

# A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Orthodox Christian Church



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*Glory be to Jesus Christ!*

*Glory be Forever!*

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13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost-Parable of the Wicked Tenants

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the temptation of assuming that faithfulness to the Lord fits comfortably within our lives instead of requiring us to make the sacrifices necessary to share more fully in His life. As much as we do not like to acknowledge it, Christ's Kingdom is not about giving us religion or anything else on our own terms. He calls us to offer Him "the fruits [of our lives] in their seasons."

Today's reading from St. Matthew's gospel follows the Savior's triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The crowds had welcomed Him as the conquering Messiah Who would cast out the Romans and establish an earthly kingdom, but they would soon reject Him when it became clear that His Kingdom is not of this world. He told the chief priests and Pharisees that tax collectors and prostitutes  
*(continued p.3)*

+ 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost +

+St. Anthimus Bishop & Martyr+

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 16: 13-24

Gospel: Matthew 21: 33-42

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 living out Christ's commandment to, *Lorve 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.*

Many of us have become comfortable with the place of religion in our lives. We have our routines of coming to services, praying at home, and engaging in other spiritual disciplines. We are used to thinking of ourselves as Orthodox Christians and members of this parish.

Familiarity breeds contempt, however, and we must be on guard against

## ***The Beheading of St. John the Baptist by St. Justin Popovich***

The death of St. John the Baptist is a second Great Friday. Why? Because there's no greater transgression than that committed on Great Friday and that committed now, when Herod destroys the greatest among those born of women. Why did the Savior praise Saint John the Baptist, as He did?

Why? Because the Holy Forerunner encompassed within himself all the virtues of heaven, all the virtues in of the prophets, all of the apostles, all of the martyrs, all of the an-

gels of heaven, all of the confessors.

We glorify the beheading of the first apostle among the Holy Apostles, for the Forerunner of the Lord was the first sent by God to see the Savior and to announce Him to the world. Long before the Apostle Peter, before the Apostle Nathaniel, before anyone else, he bore witness to and heralded God to the world, God Incarnate in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The first apostle to see the Holy Spirit descend-

ing from Heaven onto the Lord Jesus, when he baptized Him in the Jordan, declared Him to be the Son of God, the Savior of the world. He's also the first evangelist among the Evangelists. He proclaimed to the world the Lord Jesus Christ, the Bearer of all Good Tidings for humanity, "Behold the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the World."

We encounter an angel in the flesh, an earthly angel, and a celestial figure, St. John the Baptist.

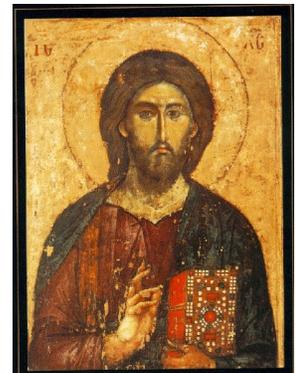
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We invite all to worship in our services. Sunday Divine Liturgy begins at 9:30 AM

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, Meg, Larissa, Jack, Evan, Ryan, Anatoly, Alexey, Heidi, Mackenzie, Mike, Jessica, Lisa, Jeff, Bonnalee, Stan, David, Carol, Norris, Debbie, Linda, Daniel, Matthew, Michael, Tom, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ

### From St. John Kronstadt

During prayer there sometimes occur moments of deadly darkness and spiritual anguish arising from unbelief of the heart (for unbelief is darkness). Do not let your heart fail you at such moments, but remember that if the divine light has been sent off in you, it always shines in all its splendor and greatness in God Himself, in God's Church, in heaven and on earth, and in the material world in which "His eternal power and Godhead are visible."

Do not think that truth has failed, because truth is God Himself, and everything that exists has its foundation and reason in Him. Only your own weak, sinful and darkened heart can fail in the truth, for it cannot always bear the strength of the light of truth, and is not always capable of containing its purity, but only it is being or has been purified from its sins, as the first cause of spiritual darkness.

The proof of this you may find in yourself. When the light of faith or God's truth dwells in your heart, only then is it tranquil, firm, strong, and living; but when this is cut off, then your heart becomes uneasy, weak as a reed shaken by the wind, and lifeless. Do not pay any attention to this darkness of Satan. Drive it away from your heart by making the sign of the life-giving Cross! Do not spare yourself, but pray earnestly, even if you have been toiling all.

