

A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Orthodox Christian Church



Rev. Matthew P. Binkewicz, Pastor



Glory be to Jesus Christ!

Glory be Forever!

Volume 13 Issue 610

5th Sunday of Great Lent-St. Mary of Egypt

March 17, 2024



Today we commemorate St. Mary of Egypt, who is the third saint whom the Church has brought to our attention during this period of Great Lent; the first two being St. Gregory Palamas and St. John Climacus. Last Sunday we commemorated St. John Climacus as the model of ascetics and today we commemorate St. Mary of Egypt, who is for us the model of repentance as

we sang in the vespers for the saint last, “In you, we have as a pattern of repentance, all-holy Mary.” From her life, let us see how this is so.

After moving away from her parents at the age of twelve, she describes her life as being “like a fire of public debauchery”. At the age of twenty-nine, she was at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher for the feast of the Precious Cross but was prevented from stepping into the nave by what she describes as “an invisible force.”

At that moment, Divine grace softened her heart, and she repented and prayed before an icon of the Mother of God promising to fulfill whatever she was told. She was then allowed entry into the nave to venerate the precious wood of the cross. Afterwards, she heard a voice instructing her in what to do. Obeying these instructions, she
(continued p.3)

++ 5th Sunday of Great Lent ++

+ Venerable Alexis-Man of God +

Epistle: 9:11-14

Gospel: Mark 10: 32-45

St. George Orthodox Christian Church is a community of believers who strive to live a life according to the Gospel of Christ and teachings of the Church.

We worship God in Trinity - Father+Son+Holy Spirit.

We are dedicated to Christ’s commandment, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, ad with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.*

Homily on the Beatitudes by St. John Kronstadt (part 5)

What shall we do, my sinner brothers? What shall we do, how shall we not cry, at the sight of our misfortune, our sinfulness and abomination, our extreme powerlessness in breaking free from sin and misfortune? A weak, stupid and reckless child, who finds himself in trouble or guilt, weeps bitterly before his parents, begging for compassion and help.

So are we, the weak, foolish, prodigal children of the Heavenly Father, falling into sin through our weakness, ignorance

and evil inclination, subjected to various slanders and misfortunes from the devil, must shed tears of repentance for the sins, tears of weakness, humbly asking for mercy, forgiveness and help.

Passions and temptations are like rivers, as the Savior said: “The rivers came and beat upon that house, and it fell” (Matt.7:27), that is, they crash on the people, or, as David says: “Save me, o God, for the waters have come in unto my soul” (Psalm 68:1), and since these rivers flow

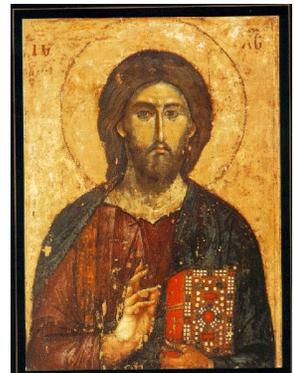
within us, we must release these rivers of tears from our eyes, so that the sins don't carry us away.

Along with the tears, the sins will flow out from our souls, and the rivers of living water that is, the grace of God, will flow in to cleanse, bless, enlighten, strengthen, and comfort the tearful soul. However, it is impossible to cry all the sins out in one time, since they are an abyss. We must cry long, and hard, seeking salvation not from tears alone but from the love
(continued on p.2)

We invite all to worship in our services. Sunday Divine Liturgy begins at 9:30 AM

If you have any questions about the church or would like to speak with our pastor, please call Fr. Matthew at 607-280-1586

Glory be to Jesus Christ.
Glory be Forever.





As the deliverer
of captives
and defender
of the poor,
healer of the infirm
and champion of kings,
victorious great
martyr George
intercede with Christ
our God that our souls
may be saved.

News and Notes

We welcome all who are with us today and invite you to join us at our coffee social following the Divine Liturgy.

Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17)

Please keep the following in your prayers: Mother Onufria, Larissa, Jack, Evan, Ryan, Anatoly, Alexey, Heidi, Mackenzie, Lisa, Jeff, Bonnalee, David, Carol, Norris, Debbie, Linda, Daniel, Michael, Abraham, Katrina, George, Rochelle, Brianna, Tamam, Catherine, Chuck, Theresa, Sally Lou the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ

Now is the time!

Why should you wait until tomorrow to change or take your life more seriously? How do you know that tomorrow will come? Today is the day of salvation if you hear difficult and good words and you apply them to yourself with faith and conviction. Today is the day to receive new life and boldness before the throne of Christ. But we receive this by going out of our way to serve others whenever and in what-

ever way that we can. We can do this anywhere can't we? We can practice by serving our families, our spouses, our brothers and sisters, our church community with great joy. And then this joy will overwhelm us and energize us to go further out of our comfort zone to serve others is greater need. This is our path, my beloved. This path starts with self-denial.

We start fasting for many reasons and one of them is in order to develop the ability to deny ourselves. St. John Chrysostom tells us that not only can we be saved but we can become equals to the apostles themselves through self-denial. He writes, "The blessed Paul writes, "Covet earnestly the best gifts, and I will show you a more excellent way; [1 Cor. 12:31] he did not speak next of a sign, but of charity, the root of all our good things. If then we practice this, and all the self-denial that flows from it, we shall have no need of signs; even as on the other hand, if we do not practice it, we shall gain nothing by the signs. From all worldly things, therefore, let us withdraw ourselves, and dedicate ourselves to Christ.

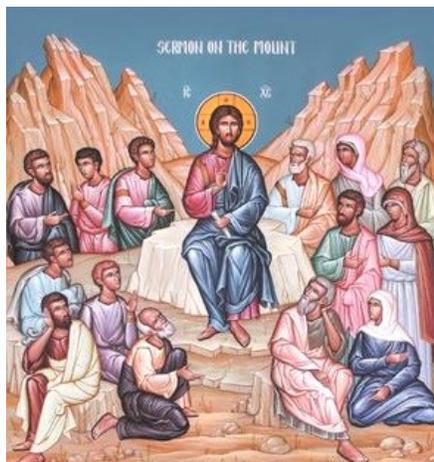
Homily on the Beatitudes, cont'd from p.1

love of God, from the grace of Jesus Christ, who wept with our tears for us, and promised to relieve us from sins, and give us temporary and eternal consolation. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted," says our Savior.

But what does the world say? What do some of you say in your hearts? Blessed are those who laugh, those who rejoice! Not "Woe unto those that laugh now! For you shall mourn and weep" (Luke 6:25), as the Lord says, whom no one saw laughing, only weeping during his earthly life. But how? How can we laugh and rejoice under the wrath of God, before the desperate struggle for life and death, surrounded by misfortune, when the all-destructive and seductive sin with such impertinence and ferocity destroys the human souls, redeemed by the blood of the Son of God; when every hour this fiend of hell threatens to bring us down in the fiery Gehenna, ready to burst open?

Is it the time to laugh and rejoice when temptations, vices, and falls are

everywhere? Is it the time to laugh when our brothers die of sickness, starvation, different kinds of misfortunes, or suffer from oppression, resentment and cruelty of their fellows, while others seek pleasures, and wal-



low in luxury and vices? So, my poor sinners! Under such gloomy spiritual and physical conditions, joy and laughter are out of place, for the time for joy and laughter has not come yet. It will only come after tears and weeping over the sins we committed

in this life and after our victory over sin. "Blessed are you that mourn now: for you shall laugh" (Luke 6:21), says the Savior.

