

WEEKLY MEDITATION

I will search Jerusalem with candles and I will punish the men who are stagnant in spirit. (Zephaniah 1:12)

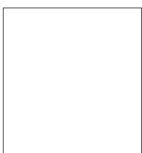
The word used here can mean either candle or lamp. In the ancient world there was no electricity and no form of public lighting. The moon and the stars on a cloudless night gave about as much light as there could be outdoors, and Jerusalem - like other cities and towns - was often pitch black at night. People who had to be out at night would carry torches or lanterns or lamps. We are familiar with the Lord's parable in the Gospels about the young women who did not have enough olive oil in their earthenware lamps to keep vigil for the Bridegroom. Candles were expensive and rarely used. They are not really much use outdoors - think how often our candles blow out during our outdoor procession at Pascha! They would be kept for special, indoor occasions. Even in the Temple, oil-burning lamps were more commonly used than candles.

The tradition of blessing candles at tomorrow's feast is an ancient one. The prayers we use in blessing them have two important themes. The major theme is that the candle is a symbol of the Light of Christ. The visible light of the candle reminds us that our Lord Jesus Christ is the True Light, the Light of the World. The Light of Christ has overcome the darkness of sin and death. In His Light we see light, that is to say, through Him we have come to a true knowledge of God and man. The visible light is also the expression on an inner, spiritual light, the light of faith. Just as the visible light dispels darkness, so the inner light of faith and understanding dispels the darkness of wickedness, ignorance and sin.

The other theme is that our candles represent a sacrificial offering on our part. It is, after all, a lot more difficult to make a candle than to pour oil into a lamp. Candles are valuable - they are made with materials that are relatively expensive and it takes time to make them. When we give an offering for a candle, we are making a small sacrifice, a gesture of self-offering. This self-offering expresses the most fundamental attitude of believers: we offer ourselves to God.

Our use of candles in worship unites our own impulse of piety and devotion in self-offering with the great themes of Christ as the Light of the World and of light as the visible expression of the invisible working of grace transforming our spiritual darkness.

Fr. Andrew



*Sf. Mary's Orthodox Cathedral
1701 Fifth Street NE
Minneapolis, MN 55413*