

## Sunday of the Forefathers – Second Sunday Before Christmas

*Colossians 1:12-18; Luke 14:16-24*

Today, on this second Sunday before Christmas, we commemorate the holy forefathers. Why are they? They are the men of great faith and the prophets who foreshadowed in some way the coming of the promised Saviour, or foretold His coming in prophesy.

Next Sunday, we will specifically commemorate the ancestry of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the promised Christ – His genealogy, His royal Davidic lineage, through Joseph, His legal guardian, and his royal and priestly lineages through His Mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary.

In a special way today, we remember the prophet Daniel and the three holy youths, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

In the year 597 B.C., almost 600 years before Christ, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon and his army came up to the city of Jerusalem and besieged it. Jehoiachin, the king of Judah, surrendered himself and the city of Jerusalem into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. The king of Babylon then took Jehoiachin, his family, his servants, his princes, his palace officials and deported them to Babylon. What followed was the first deportation of Judean elite to Babylon, which according to 2 Kings 24:14, numbered 10,000 captives. Among those taken were members of the nobility, officials, chief men of the land, mighty men of valour, men fit for war, craftsmen, smiths, and youth who were educated and wise. Only the poorest of the land were left behind (2 Kings 24:12-17).

When the captives arrived in Babylon, educated and wise youths were chosen to serve and the king's palace. They were taught the Chaldean language and underwent three years of training in order to serve the king of Babylon. Among these young men were four good friends: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The Babylonians gave them second names: Daniel was called Balteshazzar; Hananiah was called Shadrach; Mishael was called Meshach; and Azariah was given the name Abednego.

Now these holy youths were determined not to assimilate – not to lose their religious beliefs and their faith in the one true God of Israel. They continued to worship God alone, to follow God's Law, and to abstain from anything that was unclean.

After some time, because of Daniel's great wisdom and God-given ability to interpret dreams and visions, the king appointed him to serve as the ruler-administrator of the whole province of Babylon, and also to serve as the chief and prefect over all the wise men (the magi) of Babylon. Upon Daniel's request, his three close friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were appointed to assist him in the affairs of the province; and Daniel remained at the king's court. (Daniel 2:46-49).

It so happened that king Nebuchadnezzar decided to make a huge idol out of gold and he set it on the plain of Dura. He gave orders that the members of his government and administration assemble for the dedication of the idol and to bow in worship before it. Anyone who failed to comply with the order would be thrown into a fiery furnace. The three young men of Judah, who served as administrators, refused to worship the idol. After being reported to the king by their enemies, they were bound and cast into a fiery furnace.

And then, a great miracle took place. First, it was a great sign that pointed first to the Mystery of the Trinity, the revelation that God is One, yet a communion of three Divine Persons. Second, it was a great sign that pointed to and foreshadowed the Mystery of the Incarnation.

Cast into the fiery furnace, the three young men were not burned alive, but walked about freely and unharmed in the fiery furnace. Thus, they became a living sign of the Mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. There was one fiery furnace, with three persons inside it. In the same way, God is One in Being, One Divine Fire, yet in Him, there are three equal divine Persons. This was the first revelation.

Then, while the three young men walked about in the fiery furnace, a fourth person appeared in their midst. This man had a divine appearance; he was like “a son of gods” (Daniel 3:25).

This fourth man in the fiery furnace was a prefigure of Jesus the Christ, the promised Saviour to come. Here we find a second revelation, a foreshadow of the Mystery of the Incarnation. The promised woman will be overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, and by His power, the Son of God will take flesh and become a man. He will be conceived in her womb, and she shall contain the uncontainable Divine Fire – God Himself. And He will be born of her.

Having witnessed this miracle, king Nebuchadnezzar gave orders that the men come out of the furnace. As the three young men came out, the fourth figure disappeared. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were then vindicated and restored to their positions of authority.

What happened as a consequence, was the conversion of the king – his change of heart. Seeing the faith of the three men and the miracle that took place, the king proclaimed that the God of Israel to be the God Most High. He makes the following statement about God and the Christ that is to come:

How great are His signs! How mighty His wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and His dominion is from generation to generation” (Daniel 4:3).

After some time had passed, the faith of Daniel the prophet was also tested. When Darius became king, he issued an edict forbidding anyone to pray to their gods for thirty days, under the penalty of death. All requests and needs were to be submitted to the king for his intercession.

Well, Daniel would not follow this order. He continued to pray faithfully three times a day, on his knees, towards Jerusalem. This, of course, was reported to the king by his enemies. Daniel was arrested and thrown into a den of hungry lions. But God sent His angel who shut the mouths of the lions. Daniel was saved; and when his accusers were cast into the den, they were devoured.

King Darius then issued the following decree:

“Peace be multiplied to you. I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion, men are to tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, for He is the living God, enduring forever; His kingdom shall never be destroyed, and His dominion shall be to the end” (Daniel 6:26).

Living in a world of idols and idol worship, Daniel and his three friends remained faithful to the one true God Most High. They lived in the world, but were not of the world.

Today, we live in a secular world where idols are much more subtle and refined. There are movements, ideologies and others things that have become idols of worship. These movements and ideologies are opposed to God and His truth.

Lately, we were confronted by a movement to eliminate prayer and the mention of God's name publicly on Remembrance Day. More recently, we were confronted by a movement to eliminate Christmas as a public holiday, and to re-name Christmas trees as 'holiday trees.' These movements are not only anti-Christmas, but also anti-Christ. Thanks to all those who stood up and resisted, those who refused to be lukewarm in their faith, anti-Christian statements and decisions were retracted.

As we prepare for Christmas, we are reminded today of the example of Daniel and the three young men, who remained steadfast in their faith and loyalty to God, despite the social pressures and persecutions they endured. Like them, we are called not be lukewarm, but to burn with zeal in our faith and love for God. To the church in Laodicea, Jesus said,

“I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of My mouth” (Rev 3:15).

As Christians, we are called to live in this world, but not be of this world. We are citizens of our country in this world, yet at the same time, we are servants of Christ, our King and God, and citizens of His everlasting kingdom that is not of this world.

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