

Date: January 9, 2025

Subject: BURL-Choir Sunday After Nativity Weekend NOTICE

Dorogiye!

This Saturday/Sunday, the Church celebrates the Sunday After Nativity and the Kinsmen of the Lord (Svatih Bogootets).

The attached Tropar / Kondak text sheet contains the special prayers that will be sung.

Today, the Church commemorates the Protomartyr and Archdeacon Stephan! Happy Namesday and MNOGAYA LETA to our o. Stefan!

Brief summaries about the Sunday After Nativity and the Kinsmen of the Lord, and Protomartyr and Archdeacon Stephan are provided below.

(Note: unless otherwise indicated, all dates are “old style”.)

#### \*\*\*\* SUNDAY AFTER NATIVITY

In the Sundays before the Nativity, the Church recalled all the forefathers, both of the flesh and of the spirit, who lead up to Christ. Today the Church celebrates the memory of three particular saints who are closely related to our Lord, David the King, Joseph the Betrothed, and James the Brother of the Lord.

The prophet and King David is the source of the royal line of the Hebrews from which both the Virgin Mary and the righteous Joseph were descended. Because of this lineage, Jesus Christ could properly be called, “King of the Jews”, for in the flesh, He is of royal lineage. Of course, because He is also God, the maker and ruler of all creation and was therefore not only King of the Jews but King of all that is.

From each of these righteous men—David, Joseph and James—we learn much about the spiritual life. David was a man after God’s own heart, as the scripture tells us and so from him, we can learn how to draw near to God. Even when he fell into grave sin, we see from David's deep and heartfelt repentance our own path back to God when we fall away.

James, the Brother of the Lord, was the first bishop of the Church in Jerusalem. He presided over the first apostolic council (which is described in the book of Acts) and was finally martyred for his confession of Jesus Christ.

Joseph, the betrothed of the Virgin Mary, was chosen by God to be the guardian of Jesus Christ and his holy Mother, a task that he performed with great humility and diligence.

Too often when we consider the saints we tend to project our own situation and passions on them and as a result they become a bit clouded. Few are more distorted in popular life than the righteous Joseph, and so it is important to stop occasionally to see who he really was.

First, we must remember that Joseph was not a young man, he was indeed already a widower of many years with at least six grown children (there may have been more as the number of daughters is uncertain). At the time he was chosen to be the guardian of the Virgin Mary he was already eighty years

old, and according to the Great Menaion of St Dimitri of Rostov he lived to be 110 (meaning that he died just before Jesus began His public ministry).

Although he was of royal lineage (being in the line of David the King) Joseph was a poor man who earned his living by means of hard labor (for he was a carpenter). Being a carpenter in that time did not mean going to the lumberyard and picking up a load of 2x4's, plywood and nails with which to build a house—rather it meant going out, felling a tree, sawing it and shaping it into what was needed and then, without nails, assembling that lumber into what was desired. It was extremely hard labor, and this was the daily life of Joseph.

He was miraculously chosen by God to be the guardian of the Virgin Mary when she was no longer able to live in the Temple. Although it was the custom for young women such as her to return home and wed and raise families, she was unable to return home as her parents, Joachim and Anna, had died and she was the only child. Also, she had made a vow to remain a virgin dedicated to the service of God, and the priests recognizing her piety and holiness did not wish to force her to break that vow.

Therefore, all the eligible widowers were gathered at the temple and from each one was taken a staff which was then placed in the Holy of Holies. The staff of Joseph began to bud just as the staff of Aaron had in ancient times, to indicate that he was the one chosen by God. Though he sought to avoid this honor, Joseph finally submitted to the will of God and took the Virgin Mary into his household, and for her protection she was betrothed to Him (otherwise she would be considered a mistress, being found in the household of an unrelated man.) Thus, the Church calls Joseph "the betrothed" to set him apart as the chosen protector of the Virgin Mary and her divine Child.

Joseph was also righteous; that is, he heard the word of the Lord and kept it. When the Virgin was found to be with child, he assumed this pregnancy to be the result of youthful passion and adultery. He set out to resolve the matter secretly so that she would not be accused or exposed to public dishonor. But before he could accomplish this, an angel came to him in a dream and revealed to him that this pregnancy was not the fruit of sin, but rather that it was the miraculous fruit of righteousness and that the Virgin had been chosen by God to bear the Messiah, miraculously conceived without an earthly father.

Joseph became, at this moment, the very first convert to the Christian faith, for he abandoned his own fallen opinion and received with joy the revelation of God that this Child would be for the salvation of not only the people of Israel, but of all mankind. Even though this belief was tested by the evil one (as we see depicted in the icon of the Nativity) Joseph did not doubt, but remained faithful to the word of God that had been given to him by the angel. Later, after the birth of the Child, an angel again came to him and instructed him to take the Child and his mother (note the words here that the angel did not say "your wife and son" or even "your betrothed" but "the Child and his mother", indicating the true relationship between them all) into Egypt to avoid the wrath of Herod. Here we see a man, over eighty years old, in obedience to the word of God embark upon a very difficult journey of months over the sands of the desert from Israel into Egypt. Even today this is a difficult journey by car or train and at that time the only transportation was to walk. But Joseph, putting his trust in God, obeyed.