That is true that "blessed are you that weep." If any of you has the gift of weeping over sins, you have experienced the beatitude of crying over your sins or the sins of others. The beatitude is inseparable from the Gospel lament, so that those who weep shall be naturally rewarded with comfort. However, there is another kind of crying, crying over the sorrow of this world: that is the powerless fury that cries, and the humiliated pride; that is the dissatisfied vanity that cries, and so does the hurt-esteem... countless are the vain tears!

As many unsatisfied passions, as many fainthearted there are – that many empty tears are shed, but these are sinful tears, useless tears, the tears that do harm to those who weep, for they cause the death of soul and body. "For the sorrow of this world works death" (2 Cor. 7:10).

(continued p.4)

Homily on St. Mary of Egypt Sunday, (cont'd from p.1)

left the Church, crossed the Jordan River into the desert and lived there from the age of twenty-nine until she was seventy-six at which time she was met by the monk Zosima and after which she lived two more years.

Upon Zosima's encounter with the saint in the wilderness and speaking to her, we learn of the kind of saint that St. Mary was. Some people doubt the almost supernatural existence of St. Mary's life but may we be reminded of those saints who were comparable to her. Her life is akin in various ways to St. Seraphim of Sarov, St. Ambrose of Optina, St. Silouan of the Holy Mountain, and also many contemporary ascetics of Mount Athos to name only a few.

Therefore, may we not, because of the weakness of human nature, "consider impossible these wonderful things accomplished by holy people," as St. Sophronius encourages us in his introduction to the life of St. Mary. Although it may not always be apparent in our own times, these gifts are "only a normal step in the growth of a monk," from the first century to our day or, as the model of asceticism from last Sunday writes, "Let no one on seeing or hearing something supernatural in the monastic way of life fall into unbelief out of ignorance; for where the supernatural God dwells, much that is supernatural happens."

How are we to understand what repentance is and why we are called to be repentant? The answer to this question begins with the fall from grace of our first parents. After the fall, the Fathers say, man's knowledge and organs became ill, an illness that basically consists of ignorance of God. The beginning of the process whereby this illness is remedied starts when the grace of God appears to us and reveals "the divine way" to us. We can choose to ignore this grace of God, or we can choose to repent.

Our ignorance of God is only overcome by the grace of God, but when the grace of God acts within our heart, we have a choice to either turn to God in repentance or not. St. Theophan the Recluse, explaining the Parable of the Prodigal Son, writes of that the successive stages from the time the grace of God arouses us, to our response to it, saying: These moments are described in the parable of the Prodigal Son in this way: When he came to himself means he has come to his senses; I will arise

and go indicates he has decided to cease his former life; I have sinned is repentance, and his father clothes him (forgiveness and absolution) and prepares him a meal (Holy Communion).

What repentance does is twofold; it is the means by which we are granted knowledge about ourselves, about the reality around us and about the highest of the spiritual realities and it breaks and refines the soul raising up the fallen man. Summarizing St. Symeon the New Theologian, Larchet writes, "Repentance is the door that causes darkness to exit so that light may enter ... He who repents is indeed purified by God of his sins and passions, and the veil that obscured his faculties of knowledge is gradually lifted." Through repentance, we learn how to overcome the passions which is the basis of our whole Christian life. St. Theophan writes that "These penitential feelings are a sign of our growth and purification."

Furthermore, "By examining oneself every moment, by systematically repenting of one's sins and opposing each passionate thought with an attitude of repentance, man can succeed in progressively conquering—by God's grace—all the passions dwelling within him, and thus being healed of all his spiritual illnesses."

No other created order has this ability, this capacity, to turn from sin in repentance. It is a special gift given only to man. As St. John Climacus writes: "It is the property of angels ... not to fall ... It is the property of men to fall, and to rise again as often as this may happen. But it is the property of devils, and devils

alone, not to rise once they have fallen."

