

Sretenie Gospodne (Meeting of Our Lord)

We find two types of festive icons devoted to the feast of the Meeting of our Lord in the Temple. The first is accentuating on the self-sacrifice of Christ, the other – on the role of Our Lady Theotocos, Mother of God as intermediary in the redemption of the human race.

The featured icon “*Sretenie Gospodne*” (*Meeting of Our Lord*) created by the school of the legendary painter Andrey Roublyov belongs to the first category. It is part of the collection of the *Russian Museum* in Saint Petersburg. Five actors are depicted in it: at the center is Mary, The Mother of God, presenting the Infant and Simon, The Receiver of God, who takes Him from her hands as a sublime sanctity. Behind Mary stands her husband – Joseph the Betrothed, and behind Simon is Ann, The Prophet Woman. Thus, the icon is divided clearly in two parts – left and right, the left is dedicated to the upcoming New, and the right side – to characters of the Old Testament.

The two sides are united by the Infant Jesus, located on the axis between the two halves. The left side is a bearer of movement upstream and into the right, the right side is pointing downwards and to the left. In this way the two opposite visual forces meet at the point of the main action – the reception of the Infant. The first image on the right of the icon is Joseph, shown separately from the other figures, literally outside of the field of action. His right leg is almost going out of the composition. The figure of Joseph appears all the more static through the architectural elements, being enclosed between the vertical and horizontal columns and beams of the buildings. These vectors guide the eye and determine the direction of reading of the visual story. It becomes clear that Joseph is of secondary importance, only a custodian of the New, but at the same time, same as in the case of Simon and Ann, he belongs to the Old Time. His main role is to protect Virgin Mary and the Infant-God.

In his hands Simon holds two doves, abiding to the Old-Testament rituals for purification and votive donation. The structure behind the back of Ann closes the composition on a joyful, fresh note and concludes the movement lightly upwards and to the diagonal.

The biblical account of the Meeting of the Lord includes also the so called Hymn of St. Simeon the God-receiver: “*Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people, a light to enlighten the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel*” (Luke 2:29-32).

The icon “Meeting of Our Lord” as a whole has a festive, organized appearance. Golden-ochre warm tones dominate, the red colour clearly underlines the ceremonial moment of the meeting. The lightness of the upper right corner indicates the general streamline of the composition towards light, to the Kingdom of God.

The Figure of the Holy Virgin Mary is touchingly humble, her head bowed and her hands that just presented her first-born Son to the Elder Simon are hidden in the sleeves. This

gesture repeats the same one of Joseph the Betrothed and we see it for a third time in the action of Simon the God-Receiver.

The rhythmic three-fold repetition of the same gesture reveals the main subject – the presentation and the reception of the Holy Infant Jesus. The humbleness of Mary stems not only from the presentation but also from the prediction of Simon that she will suffer for her Son “*And a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also*”. The shape and the style of the vestments of the Holy Virgin Mary and of Joseph repeat, thus uniting them in a group. The Elder Simon stands on an elevated spot, still he is bowing before Holy Virgin. He is taller than her, but holds her in reverence. Simon is full of tenderness towards the Infant, bringing his face close to His, thus reminding us of the main feature in the “Eleusa” (Tenderness) line of icons.

The figure of St. Simeon the God-Receiver is built in a completely different way than the one of the Holy Virgin Mary. It is light, weightless, underlined by the transparent character of his vestment, blending with the colour of the canopy above the sacrificial altar. The Old Testament characters of Simon the God-Receiver and Ann the Prophetess are kept in the same style – airy with light accents in gray. On the opposite, the images of Joseph the Betrothed and Virgin Mary are in heavier, realistic, earthy tones, as if the old-testament characters melt into the lightness of the cloud that awaits them in the future.

The motion of the arms of Simon the God-Receiver repeats the main visual direction of the composition and the angle of the slope on which he stands - from left to right and upwards. At the very end, the last character of the icon – Ann the Prophetess faces the main scene, but we see only her profile. Her figure is very elongated, which places her above Joseph and Virgin, still her image does not portray an old woman, in opposite, she looks young and lively.

The whole human race, embodied by St. Simon the God-Receiver and Ann the Prophetess is going to receive the Gospel, the holy message about the reincarnation of the Son of God.

Vassil Popvassilev

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