

The Royal Hours at Christmas

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All Divine Liturgies in the Orthodox Church are preceded by the chanting of the Hours services, consisting of psalms, hymns and prayers. But in the great cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, the Byzantine Emperor was present each year at the service beginning the celebration of the Nativity of Christ. Therefore, the Hours preceding the Vespers and Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great on Christmas Eve are given the name "Royal Hours."

The Emperor's attendance at the service was in part a demonstration of his humble acknowledgment that Jesus Christ reigns over all mortal beings. The third psalm is Psalm 45: "My heart overflows with good tidings as I sing my ode to the King; my tongue is like the pen of a skillful scribe. Thou art the fairest of the sons of men; grace is poured upon Thy lips; therefore God has blessed Thee forever. Gird Thy sword upon Thy thigh, O mighty one, in Thy splendor and beauty. Draw Thy bow, ride forth in triumph and reign, for the sake of truth, and meekness, and righteousness." Such words could apply to only one Sovereign.

The verses of the Royal Hours make no attempt to conceal the human confusion and anguish of Joseph. He tells Mary, "I am troubled; what can I say to you? Doubt clouds my mind; depart from me! What has happened to you, O Mary? Instead of honor, you bring me shame. Instead of joy, you fill me with grief. Men who praised me will blame me."

The verses also chillingly describe the effect of one powerful man's jealousy and fear. Herod was willing to kill innocent children to keep his unique position as ruler: "Herod was filled with alarm when he saw the righteous wise men. Overcome by fury, he determined precisely when the child was born. Mothers were robbed of their infants: Their tender lives were reaped as a bitter harvest."

Mary could not stop the terror and sorrow created by Herod. But she could lovingly reassure Joseph. In the verses she says: "Why are you so troubled? Why are you in misery seeing me with child? Do you not understand at all? I bear a fearful mystery! Cast your fears away, and learn a strange wonder: God in His mercy descends from heaven to earth. Within my womb He has taken flesh! When He is pleased to be born, you will see Him. You will rejoice, and worship Him, your Creator."

The Royal Hours give us a whole atmosphere surrounding the birth of Our Lord: the venality of Herod who fears being supplanted; Joseph's fear of disgrace; Mary's faith, which leads her to inspire Joseph—and us—with words like "mystery" and "wonder" to describe the event she does not fully understand but has fully accepted.

Father Alexander Schmemmann has rightly called the Royal Hours "one last meditation on the cosmical meaning of the Nativity, on the decisive and radical change it performed in the entire creation."