



Parish Information Bulletin

Program for 28 January—3 February 2024

SUNDAY 28 JANUARY <i>St Ephraim the Syrian</i>	15TH SUNDAY OF LUKE, Luke 19: 1-10 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 7.30am Orthros and Divine Liturgy
TUESDAY 30 JANUARY <i>Synaxis of the Three Hierarchs</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 7.30am Orthros and Divine Liturgy
FRIDAY 2 FEBRUARY <i>The Presentation of Christ in the Temple</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 7.30am Orthros and Divine Liturgy
SUNDAY 4 FEBRUARY	GOSPEL READING: Matthew 22: 35-46 EPISTLE READING: 2 Corinthians 4: 6-15

St Ephraim the Syrian

St. Ephraim was born early in the fourth century in the ancient city of Nisibis in Mesopotamia, where the Roman Empire bordered on the Persian Kingdom. At one time Mesopotamia belonged to Syria and for this reason St. Ephraim is known as "the Syrian." He was born of Christian parents before the Edict of Milan was issued

(313), establishing official toleration of religion, and, as he later wrote, his ancestors "confessed Christ before the judge; I am related to martyrs."

When he was still a baby, his parents had a prophetic dream: from the boy's tongue sprang a lush vine which produced abundant clusters of grapes. The more the birds ate the fruit, the more it multiplied. Later it was revealed that these clusters were his sermons, the leaves of the vine—his hymns.

Remember not O Lord the sins of my youth. (Ps. 25:7) Judging from his youth, however, one could never have guessed his future greatness. In spite of his parents' having educated him in Christian precepts, he was impetuous and even rather wild, like an unruly colt which resists the bridle: "I would quarrel over trifles, acted foolishly, gave in to bad impulses and lustful thoughts. My youth nearly convinced me that life is ruled by chance. But God's Providence brought my impassioned youth to the light of wisdom." He relates the story of his conversion:

"One day my parents sent me outer town and I found a pregnant cow feeding along the road. I took up stones and began pelting the cow, driving it into the woods till evening when it fell down dead? During the night wild beasts ate it. On my way back, I met the poor owner of the cow. 'My son,' he asked, 'did you drive away my cow?' I not only denied it, but heaped abuse and insult upon the poor man."

A few days later he was idling with some shepherds. When it grew too late to return home, he spent the night with them. That night some sheep were stolen and the boy was accused of being in league with the robbers. He was taken before the magistrate and cast into prison. In a dream an angel appeared to Ephraim and asked him why he was there. The boy began at once to declare that he was, innocent. "Yes," said the angel, "you are innocent of the crime imputed to you, but have you forgotten the poor man's cow?"

When Ephraim saw the tortures to which criminals were subjected, he became terrified. He turned to God and vowed that he would become a monk if God would spare him such a cruel ordeal. The magistrate, however, just laughed at the youth's tears and ordered that he be stretched on the rack.

But just then a servant came to announce that dinner was ready. "Very well," said the magistrate, "I will examine the boy another day." And he ordered him back to prison. Providentially, the next time the magistrate saw Ephraim, he thought he had been punished enough and dismissed him. Although he was spared the rack, Ephraim had learned his lesson and, like the Prophet David, he entreated the Lord to overlook his youthful folly. True to his vow, upon his release he went straightway to the hermits living in the mountains where he became a disciple of St. James (Jan. 12), who later became a great bishop of Nisibis. Born again in repentance, Ephraim began to train as an athlete of virtues, exorcizing himself in the study of the Holy Scriptures and in prayer and fasting. The passionate and wayward youth was transformed into a humble and contrite monk, weeping day and night for his sins and entirely surrendered to God. Ephraim's earnest resolve pleased the Lord Who rewarded him with the gifts of wisdom; grace flowed from his mouth like a sweet stream, in fulfillment of his parents' dream.

In spite of the gifts which God so lavishly bestowed upon him, St. Ephraim remained deeply humble. He even feigned madness so as to avoid being consecrated bishop and the glory that attends that position. Doubtless, his humility was guarded by the remembrance of the sins of his youth and by his contrite spirit which followed upon this remembrance. But while tears of repentance constantly flowed from his eyes, Ephraim's face was bright and shone with joy. As St. Gregory writes: "Where Ephraim speaks of contrition, he lifts our thought to the Divine goodness and pours out thanksgiving and praise to the Most High."

On January 28, 373, after a brief illness, St. Ephraim reposed from his labors and was received into the heavenly habitations. The citizens of Edessa called him a "lyre of the Holy Spirit." Now, centuries later, his works still sing to the soul, inspiring it with the sweet fruit of repentance.

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Fr Athanasios and
Fr Ephraim are available
at the Church every
Monday to Friday
between 4.00 and 6.00pm
for Holy Confession and
any spiritual need.

Saints Basil the Great (c.330-379), Gregory the Theologian (329-c.390) and John Chrysostom (c.349-407) each had devoted followers during the 11th century who sought to declare one Saint superior to the other two. Some spoke of Saint Basil, who explained the mysteries so well, as superior to Saint John Chrysostom, who was inclined to absolve sinners. Supporters of Saint John pointed to his homilies as the most accomplished interpretation of the Divine Word. Others declared Saint Gregory the Theologian as preferred of the three for his purity and grace in explaining the dogma of the Holy Trinity.

