

# 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 12 Issue 597

28<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost-Parable of the Banquet

December 17, 2023



Today's gospel is a parable about the people of Israel at the time of Jesus. Jesus is telling a story of how Israel rejects the Son of God. It is interesting to read this story today, when we are also remembering the Holy Patriarchs of the Old Testament, as well as the prophets; all the righteous of those ages up to the time of Christ.

The *Synaxarion* this morning told us that when Christ came the law of fear

was exchanged for the law of love. Jesus called his people to set aside their understanding of who God is: to exchange a view of God as this irrational and irritable tyrant, of God as an abusive and domineering father figure, and instead realize that the enmity between man and God is entirely of man's own making. God is love. God invites us to a feast. Jesus tells us about the people who reject the law of love. He uses three metaphors in the three excuses offered by the three men who refuse the invitation to the feast.

The first man gives the excuse of having bought land. This is a metaphor for the land of Israel, the nationhood, the tribalism that Jesus observed in his fellow Israelites. It refers to a narrow us-centred religion which also has a very narrow understanding of God. The God they were imagining  
*(continued p.3)*

+ 28<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost +

+Sunday of the Holy Forefathers+

Epistle: Colossians 3:4-11

Gospel: Luke 14: 16-24

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.*

## **Sunday of the Holy Forefathers**

We honor all the righteous of the Old Testament, including those who became the Savior's ancestors according to the flesh, because these people burned like candles of God in the darkness of paganism, and lived in the hope of the coming of the Messiah and mankind's deliverance from slavery to the devil, sin, and death.

They lived by this hope, lead by it as by a certain inner ray of the heart, which cut through the darkness of pagan religion and gave them the

anticipation, the prescience of Christ, the joy of communion with God, the Kingdom of Heaven, and the foretaste of paradise, where human feet had not stepped. Because into the world would come the One Whom these forefathers and fathers loved above all else, loved more than life itself, and for Whose sake were ready for anything—even death. Into the world would come our Lord Jesus Christ, Who would save them. And he will save all of us!

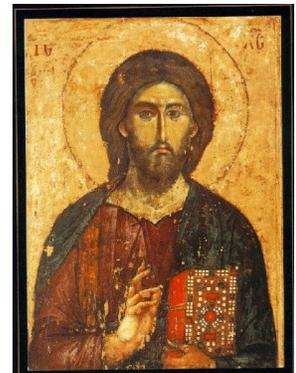
It is precisely for this reason that on the final Sunday before the Nativity of Christ, on the Sunday of the Holy Fathers, at the Liturgy is read the first synoptic Gospel, the first in order according to the Gospel of Matthew, where the genealogy of the Lord God, our Savior Jesus Christ is recounted.

On the one hand, this was established by the Church in order that we would know and be interested in the lives of the Righteous Old Testament ones, finding much that is  
*(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, Mike, Lisa, Jeff, Bonnalee, David, Carol, Norris, Debbie, Linda, Daniel, Michael, Abraham, George, Rochelle, Brianna, Tamam, Catherine, Liz, Chuck, Theresa, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ

**From St. John Kronstadt**

Whatever you may say, a man is sometimes too irritable and too evil to be so of himself, but he becomes so through the most zealous endeavors of the Devil. Only watch yourself or others at the time of irritation and wickedness, when you yourself or anyone else would wish to destroy the person who is inimical to you, really or in your imagination.

Compare this state with that which fol-

lows it (sometimes soon afterwards by the action of your Guardian Angel, tranquility, meekness and kindness, either in yourself or in anyone whom you watch) with the former opposite condition, and you will say to yourself: "No, this seems quite a different man from him, who, not long ago, was so full of evil and rage; this man is the one' out of whom the devils were departed, sitting at the feet of Jesus [meek and humble], clothed and in his right mind."

In him there is not even a shadow of the former wickedness and the former foolishness!" Some deny the existence of evil spirits; but such phenomena in the human life clearly prove their existence. If every phenomenon has its corresponding reason, and if the tree is to be judged by its fruits, then who will not see in the madly-infuriated man the presence of the evil spirit, who cannot show himself otherwise than in a manner worthy of him? Who will not see the chief of all evil in the outpouring of anger? Besides this, a man subjected to irritability and breathing malice clearly feels the presence of a hostile evil.

**Sunday of the HolyForefathers, cont'd from p.1**

fascinating and, especially, instructive in them. On the other hand, this established order is testimony to the fact that Christ is a real, historical person—and not just an historical person, but God incarnate in human nature, become a real Man, Who took on our sins, healed us with His redeeming *podvig*, and Who ascended with human nature to the right hand of God the Father. Every man has ancestors and the Savior also had them, which is what the Gospel retells with utmost clarity.

Furthermore, brothers and sisters, we would like to direct your attention to the *podvig* of the holy forefathers and fathers from the historical point of view. We live in a society that is penetrated and drenched with Christian morality, as the earth is penetrated with air and drenched with water. But at that time, the Canaanite peoples made sacrifices of their own nursing children to Moloch, the Scythians drank the blood of their enemies. Cruelty and slavery were the norm then. Human life was cheap.

