

WEEKLY MEDITATION

And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots. (Isaiah 11:1)

In the New Testament, the lineage of our Lord Jesus Christ is given in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. In the third chapter of Luke, the Apostle traces the ancestry of Jesus from Joseph all the way back to Adam. In Matthew, the generations are traced from Abraham down to Joseph. Jesus is linked to Adam - as a true descendent of our first father, and thus related to all humanity- and to Abraham - as a true descendent of the patriarchs, very much one of God's chosen people. That the Lord is descended from David, Jesse's son, is important. David is, of course, the great King of Israel, the King against whom all other rulers were measured, the one from whose royal lineage the savior of Israel (and even 'the nations') was expected come.

A famous use of this text from Isaiah is the image of the Tree of Jesse. These trees were especially popular in the western European middle ages. In such images Jesse is shown asleep and from his side springs the trunk of a tree or a vine with many branches. Within the branches are found figures representing the Lord's ancestors. At the top of the tree or vine is Mary, with Jesus above her. It is possible that the idea of a 'family tree' as a way to depict genealogical data originated with mediaeval illustrations of the Tree of Jesse.

The icon that we use at the Cathedral for the two Sundays before Christmas - the Sunday of the Forefathers of Christ and the Sunday of the Ancestors of Christ - is a bit different. Like the image of the Tree of Jesse, it depicts a luxuriant vine. But within its branches are the prophets of the Old Testament who foretold the coming of the Savior. Mary and Jesus are not shown separately, but instead they are together in traditional icon of the Nativity in the center of the panel, the Theotokos and the babe in a manger.

Fr. Andrew

