30/12/2024

The Feast of the Holy Forefathers at the Patriarchate



On Sunday, 16th/29th December 2024, the Feast of the Forefathers was celebrated by the Patriarchate, that is, the forefathers of Christ according to the flesh, both before and under the Law, who were pleasing to God. This feast commemorates the line of patriarchs beginning with Abraham, the one blessed by God, and from whose seed the Most Holy Theotokos was born, through whom, by the Holy Spirit, our Lord Jesus Christ was conceived and born.

This feast was celebrated in the beautiful and grand church of the village of the Shepherds / Beit Saḥur, with its iconostasis carved into the rock, through the Divine Liturgy, presided over by His Beatitude our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem, Theophilos III. Concelebrating with Him were their Eminences the Archbishops, Aristarchos of Constantina, Methodios of Tabor, and Aristovoulos of Madaba, along with the Hieromonks of the Holy Sepulchre, led by Elder Kamarasis Archimandrite Nektarios, the Hegumen of the Shepherds, Archimandrite Ignatios, and the Priests of the Church, Hanna Rasmawi, Fr Issa Mousleh, and Fr Savvas Kher, as well as the

Hierodeacons Simeon and Eulogios. The choir of the parish chanted, and the ceremony was graced by the presence of the Honorable Consul General of Greece in Jerusalem, Mr Dimitrios Angelosopoulos, the Mayor of the City, Mr Said Khoury, and the former Mayor and current Minister of Tourism, Mr Haiek, with the active participation of the members of the Community.

Before the Holy Communion, His Beatitude delivered the following sermon:

“Scripture foretold that ‘God would justify the nations by faith, and He preached beforehand to Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed.’

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Pious Christians,

The grace of the Holy Spirit has gathered us all in this sacred place, the historical land of the “shepherds who kept watch in the fields” (cf. Luke 2:8), that we may festively perform the memorial services for the Holy Forefathers: Adam, Enoch, Noah, Melchizedek, Abraham, and Jacob; with the Lawgiver Moses and Aaron, Jesus, Samuel, and David; with Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, along with the twelve, Elijah, Elisha, and all the prophets; Zacharias and John the Baptist, and all those who proclaimed Christ, the Life and Resurrection of our people.”

The God who established all things from nothing was about to become incarnate, through the Holy Spirit, and come forth from the pure blood of the Virgin Mary, who had been predestined and chosen before the ages and from all generations. Concerning her, the most eloquent Isaiah prophesied: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call His name Emmanuel” (Isaiah 7:14).

This Son of the Virgin Mary, namely Emmanuel, whom Moses and the Prophets had foretold and whom the disciples and Apostles recognized as our Lord Jesus Christ, according to the true testimony of the holy Evangelist John, who said: “Philip findeth Nathanael, and saith unto him, We have found Him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph” (John 1:46).

These forefathers of Christ according to the flesh, both before the Mosaic Law and under it, are honoured by our Holy Church. Especially is Abraham, the patriarch, honoured, to whom the promise was first given by God, saying to him: “In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 22:18, Genesis 12:3). This Abraham, though a Gentile, that is, an idolater, was called by the Holy Spirit to the knowledge of the true God, as the Lord says: “God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24).

From this Abraham came Jacob, and from Jacob, Judah, from whom Christ came, and all the other descendants of Abraham, as the divine Paul proclaims, saying: “For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:28-29).

Explaining this word, the Zigavenos says: “Through Christ, ye are the seed of Abraham, of whom Christ is the preordained seed.” This is also expressed by the hymnographer of the Church, who says: “By faith hast Thou justified the Forefathers, when through them Thou didst betroth Thyself aforetime to the Church from among the nations. The Saints boast in glory that from their seed there is a glorious fruit, event she that bare Thee seedlessly. By their prayers, O Christ God, save our souls” (Apolytikion of the Forefathers).”

From the above, it is evident that the true fleshly descendant of Abraham is Jesus Christ, the Son of Abraham, as the Evangelist Matthew testifies (cf. Matthew 1:1); however, He (Christ) is “greater than Abraham” (John 8:53), according to the Evangelist John. And consequently, all those who belong to Christ and His Church, of which He is the Head of the Body (cf. Colossians 1:18), are the seed of Abraham.

The Church of Christ, beloved brothers and sisters, is the one that proclaims and announces the great and ineffable mystery of the condescension and incarnation of the Word of God and our Saviour, Jesus Christ. This great and divine mystery of godliness, according to which “God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory” (1 Timothy 3:16), is also proclaimed by the hymnographer of the Church, who says: “He that is full is emptied out in the flesh for our sakes, and a beginning doth He receive Who from before eternity is without beginning; He that is rich becometh poor, and though He is the Word of God, He reclineth in a manger of dumb beasts as an infant, working the refashioning of all men from the beginning of time” (Matins, Ode 5, Theotokion)”.