When we humble ourselves through repentance, we draw God to us, as the Psalmist says, For the Lord is nigh unto them that are of a contrite heart (Ps. 33:19) and also, A broken and contrite heart, God will not despise (Ps. 50:19). What does this contrition of heart look like? St. John Chrysostom's remarks on repentance when he writes, "Groan when you have sinned, not because you are punished, (for this is nothing), but because you have offended thy Master, one so gentle, one so kind, one that so loves you and longs for your salvation as to have given His Son for you." The contrition is a result of one's relationship to God and the breaking of that relationship which grieves God.

(continued p.4)



The difference between the “pain” associated with unhealthy guilt contrasted with the pain of repentance is explained in this manner. This pain has no connection to the pain produced by remorse, a pathological state in which the sinner remains trapped in his sin, keeping his eyes fixed on it and remaining passive in the face of it. In remorse, man continues the sin under a different guise and becomes sick in another way. He remains focused on the fault committed and on his state, not succeeding in detaching himself from them. In repentance, on the contrary, the sinner focuses on God. He does not feel pain on account of the sin itself—he is not sad because of his wounded ego.

If he is suffering, it is because he has separated himself from God by his sin and because his sinful state keeps him distanced from Him. Repentance, therefore, excludes every pathological feeling of guilt that might distress or paralyze a person. This is why, “Repentance is the cheerful deprivation of every bodily comfort,” as St. John Climacus writes because one rejoices to struggle for Christ, to give up one’s pleasures, comforts, and even one’s life for Christ.

As St. Mary narrates her life to Zosima, before she describes her voyage to Jerusalem, she interrupts the flow of her story. Shamefully, she says that she believes herself to be polluting the air with her words and why the earth did not open its jaws and swallow her alive into hell not only due to her sinfulness but, as she says, because of the many souls that she entangled into her own net. She answers this question by saying, “But I think God was seeking my repentance. For He does not desire the death of a sinner but magnanimously awaits his return to Him.”

Also, when she was in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, she turned to an icon of the Mother of God and addressed her, praying, “But I have heard that God, Who was born of thee, became man on purpose to call sinners to repentance.” She is a model of repentance for us because amidst the darkness of sin the light of truth still shines, and always will. So, unexpectedly, God opened the eyes of her soul so that she would understand at that moment that she is not far from forgiveness and the constant love of God. Amen.

But what exactly shall we weep over? First of all, weep over your sins through which you have defiled and being incessantly defiling the image of God in you. Just think about it: God reflected himself in you, as the sun reflects itself in a drop of water; you were made as a god on earth, as says the Scripture: “I have said, you are gods; and all of you are children of the most High” (Psalm 81:6). But every day you drag this image in the mud, you defile this image with your passions, soil it with your attachment to the world, disbelief, pride, hatred, envy, intemperance and drunkenness and other passions. Through all this, you anger your creator and exasperate his long-suffering. Weeping about it day and night is the right thing to do now. So, weep!

Secondly, weep, for you bear the name of a Christian, but you don't keep the vows and obligations of a Christians given at baptism. Weep, for you live like a pagan, stuck to the ground, never thinking of Heaven and life that has no end. Weep, for you have been a Christian for such a long time, but you don't have the spirit of Christ, you don't conform to him, you don't strive to live his life. Weep, for Christ does not dwell in you through your faith, for you have not become a new creature, you have not put on Christ, as the Scriptures say “As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27).

Thirdly, weep, for your heart constantly endeavors to do everything that is contrary to God. Weep over its evil inclinations, impenitence, its unwillingness to improve. Our penitence, and prayers, partaking in the Holy Life-Giving Mysteries could conquer a heart of stone and make it soft as wax, but we still don't change for the better due to our negligence. O damnation! O spite! O corruption of heart! O pride! O earthly attachments! O flattery of voluptuousness and avarice! So, weep, for although you repent and pray, you don't bring your Lord any fruit worthy of repentance, any fruit of faith and love, fruit of humbleness and gentleness, fruit of abstinence, purity and chastity, fruit of mercy and so on.

(continued next issue)

