



My Beloved Ones,

I pray that each and every one of you has experienced a healthy and productive beginning to your 2018.

In its own way, this Sunday's Gospel also looks ahead to the remainder of the liturgical year, acting as a bridge between the Nativity season, and the beginning of the Triodion.

For this second Sunday after Epiphany—that is after His manifestation to the world—our Lord hears that John the Baptist has been arrested. Knowing that the great and final prophet's ministry has ended Christ leaves His home in Nazareth, journeying, as Matthew says to “...*Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali...*” (*Matthew 4:13*)

This was done so, “...*that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ‘The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, toward the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.’ (Matthew 4:13-16)*. At this time of year, the great Messianic prophecies of Isaiah of

course bring to our minds the feasts of the Nativity and Theophany that we have just experienced: the light which illumined the little town of Bethlehem has now begun its work, spreading across the land.

For all the peace and merrymaking that the holidays bring, there is a reason that the hymns we heard on the Feast of Theophany are similar to those of Good Friday: because when he entered the River Jordan, Christ took His first steps to the Cross. While it may seem incongruous to hear these mournful chants in the shadow of a Christmas tree, we would do well to remember that that the work of the Incarnation is only complete when we contemplate the empty tomb. Christ's own birth foreshadows His redemptive death: wrapped in cloth, lying in a cave, presented with gifts of myrrh. Every feast ultimately points toward that Feast of Feasts: Pascha.

Matthew ends his Gospel, looking away from the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies, and towards the fulfillment of John's work. The Evangelist stresses that in John's absence Christ began to use a phrase that would have been familiar to all who encountered John or directly experienced his baptism: “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*” (*Matthew 4:17*). While it is a coincidence, it seems appropriate that we are being called to begin walking with Christ on His ministry, just as the secular world begins its New Year. Each signals a time for fresh beginnings, working towards, not just earthly betterment, or even repentance, but *Theosis*.

My wish is that as we begin to approach the Triodion, we use the spiritual lessons we have gained this Nativity season—love, peace, forgiveness, and joy—to better not only our New Year, but our souls, as we approach the Greatest moment of our liturgical year, as well.

+ALEXIOS

Metropolitan of Atlanta