Here, the question arises: what does it mean “He reclineth in a manger, working

the refashioning of all men from the beginning of time”? The Lord worked the work of salvation in Christ, “so that the whole man, the same in God and man, might be renewed, fallen as he was under sin,” says St. Gregory the Theologian. And St. Cyril of Alexandria, explaining the words of Christ, “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35), says: “I am the bread of life, not the bodily bread, which puts an end to the suffering of hunger and saves the flesh from perishing. But rather, I renew the whole living being to eternal life and establish man, who was created to be eternal, above death, stronger than death.”

In this, the Birth of Christ is precisely related: “to make man always as he was made,” meaning the salvation of man, as St. Gregory Palamas also says: “The birth of Christ is beyond description according to His divinity; but He is genealogically related according to His humanity, being the descendant of humans, the Son of Man, having deemed it worthy to become Man to save man.”

According to Zigavenos, the Word of God, having become man, did not avoid “our reproaches,” meaning He did not scorn human weaknesses, which are considered not sinful. In other words, God took on human nature with all its imperfections, except for sin, and healed it. “For He came as a physician, not as a judge,” Zigavens says again.

Christ, beloved brothers, whom we have put on in our baptism, we are called to welcome Him in the manger and the cave of our hearts spiritually, that is, in the Holy Spirit and not in a worldly, materialistic way. We are to heed the Apostle Peter’s exhortation: “Brothers… purifying your souls in obedience to the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned brotherly love, love one another fervently with a pure heart, being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God which lives and abides forever” (1 Peter 1:22-23).

Many happy returns and peaceful and blessed Christmas!”

At the end of the service, a reception was held in honour of His Beatitude and His delegation, and for the joy of many, hosted by the Community, followed by a meal. During this festive occasion, His Beatitude once again addressed those present with the following words:

“Being God, the God of peace, the Father of mercies, Thou sent to us the Angel of Thine great counsel, bringing peace. Therefore, having been guided by the light of divine knowledge, we rise early from the night, glorifying Thee, O Lover of mankind.”

Esteemed President and honorable members of the Ecclesiastical Council,

Your Excellency, Minister of Tourism,

Honourable Mayor,

Holy Fathers and beloved brothers,

We offer glory and thanksgiving to the Holy Trinity, who has deemed us worthy to celebrate the memory of the Holy Forefathers amid the judgment of war, the displacement of people from their homes, and unspeakable trials.

Today’s celebration, in the village of the shepherds who were in the fields near the place of the Birth of our Saviour Christ in Bethlehem, serves as the forerunner of the celebrations of the great feasts, namely the arrival of the Angel of the Great Counsel of God, who brings peace to the world.

This peace, which is of God, primarily concerns the reconciliation of man with God, as Saint Paul proclaims, saying: “For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” (Romans 5:10).

This is because righteousness and peace entered the world through the Birth of Christ from the pure blood of the Virgin Mary.

The rulers, that is, the leaders of “this present evil age” (Galatians 1:4), were not able, nor can they achieve peace between the disputing peoples and nations, and therefore the Prophet David says: “Do not trust in princes, in sons of men, in whom there is no salvation” (Psalm 145:3).

Our Holy Church is the one that proclaims peace in the world by word and deed at all times: “For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace” (1 Corinthians 14:33), Saint Paul proclaims. “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:27), Christ says.

Yes, beloved brothers and sisters, our hearts must not be troubled nor afraid, for

we have a place of refuge and a place of protection, “the Church of the Lord and God, which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). Proof of this is the unceasing Christian presence in the Holy Land, in the land of Palestine, the historical, tangible, visible, and active testimony of the Rum Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem and all Palestine. Our venerable Patriarchate of Jerusalem, founded upon the redemptive blood of Christ, stands as a guarantee of the Christian presence and testimony not only in the Holy Land but also in the entire Middle East, according to the word of the Lord: “And the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).

Many happy returns, peaceful and blessed Christmas!”

Finally, His Beatitude visited and inspected the new Church of the Cemetery being built by the Community in the land of the Patriarchate, in the estate of the Tower of Saint Sabbas. He then blessed the new shop of pilgrimage items belonging to the Roman Orthodox and faithful friend of the Patriarchate, Mr Athanasius Abu Aeta.

From the General Secretariat

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