



My dear Brothers and Sisters in the Lord,

As we continue our journey to Bethlehem, the Orthodox Church is mindful of the lessons we must keep in our hearts in preparation for the Nativity of Christ. Therefore, this Sunday is the Sunday of the Holy Forefathers, when we commemorate those who lived righteously awaiting the coming of God's promised Messiah. Special attention is paid to the Patriarch Abraham, who was blessed by God with a son, Isaac, even though he and his wife Sarah were elderly. This was done to fulfill the Lord's promise to Abraham that, *"I will bless those who bless you... and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves"* (*Genesis 12:13*). Not only did the Twelve Tribes of Israel begin through Isaac's son Jacob, but Christ's life and ministry were prefigured in these forefathers and mothers; for example, a "type" of Christ's betrayal at the hands of his disciple Judas Iscariot is seen when Jacob's favorite son Joseph is sold into slavery by his jealous brothers.

In this week's Gospel, our Lord compares the Kingdom of Heaven to a great banquet, in which all the world is

invited. However, as with so many things concerning God, those in the world excuse themselves, whether it is because of work (one person has bought a piece of land, another, a yoke of oxen), or personal lives (one guest cannot come because he is recently married). In response, the owner of the house orders that his servants first go out into the streets and lanes, inviting in not only, *"...the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame"* but all in the town, *"For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner"* (*Luke 14:21, 24*).

Remembering that the history of our salvation includes both our mothers, as well as our forefathers, let us consider two women from the Old Testament, especially because they do not seem like "typical" servants of God. Just as world chooses to consider weak those whom God has made strong (*"...the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame"*), God has even placed pagan individuals into His story, such as the Old Testament matriarch, Ruth. After the deaths of both their husbands, Ruth's sister-in-law Orpah chose to return to her pagan homeland. The choice to leave Israel was also available to Ruth but she decided to forsake a life of comfort in her homeland to serve the God she chose to worship, and to stay with her mother-in-law, Naomi. And how great Ruth's reward! Through her, she becomes the great-grandmother of the mighty King and Prophet David, who gives us not only the Psalms, but our promised Messiah, Jesus Christ.

How wonderful it is that we can observe the coming of the person who had been awaited by our righteous forefathers and foremothers for thousands of years? We must take great joy and strength remembering that God invited them to each play a part leading to the Incarnation of our Lord. And now, because of their faithfulness and obedience these saintly ancestors will observe His Nativity as part of the Banquet in God's Heavenly Kingdom, interceding on our behalf, now and always.

+SEVASTIANOS
Metropolitan of Atlanta