

Entrance of the Theotokos: Epistle (Heb.9:1-7)

Today we celebrate the feast of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the temple. The Epistle for the feast, Hebrews 9:1-7, describes how the worship space in the temple at Jerusalem was divided into two parts: *“the first part, in which was the lampstand, the table, and the showbread, which was called the sanctuary [literally, ‘holy place’]; and behind the second veil, the part of the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of All, which had the golden censer, and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which were the golden pot that had the manna, Aaron’s rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant.”*

And we’re supposed to care about that why, exactly? And what in the world does this have to do with the Mother of our Lord? Well, focus on what our Epistle describes as the central item in the Holy of Holies. Outshining everything else was the Ark of the Covenant. As we see in Exodus 25:10-11, the ark was the first thing God told Moses to make: *“And they shall make an ark of acacia wood: two and a half cubits [45 inches] shall be its length, a cubit and a half [27 inches] its width, and a cubit and a half its height. And you shall overlay it with pure gold, and shall make it on a molding of gold all around.”* The whole sanctuary was designed around the Ark, because the Ark was the vehicle by which God chose to make Himself present to and among His people and to manifest His blessing upon them.

What actually was the Ark? Basically it was a simple wooden box. It was indeed completely covered with gold; but as far as we know it had no elaborate decoration like the lamp-stand in the outer sanctuary. The box had a lid, called the mercy-seat or, more accurately, the atonement cover, with solid gold cherubim at either end, kneeling and facing inward with their wings touching, forming a kind of seat or throne. *“And there,”* says God in Exodus 25:22, *“I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the Ark of the Testimony.”* That’s why Psalm 99:1 says that the LORD Who reigns *“dwells between the cherubim,”* that throne formed by the wings of the cherubim is the place where God’s presence and glory are present to His people.

And understand this: the Tabernacle and its contents were all designed by God as a type, to foreshadow Christ and God’s dealings with us through His beloved Son. Acacia wood had a reputation for never rotting, and indeed, the Septuagint translates it as *“incorruptible wood;”* and that reminds us of our Lord’s sinless humanity. The gold, of course, reminds us of Christ’s divine glory. And the use of these two materials prophesies the union of the two natures in Christ, the God-man, as St. John tells us in John 1:1 and 14, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”* We cannot really wrap our heads around either the

mystery or the mechanics of it. How could God take on the totality of our human nature, being like us in all things except sin, and still remain God? Quite honestly, I can't figure out the "how" of it. But throughout the Gospels this is what Jesus says of Himself, of Who He is. In John 10:30, for example, He says "*I and the Father are one*," meaning "one nature, one essence." So in the end, with St. Paul in 1 Timothy 3:16, all we can do is witness His wonders, especially His Resurrection, and say "*without controversy [without doubt or argument] great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh.*" So what the physical ark foretold was the Lord Jesus Christ, truly God and truly man.

And notice what our Epistle says was inside the Ark: "*the golden pot that had the manna, Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant.*" The Ark was designed to contain the stone tablets on which the finger of God Himself wrote the 10 Commandments, the fundamental ways in which God's covenant relationship with His people Israel was to be lived out in the everyday. Our Epistle calls them "*the tablets of the covenant*" because that's what they were really all about: not arbitrary laws, not just rules of behaviour, but the expression of a covenant relationship with God. And why did Jesus come? He came to usher in the New Covenant, the new relationship between God and, not just the people Israel, but "*whosoever believes in Him.*" And as we hear every single Liturgy, He sealed that new covenant in His "*blood of the new covenant, which is shed for [us] and for many, for the remission of sins.*"

Note also how verse 4 says that the Ark held "*the golden pot that had the manna.*" As the Israelites journeyed through the desert after escaping the slavery of Egypt, says Exodus 16, they "came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai." Their food had run out, and the people were hungry, and complaining that even as slaves they "sat by the pots of meat and ate bread to the full." So God told Moses, "*Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you;*" and then He did. The next morning the people found the ground covered with "*a small round substance, as fine as the frost on the ground.*" And they asked each other, "*What is it? For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, 'This is the bread which the LORD has given you to eat.'*" And God provided that bread from heaven every single day, for 40 years, "*until they came to the border of the land of Canaan.*" And for the Christian it's not hard to see in the manna a type of Christ Himself, Who tells us in John 6:35 and 51 "*I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst...I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.*" In His Word, and more especially in the Eucharist, Christ is the heavenly sustenance for our souls.

Lastly, the Ark contained "*Aaron's rod that budded.*" This refers to the incident in Numbers 17, when there was yet another argument among the people, this time about who should be the High Priest. God commanded the people to take a

staff, a tall walking stick, one for each tribe, with the name of the tribe's leader written on it, and to place these 12 staves beside the Ark overnight. The next day, Moses went into the tabernacle, *"and behold, the rod of Aaron, of the house of Levi, had sprouted and put forth buds, had produced blossoms, and yielded ripe almonds."* God took a dry dead stick and made it blossom with life. And isn't that exactly what God has done for you and for me in the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus? The cross was itself dead wood and an instrument of death; yet once watered by the blood of Christ, says Ephesians 2:5, through the Cross God, *"even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ."* And He can still take lifeless hunks of wood, men and women *"dead in trespasses and sins,"* and, as His resurrection life flows through us, make us blossom with new and eternal life and bear fruit to His glory.

But if the Ark and its contents all refer us back to Jesus, why do we read this Scripture to celebrate an event in the life of His mother? And if the Ark and its contents all refer us back to Jesus, why do we, in our hymnody, sometimes call Mary *"the ark"*? Well, remember back to when we said that the Ark was the vehicle by which God chose to make Himself present to and among His people and to manifest His blessing upon them? And isn't that exactly what Mary has been, the part she has played in God's plan for our redemption? It was not dead wood but a living womb which God chose as the vehicle by which He would make Himself, not just present to His people, but one with His people. It was not dead wood but a living womb which contained Him Who brings and Who is God's New Covenant with the entire human race, the Bread of Life, and the One Whose blood raises to new and fruitful life those once *"dead in trespasses and sins."*

Well, fine; that's what God did some 2000 years ago with one human being. But what has that to do with you and me here and now? Simple: what God did with Mary physically, He seeks to do with you and with me spiritually. Through Mary, the Saviour was born into and made present to this world. And it's supposed to be through you and through me that this same Saviour is made present to the people of this world here and now. Romans 10:14 asks, *"How then shall they call upon Him in Whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of Whom they have not heard?"* How are people supposed to meet and get to know Jesus Christ, and to accept Him into their own hearts and lives? Through you, through me. We are supposed to be the living arks through whom the Saviour, the Lord, the Bread of Life, is carried to people still outside the New Covenant. One prayer sums up nicely our role as living arks when it asks God, *"So clothe us in Your Spirit, that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know You to the knowledge and love of You."* Is that your prayer, and mine, today?