Anyone could break into another man's house during war and take him into slavery, to make of him a "talking thing" with absolutely no rights.

And it seems to me that in those times it must have been very easy to lose the guiding star of the true faith, but the holy forefathers and father did



not lose it; to the contrary they preserved it as a flaming, fiery tradition, like a burning candle, which we also must pass on (still burning!) to our own descendants. The world is still standing because of this.

There is a reason why this year at the Liturgy on the Sunday of the Holy Forefathers the Gospel parable of

the wedding feast of the king's son is read (Lk. 14:16-24). The powerful of that world rejected Christ, but the lame on the wayside accepted Him and were triumphantly led to the wedding feast. Who are "the maimed, the halt, and the blind" in the Gospel, who were called to the feast of faith? Of course they are, first of all, the holy forefathers and fathers, and after them all Christians who sincerely consider themselves spiritually sick—sick with sin, and therefore do they weep and lament over their sins and seek their most important Doctor, God. They seek and find Him.

And perhaps one of the most important feelings or thoughts that unites the holy forefathers, the fathers, the apostles, and in general all the saints of all generations is the understanding that the Lord, just as before so also now, like a thousand years ago, and in the coming year, is amidst us, and walks beside us through life. This feeling of the living God is what makes us Orthodox Christians.

## Homily on Christ, (cont'd from p.1)

has a very narrow focus: one small group of people *to the exclusion* of all the others. These people became irate when Jesus loves outsiders, whether it was foreigners or those who, like Zacchaeus, were considered to be unredeemable. The man whose excuse for not attending the feast is his purchase of land does not understand that the whole earth is God's.

The second man gave the excuse of having just bought oxen. This is a metaphor for the animals offered in the temple. This represents the liturgical legalism and ritualism of the Jewish cult in Jesus' day. He criticized his fellow Jews for straining the gnat but swallowing the camel when they multiplied rules only to make it seem lawful to do that which his clearly immoral and unethical. Religious observance was believed to be a means of forcing God to give them back their kingdom. God, in their view, would have no choice but to restore the kingdom because the people had perfected the art of following the letter of the law.

This God they are imagining is petty and easily offended for no good reason. He is a touchy tyrant. These same people were offended with Jesus who suggested that the sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath. They could not conceive of a God who would do anything for them that they did not earn, and yet they believed they could insult God's intelligence by creating legal loopholes that flew in the face of the spirit of the law. What kind of God did they actually believe in?

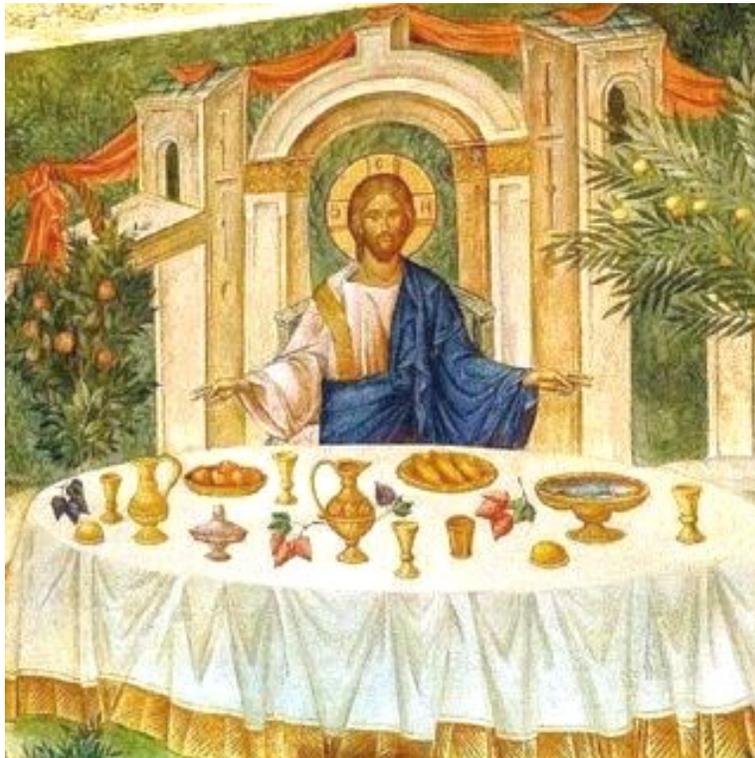
The final excuse that was offered was marriage. A man declines to attend the feast because he has recently married. This is a metaphor for those who have deluded themselves into thinking that they have arrived. It is realized eschatology. It is a belief that all the questions have been answered. God is almost not needed. It is bride who does not need a bridegroom, because she has already married another. Israel did not think it needed Jesus.

In fact, such toxic pride, is actually based on the notion that God cannot be relied upon. If you don't think God will help you, then it's up to you, and you better do it yourself. This kind of religion is based on the feelings of insecurity, fear and betrayal. They were incensed when Jesus suggested to them that they had *not* reached the

heights, and the kingdom of God was not even in the direction they were headed. He says, "blessed are the meek," and, "blessed are the poor." What he was asking of them was to honestly face the fact that they did not feel that God cared for them.