These factions caused an ongoing dispute within the Church until the Three Hierarchs appeared to Saint John, Metropolitan of Euchaita in a dream. In unison, they told him that "there is not among us a first, a second or third" and that they were to be celebrated together in one Feast. With these miraculous instructions, Saint John of Euchaita arranged for the composition of a service with commemorative hymns for each of the three, and chose the date at the end of the month in which they are all celebrated individually. In the troparia chanted in their honour, the Three Hierarchs are celebrated as an earthly trinity who encapsulate the Church's entire ministry and who propagated the correct understanding of our Faith. In Greece, the Feast has long been associated with education and learning, and is recognized officially as the major Feast for schools by the Greek state.

ON THE PRESENTATION OF CHRIST IN THE TEMPLE

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Today's Feast has no fewer than four different names. Each name recalls a different aspect of this Feast. What are they?

First of all, today's Feast is called the Presentation of Christ. This is because it commemorates the Presentation of Christ by His Mother in the Temple at Jerusalem exactly forty days after His Birth. As we can see from the icon of the Feast, Christ was brought to the Temple by His mother and accompanied by His guardian Joseph, who holds the customary sacrifice of two turtle doves. In the Temple Christ was carried in the arms of the Righteous Simeon and watched over by the Prophetess Anna. This Feast is yet more proof that the Son of God truly became man. Today an infant, not a spirit or an angel, is brought to the Temple.

This meeting between the Righteous Simeon and Anna and the Saviour is why this Feast has another, very common name: 'The Meeting of the Lord'. According to age-old tradition, Simeon was one of those Seventy translators who in the third century before Christ had translated the Scriptures of the Old Testament into Greek. Coming to the words in the seventh chapter of Isaiah the Prophet, he had been awestruck by the affirmation that a Virgin would give birth. He had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would live until he saw these words fulfilled. At today's Feast which is the fulfillment of these words, the aged Simeon utters the words: 'Now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace according to Thy words, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people, a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of Thy people Israel'. Soon after uttering these words, he reposed, as did the Righteous Anna, who had also been waiting to see the fulfillment of the promise of the Holy Spirit that she too would see the Messiah in great old age. The Prayer of St Simeon is read at every Vespers service in the Church Year, but at Vespers yesterday, and again tonight, before tomorrow's Feast of St Simeon and St Anna, it is sung.

According to the Old Testament, the Jews were commanded to present their male children at the Temple in Jerusalem forty days after their Birth. This was to give thanks to God and pray for the purification of the mother and health of the child, for it was considered that after the vital forty-day period it was almost certain that all mortal danger was passed. This is why this Feast has yet another name: 'The Purification of the Virgin'. The Christ-Child is only forty days old, the salvation of the world is dependent on His Mother. This is why although this Feast is a Feast in honour of Our Lord, the Church is yet in blue, for we also give great honour today to the Mother of God. Indeed, this Feast is the Feast of all mothers.

In our New Testament times, we have the custom of 'churching', which is similar to this rite of purification of the mother, which was carried out in the Old Testament, but there are also important differences. First of all, since the Coming of Christ, all children, not only boys, are to be presented in church at the age of forty days. However today, they are to be presented for baptism and chrismation and so made ready for holy communion. Secondly, the Church also appoints prayer to be said over the mother at this critical time. These prayers are firstly in thanksgiving for the physical safety of the mother, but also they are said for the spiritual safety of the mother, in order to ward off what is now called 'post-natal depression'.

The Presentation, the Meeting and the Purification are then all names given to today's Feast, but there is yet a fourth name - Candlemas. This name was given to this Feast in memory of the Roman custom of lighting candles at it, which recalls the lights in the Temple at Jerusalem. The custom spread from Rome even to western parts of Russia and in the Russian service-books there is a prayer for the blessing of candles on this day. In this country, Candlemas is connected with many popular sayings concerning weatherlore, witnessing to the popularity of Candlemas in olden times. One such saying for example is: 'If Candlemas be fair and bright, winter shall have another flight'. This means that if today's weather is good, we shall have more cold and wintry weather before the Spring.

But what does this Feast mean for us today?

Since it is exactly forty days since Christmas, it is time for us to think about the last forty days and ask ourselves some questions:

What today can we present to the Temple of Christ, the Church? In what condition do we present our souls to Christ? What sacrifices have we made in the last forty days? Have we begun cultivating a new virtue? Have we attempted to give up an old vice? Have we been to confession? Have we taken Communion? Have we kept the Wednesday and Friday fasts? Have we read our prayers? Have we set a Christian example to our neighbours? Have we thanked God for all that we have received? What has changed in our way of life since the Birth of Christ forty days ago? What progress has been made?

Whatever our answers to these questions, on this, the Feast of the Meeting of Christ, one thing is certain: If we are not spiritually prepared to meet Christ, then we shall never meet Him.

Amen.