

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!

Volume 13 Issue 608

3rd Sunday of Great Lent-Veneration of the Holy Cross

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In today's Gospel our Lord pinpoints certain essential requirements for true discipleship. Our Lord invites all humanity to become His disciples, but He wants their love to be freely given. The Holy Trinity, when they made man and woman, made them according to Their "image and likeness". In the element of "image" is included humanity's freewill. We are free to do

whatever we wish. Humanity sees good and evil, and between them, they must make a choice. We are free to choose and act accordingly. Nobody compels us, we decide for ourself.

In Paradise, Adam and Eve decided of their own freewill to disobey the Commandment of God and the result was the fall. Moreover, far from recognizing their own responsibility in the matter, they blamed God for the catastrophe. Our ancestors, Adam and Eve, had the opportunity to return to God through repentance, but chose rather to live far away from Him.

While still in Paradise, God gave them three opportunities to repent, but on all three occasions, they chose freely to ignore these opportunities (see Gen. 3: 10-14).

God showed absolute respect for our freewill. This is well illustrated, when
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++ 3rd Sunday of Great Lent ++

+Veneration of the Holy Cross+

Epistle: Hebrews 4:14-5:6

Gospel: Mark 8:34-9:1

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 3)

And now look at yourselves, my brothers. Who are you, standing before me in the holy church, humbly listening to the feeble word of an unknown preacher? Are there many among you who are wise in the ways of the world, are there many who are strong, or noble among you? Are not my listeners, for the most part, the downtrodden, weak, and lowborn?

But let me comfort you, for the speech of our divine teacher, the Lord Jesus Christ, is addressed to you, just like to all the

noble ones who humbly stand here: blessed are you, who are poor in spirit, for yours is the kingdom of Heaven.

For you realize your spiritual ignorance, your sinfulness, your weakness and the grace of God addressed to you, you have come now and you will always come to this temple to enrich your spirit from the generous God.

Whether you come for the forgiveness of sins, blessing, peace and freedom of the soul, light and purity of thoughts, guid-

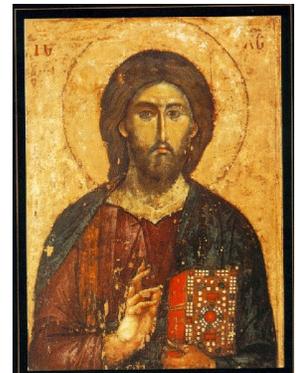
ance on the further path of your life, on Christian deeds and your everyday work; whether you seek spiritual strength against the invisible enemies, for the cure of a sickness and the relief of the sorrow, or to offer your gratitude to God for his goodness, you come here.

And where are the noble, the educated, the rich? There are very few of them. Why? Because many of them say to ourselves: we are rich, we have achieved this fortune and we don't need to
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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, 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

Christian Fellowship in the Church

Fellowship (Koinonia) refers to the way in which the Orthodox Christian brings his faith into his daily and social life. There is something holy about Orthodox Christians who gather together socially and who remain conscious that they are people of God. The relationship of the three persons of the Holy Trinity is perfect love as a community. By gathering together and showing love for one another, we emulate

the Holy Trinity, gaining strength, courage, and patience to develop a truly Christian lifestyle.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment, and the second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself, on these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:37-40)

In Fellowship (Koinonia) we are one. We gather together as the Body of Christ and work together in communion and in fellowship. We begin to realize and become aware that Christ is the focal point of all our activities and relationships with one another. Our love for Christ and our faith in the Holy Spirit begins to guide us as we center our lives around loving one another the way Christ loves us, unconditionally, unselfishly, and wholeheartedly. The presence of God is not only with us on Sundays: is always with us as we grow and learn to love one another in the spirit of genuine fellowship.

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

ask for anything.

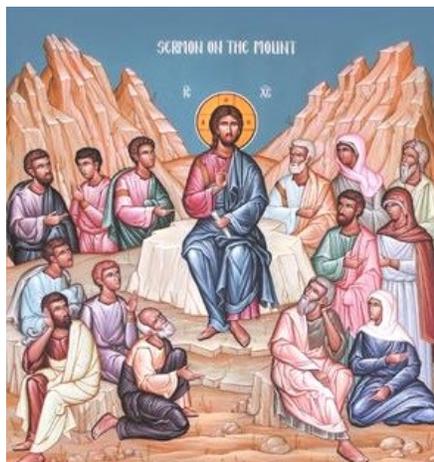
We are educated, so what else shall we learn and from whom? We have many blessings of all sorts, we don't know poverty, so what shall we ask God for; all we have we owe to ourselves, our intelligence, our labor, our position in the world, our place; so whom shall we thank and for what?