We all give the same excuse for not following Christ. Our first excuse is similar to the one in the gospel story. We also have a narrow view of God, not believing that he can forgive us. Even if we hope he can forgive us, we certainly do not easily believe he can heal and change us. We fear that God cannot give us what we need when we take on the daunting task of facing our own faults and shortcomings. God says, "be Holy as I am holy," but we do not believe it is possible. We lie to ourselves and pretend not to have any sin.

We convince ourselves that there will always be a later time, before the end of our lives, when we can repent.



Because of our fear and distrust towards God, we neglect the calling we have to serve others. By failing to equip ourselves for service through the process of cleansing our minds, we are not equipped and ready to serve others. When our mind is full of self-deceit and fear, we cannot respond to the needs of others with courageous prayer, compassion, with forgiveness.

Fundamentally, this is a failure on our own part to understand that God has bigger plans, and a bigger agenda than simply either condemning or forgiving my individual rule-breaking. We focus on the relationship of the God of

the universe to one individual person, and pretend that the problem that needs to be solved is God's petty anger and wrath towards me alone. Our focus is microscopic. We are afraid of being caught.

God is concerned with the salvation of the world. He shows us, through today's gospel, that the problem that salvation solves is not God's petty wrath, but man's petty excuse-making. God does not need to be placated. Man needs to come to the feast. By confessing my sins and accepting the forgiveness and deliverance God offers, even when it requires me to humble myself, I allow my focus to widen my focus from the narrow and scope of me-and-God exclusively, to the much wider scope of us-and-God.

(continued p.4)

### Homily on the Parable of the Banquet (cont'd from p.3)

The second temptation was to rely on the efficacy of rituals and rules. We fear that God will only ever love and protect us if we perform all his rituals correctly, and we delude ourselves into thinking we are capable of accomplishing this. We begin to nit-pick on others in the church. You have not bowed correctly. You have not crossed yourself at the appointed time, in the appointed place. We resent the innocence of the children, because they are not bound with the same irrational fear of God that binds us adults. They spill the prosphora on the floor. They are not quiet. We develop irrational soul-crushing expectations of children, of those who are weaker or more vulnerable, though we have every reason to know these expectations are unreasonable. We also put certain people in the church up on a pedestal, creating an image of the perfection that we have deluded ourselves into believing is possible. We begin to make our music a performance instead of a prayer. It must be just-so. Worship become production and experience, not sacrifice. Whereas the joy that trusting God brings can cause us to observe the good-order of the church services with love and care for others, in this mindset of fear and anger, all our attention is taken up with resenting others' failure to adhere

to a myriad of rules (most of which, by the way, are small-t traditions that have no basis in canon law or scripture). Having deprived ourselves of joy by our lack of faith, we set out to destroy as much of others' joy as we can.

The final temptation we face is that which Jesus indicated through the man who sent the excuse that he had just gotten married. How many of us become married to Orthodoxy, but not at all in the sense that God intended? In the current-day Orthodox culture the temptation is, especially, to sit behind our computer screen and discuss *the* correct Orthodox position on all kinds of controversies ranging from church politics to actual politics. We hoard answers, believing that if I know all the right answers then the world will be put back into balance. If I (little and insignificant as I am) can win all the arguments, then the world will be saved. I am married to a false bridegroom, and he is me.

We become irate when our assumptions are challenged. We become indignant at any teacher or priest

who would simply ask us to consider for a moment why we assume what we do. We resent those whose interpretation is too lax or too liberal. Some of us resent the stricter interpretations more. These are two sides of the same coin. When we ask ourselves, "how can they do/say that?" we do not really want to know the answer. We are closed off to empathy. We fear that if we begin to understand and empathize with those who are *other*, God will abandon us and allow us to become as deluded as they are. We do not trust God to do that which we pray for at nearly every service! We pray things like "establish us in the way of thy commandments" or "enlighten our minds through the light of thy gospel teachings," but we do not believe that He who began a



good work in us will be faithful to complete it. Therefore, we isolate from all whose opinion is different. We build a controversy-free cocoon around ourselves and perhaps around our families in which we do not *need* to trust God.

If we take the story seriously, we see that the wedding feast is celebrated by a company of blind and lame guests. How can we join their number? By accepting the truth of our own blindness and lameness. Any sin that I am hiding, that I am too afraid to deal with, that is something which also prevents me from loving others and

having compassion on their weakness. That is my first priority. The Paschal canon says, "Let us *purify our senses* and we shall behold Christ, radiant with the unapproachable light of the Resurrection, and shall hear Him saying clearly."

Do you want to see Christ the bridegroom? Purify your senses through the confession of your sins, by following Christ to the cross. The cross is the lifestyle of humility and admission of failure. It is the lifestyle of forgiving those who do not deserve forgiveness. When we follow Jesus to the cross, the only handwriting is the accusation nailed to the cross above our heads, not the accusations that we would like to write down against others. When we allow only accusations against ourselves to be heard, the writing above us on the top of our crosses is truth, but in a way that no one expected. The truth of the accusation is also a confession of the truth of God's promise. We will join Jesus in His royal priesthood; Jesus, above whose head was hung a sign reading, "king of the Jews."