see and enter into the joy of what is celebrated. Only within the Liturgy is there a Feast for us. With the Feast there is the INCARNATE Christ, the son of God made man. Only with Christ is there joy and real life. Without the Feast and its Liturgy what would we have?