Do not spare yourself, but pray earnestly, even if you have been toiling all day. Do not be negligent in holy prayer; say it to God unto the end from your whole heart

## The Beheading of St. John the Baptist, cont'd from p.1

It was not only the Old Testament prophet Isaiah 40, 3) who called the Forerunner the angel of the Lord, but the Lord Himself, Who said this was an angel sent to go before Him to prepare the way for Him. (Matthew 11, 10). Not only a prophet, said the Lord regarding the Baptist, but greater than a prophet – the angel of the Lord. The Holy Forerunner is truly the first angel in the flesh, the first among those who became the multitude of angels in the flesh, lamps bringing God's Light, who lived on earth like angels of heaven, and were angels on earth, and in heaven remained God's people, holy people.

We glorify the great feast of the first among the Prophets of the New Testament. He announced to men that the Lord Jesus Christ had appeared to the world not only as the Savior, but as the Enlightener and as the Judge of the world. In his hands were both the hatchet and the spade: on the day of the Dread Judgement, the Lord will clear the earth's threshing-floor and will separate the wheat from the

chaff, the righteous from the sinners.

All of this the great and glorious Prophet, Forerunner and Baptist of the Lord foresaw. This is why, today, we also praise him as the holy New Testament Prophet, killed by the im-



pious, criminal King Herod.

The Holy Forerunner also received the Lord's witness to the fact that he was the greatest of those born of woman, because he was the first of all of the holy martyrs of the New Testament. He suffered for God's

Truth in this world joyfully. In today's main hymn and prayer to him it says that he rejoiced when he went to his death and when he suffered. In this way, he became the first example and inspiration to all of the holy martyrs of the New Testament, beginning with Saint Stephen the First Martyr, and until today.

All of the holy martyrs go to their death rejoicing in the Lord Jesus Christ: they go, knowing that death can't hold them in its bonds, knowing that death is merely a gateway, an open entry through which their holy souls enter into the kingdom of heaven. How else can we explain the joy of Holy and Great Martyr George when his body was being broken? His bones were being broken on the wheel, and he shouted with joy in the Lord, for he could see Him, could see the angels of God, standing around Him, and the angels stopping the wheel. And the Holy and Great Martyr then stood up safe and sound before the impious Emperor Diocletian.

*(continued next issue)*

## Homily on the Wicked Tenants (cont'd from p.1)

would enter the Kingdom of God before them, for they had disregarded the preaching of St. John the Baptist, even after notorious sinners had repented in response to his teaching. They were like sons who had promised to work in their father's vineyard, but then did not keep their word.

Based their great heritage in the faith of the Hebrew people, the religious leaders of the day had a deep obligation to serve God faithfully. They had, however, become so corrupt that they were like the many false prophets and wicked rulers described in the Old Testament who had worshiped foreign gods, exploited the poor and weak, and killed those who dared to oppose them. In the days leading up to His crucifixion, the Savior compared these conventional religious leaders with those of previous generations who had thought nothing of murdering righteous people who truly spoke the word of the Lord. In today's parable, He foretold His own death at the hands of those who would not respect even the Son of God in Whom all the promises to Abraham are fulfilled.

Because they rejected Him, the Lord said in the verse immediately following this reading, "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit." (v. 44) Here He points to the coming of the Church in which there is neither Jew nor Greek, for those with no ancestral connection to Israel

are now "grafted in" as branches of the olive tree whose roots extend back to the covenant with Abraham. (Rom. 11: 17) St. Paul warned Gentile Christians not to take pride in their status in relation to Jews who had rejected the Messiah, for "They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you." (11: 20-21)

By faith in Christ, we have become the new tenants of the vineyard "who will give him the fruits in their seasons." Remember that that is precisely what the original tenants refused to do. Instead of tending the vineyard and offering its fruit to their rightful owner, they wanted everything for themselves and even killed the son of the owner in order to take his inheritance. We must read this passage as a reminder that to share in the life of

Christ requires offering ourselves in union with His great Self-Offering on the Cross for the salvation of the world. Our calling is the complete opposite of the temptation to corrupt the way of Christ in order to serve our preconceived notions about the good life or help us get what we want in this world. That is simply a way of wanting to keep all the fruit for ourselves.

In the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, we offer bread and wine for their and our fulfillment by the power of the Holy Spirit in the Heavenly Banquet. We then receive them as the Body and Blood of Christ for our healing and participation in the eternal life of the Kingdom. The Eucharist serves no earthly goal and must not become merely a routine religious exercise. It is truly our nourishment for the life of Heaven, our sharing in the eternal blessedness of the Holy Trinity. The Savior's Body and Blood empower us to become like Him in holiness as we manifest His restoration of the human person in the image and likeness of God.

