

December 20, 2018

Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Lord,

Christ is Born!

I wish you all the very best during this Holy Season. May Christ be born in our hearts and bear fruit in our lives as he was born in Bethlehem and ministered to the world.

In thinking about a gift that I could present to you in the words that follow, I feel that I can do no better than to encourage each of you, young and old, toward the following three actions which, if consistently pursued and practiced, will become a habit which blesses you and those you know. This admonition is a present which can always be re-gifted without any loss to the giver. This gift of admonition has three parts, which are mutually inclusive. They are the Bible, Prayer, and Worship. I pray that you will receive this gift of admonition - practice it and pass it on to all your loved ones during this Nativity Season.

1. Read the Bible at least once every day. Listening to a recording of the Bible will also do. When reading and/or listening, do so in sequence. Start at the beginning and go through chapter by chapter, paragraph by paragraph, leaving nothing unread. This reading should include every verse, even the boring parts! (A recording may come in handy here, as the reader on a recording never gets tired.) Remember, before the modern age most people could not read. St. Antony of Egypt learned the Bible by heart by hearing it read over and over again. Modern technology makes knowledge of Scripture even easier for us than for this great Saint. Take advantage of this. It is a way that Christians can redeem modern technology for the building up of the Body of Christ!

When reading, keep in mind that passages which may seem strange, irrelevant, or even cause our eyebrows to rise are in the Bible for a purpose. Nothing is in it simply to take up space, but every part has a function and place. If we persist in our reading and have faith in the process, we will find that many questions are answered and difficult passages are understood in the light of the whole Bible. With continuous reading, in sequence, difficult passages take on meaning and relevance not apprehended simply by a quick glance. This is a context where the phrase "you get what you pay for" holds true. The Bible is God's Teaching and rewards faithful students who persevere in its reading. Psalm 119 is an important text which teaches us how and why we should love God's Word. This is a perfect example of the appropriate attitude believers should have to God's written Word. This Psalm, itself a section of God's Word, is a love poem to God's Teaching. Let us imbibe and cultivate this attitude toward the Bible.

Here is one suggestion, though by no means the only possibility: Read one chapter from the Old Testament and one Psalm from the Book of Psalms and one chapter from the New Testament each day. My hope is that all the Faithful of St. Andrew Parish and all our friends would grow in the knowledge of God through the reading of the Scriptures.

The Bible is meant to give us the thoughts appropriate for understanding the God we worship and the words to speak about him and to him in prayer. Knowledge of the Old and New Testament cannot be over-emphasized. In his book entitled "Exposition of the Orthodox Faith,"

book 1 chapter 2, St. John of Damascus wrote these words: “It is not within our capacity to say anything about God, or even think of him, beyond the things that have been divinely revealed to us, whether by word or by manifestation, by the divine oracles at once of the Old Testament and of the New.”

2. In addition to Bible reading, one must pray every day. If we learn about God but do not pray, we are no better than the religious people our Lord criticized in the Gospels. First of all, the Lord’s Prayer should be an essential part of our daily prayer. It is the Prayer of Prayers. Next we should think of the Book of Psalms. The Psalter is a Prayer Book and Hymnal all in one. This Book of Scripture should be known and prayed frequently. Let these words of prayer come forth from our lips unto the Lord like an ever-flowing stream. They are God’s words recited back to him and are always appropriate. They exist for this purpose.

Petitions for family, friends, neighbors, and ourselves should also be present in our prayers. These are most effective, however, when our ears are attuned to God’s Word. The reason for this is simple: God’s words and desires put into our mouths always yield fruit because they are God’s Words and God will never deny Himself. This is what Jesus means when He says, “Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; if you ask anything in my name, I will do it” (John 14:13,14). This phrase “in my name” is equivalent to saying, “according to God’s will.” This phrase is used many times in Scripture. Here are some other places in John where it is used specifically in relationship to prayer: John 14:26; 15:16, 16:23, 24, 26.

3. Attend Church regularly, especially the Divine Liturgy. At the Liturgy we worship the God who teaches us in Scripture and guides us in prayer on a daily basis. The words we use to worship come from Him and are offered back to Him. Remember the words, “Thine Own of thy Own we offer unto Thee in behalf of all and for all.” In this offering of worship, the Church, gathered around our Lord Christ, is fed with His very Self. We do not exist at this event, only He does. He becomes our breathing and our breath. He alone is inhaling and exhaling. All of this is in keeping with what he teaches in His Scripture and through the Prayers, which He gives us from His own mouth to occupy our days and nights. He feeds us with the Medicine of immortality, which is Himself, and the only Remedy which can save us.

In the Name of our Lord let us at St. Andrew’s Church dedicate our lives to the daily reading of the Bible, daily prayers, and regular worship at the Divine Liturgy. May our Patron St. Andrew the Apostle pray for us to have the strength to do these very things not only in 2019 but throughout our lives for our benefit, the benefit the Church, and the glory of God, who is Himself the beginning and end of the entire process.

O Lord, may our hearts be like the stable in Bethlehem, so Christ may be born in us by faith as we Listen, Pray, and Worship him, admonishing others to do the same.

Christ is Born! Glorify Him!

Fr. Herman