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Archbishop Elpidophoros of America Homily for the Sunday before Theophany December 31, 2023 Saint Gerasimos Greek Orthodox Church



Beloved in Christ,

I am so very pleased to spend this last day of 2023, and this last Sunday - New Year's Eve - worshipping with you, the faithful members of Saint Gerasimos.

I think of the marvelous and spiritually rewarding days that many of us spent together in Kefalonia back in October, and I am overcome with gratitude for this wonderful community. I want to thank especially Gerasimos Athanasatos, the president of the Parish Council, for his leadership and all the work he accomplished with so many of you to make that pilgrimage to Kefalonia the fruitful and beneficial trip that it was.

Today - the 31st - is the Apodosis of the Feast of Christmas, and therefore this Sunday looks ahead to the Baptism in the Jordan, and is called the Sunday before the Theophany - Κυριακή πρὸ τῶν Φώτων - rather than the Sunday after Christmas. It always amazes me, that in these few days we know as the Δωδεκάημερον - the Twelve Days that lead from Christmas to Theophany - we behold the Infant of Bethlehem come to His complete humanity.

We are already seeing the Lord in His Thirtieth Year, with only a brief stop for His Twelfth Year tomorrow on the Feast of the Circumcision on January First.

This accelerated timeline leaves many questions unanswered about how the Lord was raised; what his experience was as a child, and indeed how he was formed by His parents and His culture as a person. Yes, the Lord Jesus is God, and as such, He is immutable. But He is also a human being, with all the factors and exigencies of life that every human being endures and engages.

To see Him, then, in the fullness of His humanity, is a message for all of us. But what does it convey?

That we, His followers and disciples, are called to be in the fullness of our humanity, whatever age we are. For just as a child can be kind or cruel once they learn to speak and to act, so this duality persists throughout life, even to the white hairs of old age. Our vocation is to choose kindness, to choose truthfulness, to choose goodness. At whatever age we find ourselves.

We see in today's Gospel reading, which begins: "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,"* that all the following verses are about John the Baptist, and the preparation for the coming of this extraordinary Son of God, Who arrives at the peak of His own human history. What then, are we to understand about ourselves from this Gospel reading today?

I believe that the message is that we must engage and prepare for life and the fullness our own human existence. That our lives are to be readied to enter into the wholeness of our human nature, one that is healed and even deified by the Lord Jesus Christ. That we are to travel with Him to the Jordan River, and there receive not only instruction in how to live, but also, by Holy Baptism and all the Mysteries of the Church, be granted the grace to do so.

Thus, my beloved Christians, we arrive at what Saint Paul calls:

“... a mature personhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” †

This is our high calling in Christ. This is, ultimately, the purpose of our lives. To live with all the emotional, mental, spiritual, and ethical goodness that is possible, within the families, cultures, and environments within which we find ourselves every day.

On this last day of the Year, the Church calls us to look forward to our mature personhood in the fullness of Christ. No matter our age or our station in life, we are called to be part of the never-ending pilgrimage that we call “life.” When we went to Kefalonia together, we were able to experience a special aspect of this pilgrimage.

May the New Year of 2024 keep all our journeys safe and sound, and bring us to see the whole of our lives as the everlasting pilgrimage to the Life Divine, and to the eternal life in God with all the Saints.

Amen. Χρόνια Πολλά και Καλή Χρονιά!

* Mark 1:1.

† Ephesians 4:13b.

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