To be in communion with Christ requires offering ourselves to Him each day and refusing to think that there are dimensions of our lives that are somehow excluded from that offering. He offered Himself fully on the Cross, to the point of death, burial, and descent into Hades, in order to rise up in glory for the salvation of the entire world. If we refuse to offer the fruit of our own lives to Him, then we will eat and drink our own condemnation and reject Him even more tragically

than did those who handed the Savior over to crucifixion because He did not serve their proud agendas in this world.

Our Risen Lord does not provide us with a religion that serves our self-centered desires or the interests of any nation, race, or faction, but instead calls us to unite ourselves to Him in his Great Self-Offering by taking up our crosses and sacrificing to seek first His Kingdom, which remains not of this world. His Reign comes not through the schemes of those who use religion to serve their power, prestige, and wealth, but through the humble trust of Our Lord taking on our humanity, the we might be saved. Let us offer ourselves to Christ without reservation as we give Him "the fruits [of our lives] in their seasons." That is the only way to live as those who are truly in communion with Him.



The hourglass measures the passing of time. Different amounts of the sand called life have been measured for all of us. Our life pours through the neck of the hourglass every day. And the sand of today is falling there—into eternity. Of course, maybe God will give us more time to live! Everyone wants to live longer and to have more sand. We do not know what God will do next, but we do know for sure how much time has already passed, how much sand has poured out into eternity. Every grain of sand is like a day.

Therefore, the Church says at the Divine Liturgy:

“That the whole *day* may be *perfect, holy, peaceful, and sinless*, let us *ask* the Lord...” We ask for a holy, sinless, and pure day. We draw our day like artists. But sometimes the picture appears dull: We don’t manage to live through a day without sinning. Of course, we want to live without sin. But these grains of sand are often painted gray, and this is at best. And if, God forbid, they are painted black! Then it’s a bad thing. The sand of the day does not just fall anywhere. It falls right into our hearts! We bear everything in our hearts! All our evil deeds, everything is imprinted there; all the scars from our wounds are there.

As we know, we can commit a sin in our youth and still feel ashamed in old age, as if we committed it yesterday. Sin has no time limit.

The criminal code provides a statute of limitations for each crime, after which a person will no longer be prosecuted. The water has flowed under the bridge, and, according to the law, the person has reformed; so many years have passed and that’s it, there is no need to punish him for that crime. Life itself has most likely already punished him. But sin is cunning: It lies in hiding, lurking somewhere in us, in the depths of our souls, and then at the right moment it can sting us again. And what do the Holy Fathers advise us to do? Every sin that arises in us is like a snake, like a viper that comes out of a hole must be beaten on the head so that it may stay there in the hole without coming out until it dies. It is necessary to beat it all the time!

The Lord has given us a great opportunity: to whiten, to purify every day and our whole lives. Our life is such that we need to cry out all the time with the psalm-

*ist: Thou shalt sprinkle me with hyssop, and I shall be made clean, Thou shalt wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. Thou shalt make me to hear joy and gladness; the bones that be humbled will rejoice (Ps. 50:9, 10).*

We ask the Lord: “Purge me, cleanse me!” And then our ears will rejoice when we hear: “You are forgiven!” When the priest covers us with the epitrachelion and says, “I forgive and absolve you from all your sins”, our bones and ears rejoice. Our hearts jubilate! We have a great joy: We can repent, we can receive forgiveness

with our contrite hearts before the Face of God, and our bones themselves can feel joy. “You are forgiven, you have been blessed!” Your days that have passed, your life that is nearing its end, your minutes and deeds are being whitened by God with the Lord’s Blood—at a high price.

Sometimes people say, “I would give everything if only this would not have happened!” repenting and striving to whiten their past sins. And God did just that! He gave the most precious thing so that all our sins would not exist: *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life (Jn. 3:16).* To make our bones rejoice, Christ was hanged on a tree. So that our ears would be filled with joy and jubilation by forgiveness granted, Christ shed His Blood. His hands were tied

with straps and nailed so that we would no longer be bound by sin, so that we would no longer be captive to it and led by it, *as an ox goes to the slaughter (Prov. 7:22)*, as the wise Solomon said. His hands were nailed so that our hands would no longer be nailed to sin, but to the truth, good works, sincerity, love, and mercy.

There is an Akathist to the Passion of Christ, which is read during Lent. And it has approximately the following lines: “They put on Thee a crown of thorns so that my head would be cleansed from all evil, from evil thoughts; they pierced Thy hands so that my hands would do good and renounce evil; they nailed Thy feet, O Lord, so that I would walk the path of righteousness; they pierced Thy rib, O Lord, and blood and water flowed out of Thy heart so that my heart would be devoted to Thee.”

*(continued next issue)*

