

HOMILY FOR THE FEAST DAY OF THE ICON OF THE MOTHER OF GOD "OF THE SIGN"

(November 27th / December 10th)

The icon of the Mother of God "Of the Sign" essentially depicts the mystery of the Nativity of Christ. The seventh chapter of the Prophet Isaiah tells us of how Jerusalem was besieged from all sides. There was no longer any hope of salvation, and people's hearts fluttered like leaves in a strong wind. However, the prophet urges the king to appeal to the Lord and ask for His protection, and ask the Lord to give a sign that this will be fulfilled.

King Ahaz refuses: "I will not ask, neither will I tempt the Lord." Then the prophet says: "*The Lord Himself shall give you a sign: behold, a Virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel*" (Isaiah 7:14), which means "God is with us."

This event tells us not only of the mystery of the salvation of mankind, of every individual, of every nation in the midst of terrible tribulations to which people are subjected, but also of how we should accept this gift from God. Usually we are either full of arrogant belief in our own strength, as was evinced by those who surrounded Jerusalem, or what is hardly any better - false humility, when man is so full of despair that he cannot bring himself to appeal to the Lord and ask for His help.

Today during the service we have heard the odes of the canon "In the waves of the sea," which tell us of the mystery of divine attrition, of how God becomes man. Our participation in this mystery is bound up with many trials and many tribulations, of which the word of God says that we must accept them with great joy, knowing that tribulation, as Apostle Paul says, engenders patience. And patience makes us perfect. Every man inevitably passes through these trials. He can, for example, experience deep disillusionment in the great hopes of his life. Or he can be visited by terrible misfortunes or great temptations. A man can pass *in the waves of the seathrough* persecution together with the entire Church, or through death, which unflinching comes to each one of us irrespective of time. And each one of us is summoned in his personal life to learn true patience, which leads to perfection.

We know that today's holiday is connected with an event that took place in the 12th century - in 1170, when the city of Novgorod was also besieged by the joint forces of Russian princes who, relying solely on their own strength,



The icon of the Mother of God "Of the Sign".

wished to teach the free citizens of Novgorod a lesson by conquering them. The Novgorodians, finding themselves in desperate straits and realizing that there was no way out for them, placed all their hope in the Lord and His Most-pure Mother. The icon of the Mother of God "Of the Sign" was taken out of the church and carried in a solemn procession around the city walls. At that moment, while an attack on the city was in progress and a cloud of arrows rained upon the Novgorodians, one of the arrows hit the icon of the Mother of God, and tears flowed from the eyes of the Most-pure Virgin Mary. Upon being hit, the Mother of God on the icon turned Her visage towards the Novgorodians, as though rejecting the attackers, who were suddenly overcome with fear and confusion and became rooted to the spot. The Novgorodians, seeing that the Mother of God was looking upon them, and being conscious of Her divine intercession, streamed out upon their enemies and routed them soundly.

Many parallels can be drawn to what is happening today to Russia and to the whole world. And we must not forget what is happening to each one of us amid all the trials which the Lord visits upon us. But there is always only one deliverance, and none other, only one sign of our victory over all evil, over all danger, over death itself. And that sign is - the Mother of God, Who has conceived in Her womb the Pre-eternal God, Immanuel, which means "God is with us"!

And this sign has been manifested in Her countless miraculous icons since ancient times. In the tomb of St. Agnes in Rome there is an icon of the Mother of God, raising Her arms in prayer and holding on Her knees the Infant Jesus, blessing the people. And the 6th century Byzantine icon in Nicopea, where the Mother of God sits on a throne and holds before Her a shield with the image of the Saviour Immanuel.

This is our shield, this is our invincible wall, this is our victory in everything that takes place in the life of each one of us, our people, our Church, the entire world. "*God is with us*, - let us sing in the days of Christ's Nativity this prophetic Old-Testament hymn, - *comprehend, ye nations, and submit yourselves: for God is with us!*" - such is our New-Testament confession. Christ is among us and within us, in our life and in our death. And we are together with Him in His victorious incarnation, passion and Resurrection. Amen.