

Fasting

Fasting is a physical metaphor for the spiritual life. When we fast from food we place our body into physical hunger. This should remind us of the spiritual hunger our soul experiences for God. For the brief times of our fast our physical reality matches the spiritual one. Both our body and soul hunger for the Lord. For the fast to be fruitful we must use the physical hunger as a call to prayer. During the moments of the day when we feel the strong hunger pangs we should direct our thoughts to God.

The Jesus prayer is a good tool for moments like this. The Jesus prayer, or resting in the Holy Name of our Lord, is an ancient monastic practice. This centering prayer places one in the presence of Jesus and invites him into our lives. The name Jesus is the center of the prayer and those who practice the Jesus prayer for a long time often end up simply invoking his name. As an assistance to starting the process of centering on the name of Jesus the following form of the Jesus prayer is commonly used.

Lord Jesus Christ (while slowly breathing in)
Son of God (while slowly breathing out)
Have mercy (while slowly breathing in the mercy of Jesus)
On me, a sinner. (while slowly breathing out our sins)

Typically the prayer is said a hundred times in a single meditation session before an icon of Christ. This is a good private meditative prayer practice. But the prayer is short and can be used throughout the day to sanctify moments of our time. Using the Jesus prayer to fill in the moments of our day as we walk from place to place, as we wait for that elevator, while sitting in traffic, this prayer COULD become a habit. The automatic response we take as our mind wanders in the empty moments of our day. This is how some monastics have seen the command of St. Paul to “pray without ceasing”.

“By fasting as by swords, all the demons are driven away since they do not endure nor are they any match for its great charm. They love the voluptuary and the drunkard, but if they look on the face of fasting they are not able to stand, but they run far away, as Christ, our God, taught us, saying, ‘This kind of devil goes out by prayer and fasting.’ Hence, we have been taught that fasting gives us eternal life.”

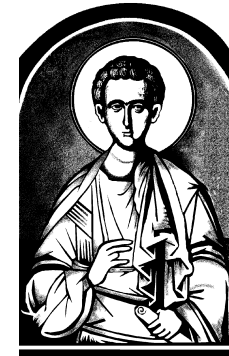
Kontakia of Romanos on Fasting

Steve Puluka

Phillipian Fast

The Winter Pascha

Week One



“ Christ is Born! Glorify Him!
Christ is coming from the heavens! Meet Him!
Christ is upon the earth, exult!
All the earth sing praises to the Lord!
Peoples sing with Joy; for He is gloriously
triumphant.

Nativity Canon Ode 1 ””

Origins of the Fast

The Feast of the Nativity was added to the calendar by Rome in the fourth century. By the end of this century it had been accepted by the east as well. Likewise, the fast before the Nativity began in the west, the second council of Tours (France) in 567 advocates a fast from the Feast of St. Martin (November 11) until the Nativity, for Monday, Wednesday & Fridays. The practice is ascribed to St. Perpetuus Bishop of Tours who died in 491. Pope Gregory established the current four week Advent

“Tell me, my child, how the seed was planted in me and how it grew in me? I behold Thee, merciful One, and I am amazed that I, who am unwed, nurse Thee; And though I see Thee in swaddling clothes, still I behold my virginity untouched, for thou hast preserved it, and yet consented to be born a newborn babe, the God before time.”

Mary in
Romanos’
Nativity
Kontakia

Season in the eleventh century for the west. In the east, the Coptic Church (Egypt) mentions the forty day fast before the Nativity in the eighth century. The Council of Constantinople in 1166 officially set the fast for the Byzantine tradition.

The forty day fast imitates the period of preparation for Pascha. The feasts of Nativity/Theophany and the Resurrection are the alpha and omega of Christ’s ministry on earth. The mystery of the incarnation opens the door for our salvation and the mystery of the Resurrection brings us forth to the New Life. The oldest Typicons (Liturgical Rule Book) we have designate the Nativity as a three day Pascha. Very early Christians made this connection between the two feasts.

We are surrounded by Advent in the United States, that is if there is any spiritual preparation for the Nativity at all. Advent is anticipation of the coming of Christ. Over time in the west this came to be a dual anticipation, the Christ Child in Bethlehem and the second coming of Christ at the end of time. Here the focus is on the appearance of Christ in the world, in both the past and the future forms.

Phillip’s fast is not advent. The focus is on incarnation of Christ and the role of Mary as the representative of the human race. We do not see the future coming of Christ but we see the plan of salvation of God. We see the shadow of the Cross in the manger of Bethlehem. The focus of our meditations is the self-emptying of God to take the form of a slave, a human being. How much God loves us to do this great deed. How marvelous that we too can become sharers in the Divine nature by the incarnation of Christ.

“Truly, O people in Zion, inhabitants of Jerusalem, you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you. Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, “This is the way; walk in it.”

Isaiah 30:19-21

“O most pure Bride of God, being revealed as a Temple, a palace, and a living heaven, you are offered today in the temple of the Law to live therein”

Matins Ode 4

Entrance of the Mother of God into the Temple

Mary the Temple

During the first week of the Phillipian Fast we have the Feast of the Entrance of Mary into the temple. Here we make the explicit connection between the Nativity and this feast by singing the canon of the Nativity on this day. Mary is the central human character in the Nativity and the means by which the God is made flesh, the incarnation. Mary’s participation in the Divine plan to save the human race is our model. We must cooperate with the plan of God in our lives the same way that Mary does.

In this feast we make the explicit connection between Mary and the temple of God built by Solomon. At vespers on the feast we read Ezekiel 43:27-44:4. This is the description of the Glory of the Lord descending on Solomon’s temple in a vision. The Lord takes around the temple and passes through east gate of the temple. He then orders Ezekiel to keep that gate shut and none are to use this gate because the Lord has used it. This image of the gate has been applied to Mary and the miraculous birth of the Christ child. Just as God’s presence came to rest on the temple of old, God came to rest in the person of Mary. Just as God used the east gate of the temple and none can now use this Holy gate, Christ is born of Mary and none can use this Holy gate of birth. Mary is the temple of God par excellence.

St. Paul also teaches us that we are temples of the Holy Spirit by virtue of our baptism. While Mary is the first, and best, temple of God, she is also the example for us. We receive the Spirit of God in our Baptism and must act as the “royal nation, and Holy priesthood” that Peter calls us to in his letter. The events surrounding Christ’s incarnation are not history but examples to follow and promises of help.

“Clearly did Balaam reveal to us the meaning of the words which were prophesied, saying that a star would rise up, a star which would dim all prophecies and divinations, a star to destroy the parables of the wise, their teachings and their enigmas, a star much brighter than this star which just appeared, for He is the maker of stars about whom it was written: ‘From Jacob shall rise up a newborn babe, the God before time’”

The Magi in
Romanos’
Nativity
Kontakia