From this journey to Egypt and the return we can see the complete dependence and faith in God's providence in the life of Joseph. Joseph had no real idea where he was going. He did not know anyone in Egypt; he had no resources or connections. Like the Hebrew people of old, he simply followed day by day the leading of God. Even after having arrived in Egypt and settled there, when they returned again Joseph was redirected throughout the journey avoiding Jerusalem and Judea, going into Galilee and finally returning to his home in Nazareth.

Throughout this whole time, Joseph acted out of simple trust and obedience to the word of the Lord. He had no guarantees or even any idea of what he would find each day, but trusted in God's provision on a day-to-day basis, knowing that as long as he was living in obedience to the word of God that God would in turn provide for him his needs.

Some thirty years later, Jesus Christ would reiterate this very attitude of simple daily dependence on God in the Sermon on the Mount. Because he heard the word of the Lord and kept it, because of his simple and unshakeable trust in God, and unwavering dependence upon providence of God, Joseph is known as one of the Righteous Ones.

In being the betrothed of the Virgin, Joseph is also known as the guardian and protector first of the Virgin Mary and then of her child the God/man Jesus Christ. This ministry as guardian of the Virgin and child is an angelic calling. From the intervention of the angels in the birth of Christ we can see that they themselves descended from heaven to serve God Who would become man and to wonder at the mystery of the incarnation. God, Who was above all things, submitted Himself not to the angelic life, but descended even to the physical world and became man. He was subject to all the dangers and corruption of the fallen physical world. He could be harmed; he could be injured and even killed. But the angels continued to serve and protect him, and when they saw danger, they warned those who were charged with the protection of the divine Child.

When the angels saw the intent of Herod to destroy the Christ Child through mass murder of the infants, the angel came to Joseph, who was the earthly protector. The angel warned Joseph in a dream and committed the Child into his care. Joseph became the agent on earth of the angelic host who served God in heaven. In taking the Child and his mother to safety in Egypt, Joseph was doing the work of the holy angels and so shared the angelic calling. In Egypt, and later in returning to Israel, he continued to be the agent of the angelic host; and even after his death, he performed the angelic task of proclaiming the good news—for when he descended into Hades to await the coming salvation of the God/man Jesus Christ, he proclaimed the good news of the coming of the promised One to those among the righteous who awaited His coming, that they might be freed from the captivity of the evil one.

Joseph was indeed one of the righteous, and as the betrothed of the Virgin Mary, he became the agent of the angelic host in protecting and serving the incarnate God. His unflinching and undoubting trust in God stands for us as a shining example of how we can order our own lives. Just as he did, we trust in God, we hear the word of the Lord, and order our lives in obedience to it. Just as he served God in imitation of the angels, so also we serve our Lord Jesus Christ.

The righteous one, Joseph the betrothed, is the very first convert to the Christian faith and stands even now before the God/man Jesus Christ and His mother, the Virgin Mary as the first of us all who have left behind our own fallen and sinful lives in order to serve God and follow Jesus Christ as He leads us from earth to heaven. (*Adapted from an article by Archpriest David Moser.*)

#### \*\*\*\* PROTOMARTYR AND ARCHDEACON STEPHEN

The Holy Protomartyr and Archdeacon Stephen was the eldest of the seven deacons, appointed by the Apostles themselves, and therefore he is called “archdeacon.” He was the first Christian martyr, and he suffered for Christ when he was about thirty. In the words of Asterias, he was “the starting point of the martyrs, the instructor of suffering for Christ, the foundation of righteous confession, since Stephen was the first to shed his blood for the Gospel.”

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Saint Stephen preached Christianity and defeated Jewish teachers of the Law in debate. The Jews maligned Saint Stephen, saying that he had uttered blasphemy against God and against Moses. Saint Stephen came before the Sanhedrin and the High Priest to answer these charges. He gave a fiery speech, in which he recounted the history of the Jewish nation, and denounced the Jews for persecuting the prophets, and also for executing the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ (Acts ch. 7).

During his speech, Saint Stephen suddenly saw the heavens opened and Jesus Christ standing at the right hand of God. The Jews shouted and covered their ears, and rushed at him. They dragged him out of the city and stoned him, but the holy martyr prayed for his murderers. Far off on the heights stood the Mother of God with the holy Apostle John the Theologian, and She prayed fervently for the martyr. Before his death Saint Stephen said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. O Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." Then he joyfully gave up his pure soul to Christ.

The body of the holy Protomartyr Stephen, left to be eaten by beasts, was secretly taken up by the Jewish teacher Gamaliel and his son Habib, who buried Stephen on his estate. They both believed in Christ, and later received holy Baptism.

Saint Stephen is also commemorated on August 2 (Translation of his relics) and on September 15 (Uncovering of his relics in the year 415).