We are sinful, they say, and this is true, but who does not sin? This is the nature of man, they say, why blame him? Although this is not the nature that created him this way; this is his own will and the abuse of that will that made him become what he is. This is how the mighty of our world think, how they judge, those proud of the world are "great and rich, sleek and bloated" (Jeremiah 5:27-28). Far from them is the kingdom of God.

«Woe unto them that are full!» says the Lord, "for they shall hunger; Woe unto you that are rich! For you have received your consolation" (Luke 6:24-25).

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven."

What is poverty of spirit? All of you have seen bodily poverty; so, to paint an image of spiritual poverty, let us explain in the same way. The pauper, as the word assumes, is the one who has nothing of his own, and whatever



he hopes for, is from the mercy of others: he does not have his own piece of bread to satisfy his hunger, or what would be enough for him to quench his thirst. he doesn't have shelter to lay his head unless someone gives him money to pay for one.

Nor does he have any clothes unless a compassionate person takes pity on him and buys him some, or, if he has some clothes, they are old, dirty, worn, and good for nothing, so you would not want to touch them. He is neglected, he is reproached; he is treated like trash, like a piece of dung, though in the eyes of God he may appear like gold refined in a furnace. An example of such is Lazarus in the Gospels.

Now let us apply these features of bodily poverty to the one poor in spirit. The poor in spirit is the one who sincerely recognizes himself as a spiritual pauper, for his has nothing of his own. He expects everything from the mercy of God, convinced that he can neither think, nor wish anything good unless God gives him what is good, that he cannot do a single truly good deed without the blessing of Jesus Christ. He considers himself more sinful and nasty, lower than everybody else. He reproaches himself and never judges anyone.

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Homily on Veneration of the Cross Sunday, (cont'd from p.1)

St. John Chrysostom writes that “God made man without the help of man, but without man’s co-operation God cannot save him.” God wishes to restore the King of nature, that is man, to the happy estate he enjoyed before the Fall. However, He does not force the restoration on us. We must want it ourselves, and in order to achieve it, we must follow the way laid down by God. This way was revealed by our Lord Jesus Christ, who showed in His Life how we could return to the original state before the Fall and invited us to undertake the journey. Christ wants “all of humanity to be saved and to come to the true knowledge of God”. It is not His wish that we should live far away from His Grace and Love.

Humanity is saved as a result of his faith in the Son of God. However, we are not saved by faith alone. Our

Lord taught that salvation depends on two things, true faith and true works. True faith is the acceptance of all that our Lord and His Disciples taught. “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word or mouth or by letter” (II Thess. 2:15). True works are to live and act according to this faith, this is to keep His commandments.

Our Lord teaches us, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). Our Lord invites all of us to follow Him, but in no way forces anybody to do so. He insists that whosoever wants to follow Him must do so of their own freewill. We see in our Lord’s life how great God’s Love for humanity is and how absolute His respect is for our freewill.

Although, He came all the way from Heaven to save humanity, He does not force anyone to follow Him. He longs for us to return to Him, but leaves it entirely up to our own choice.

This respect shown by our Lord for man’s freewill is also shown by the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Church does not force anyone to do anything against their will, because this would be contrary to the teaching of our Lord. It is up to you whether you believe; it is up to you whether you practice the teachings of Christ.

However, lest we misinterpret this emphasis on our freewill, we must bear in mind two important points. The first is that if we wish to be His Disciples, we must believe in Him completely, without adding or subtracting from His Teaching. We must not only profess to be Christians, but must also put our Christianity into prac-

tice. St James teaches us, “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith, but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well, keep warm and well fed’, but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, You have faith, I have deeds’. Show your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith

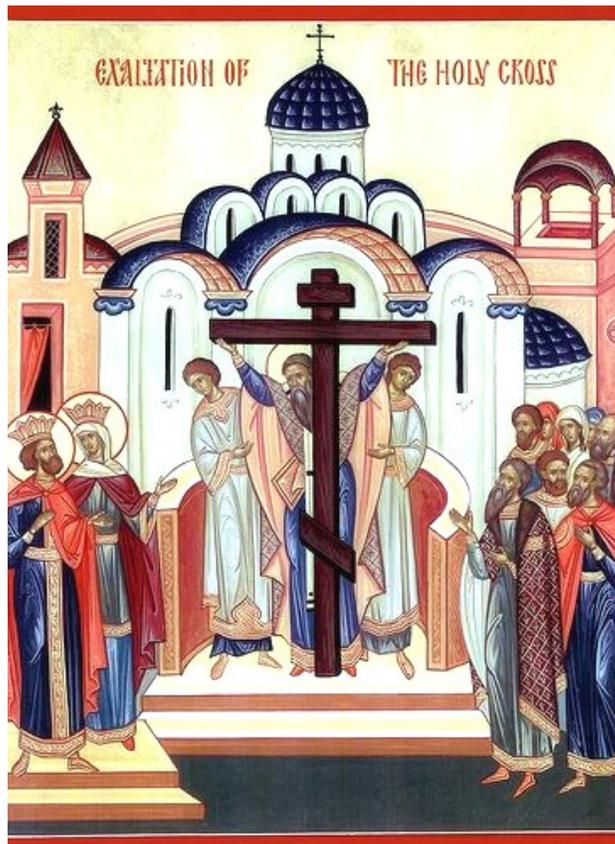
and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did” (James 2:14-22). And “as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead” (James 2:26).

The second point is that while we are free to do as we wish, we are responsible for our actions. We are the only creatures on Earth who are responsible for each and every action. We choose, according to our freewill, either to do good or evil. Whatever we decide will have certain consequences for which we will be accountable. The animals are not responsible for what they do, because they act from instinct, whereas we act according to our freewill. Our freedom is fulfilled only in Christ, “so if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8: 36). Divorced from Christ and far away from the

true knowledge of God, humanity lives in darkness and bondage.

Today, my beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, our Lord invites us to follow Him, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden light” (Matt. 11:28-30). It is up to us whether we accept this invitation or cast aside the opportunity for salvation which He gave us by means of His Sacrifice on the Cross. Today, the Orthodox Church offers for veneration the Holy Cross so that the faithful may benefit from its Grace in their striving to complete the fast of Lent.

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This tradition arose in Constantinople at the Church of St Sophia where the true Cross of Christ was safeguarded. Half way through the period of Great Lent the Patriarch of Constantinople placed the Cross in the centre of the Church so that the faithful might venerate it. On Monday and Tuesday, the women venerated it and on Wednesday and Thursday it was the turn of the men. On Friday, after the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, it was restored to its place of safekeeping.

The purpose for the veneration of the Cross is first that we might gain Spiritual and bodily strength to continue the spiritual struggle; and secondly, that we might learn that before the Resurrection, there is the Crucifixion.

The Crucifixion means that we must crucify our passions so that through their death the new man in Christ may arise, as St Paul teaches us, "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified their sinful nature with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5: 24) and "don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus, were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we will certainly also be united with Him in His Resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with Him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Now, if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, He cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over Him. The death He died, He died to sin once and for all; but the life He lives, He lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:3-11). Amen.

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He claims his soul's raiment to be bad and dismal, stinking and worthless, and never ceases to beg our Lord Jesus Christ to improve the raiment of his soul, to clothe him in the imperishable garment of truth. He relentlessly shelters underneath the wings of God, finding safety nowhere else except in God; he believes that he owes everything to God and earnestly thanks him for everything, at the same time eagerly sharing everything

he has with those in need. This is who is poor in spirit, and such poor in spirit shall be blessed, by the word of God.

For where there is humility, recognition of one's poverty and wretchedness, there is God, and where God is, the sins are relieved, there is peace, light, freedom, contentment and beatitude. These are the poor in spirit to whom the Lord came to preach the Gospel of the kingdom of Heaven, as he said: "he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor" (Luke 4:18), which means those poor in spirit, not those striving to be rich, for their pride repels the grace of God, and they remain an empty and foul-smelling shell. Don't people willingly extend a helping hand and mercy to those who are truly poor, in a desperate need for the bare essentials, so even more, is it not God who shows mercy and fatherly answers to those who call on Him, and fills them with his spiritual treasures? "he has filled the hungry with good things" it is said (Luke 1:53).

Aren't the valleys richly watered with rain; don't the valleys bloom and are fragrant? Aren't those the mountains, where you find snow and ice, and lifelessness? The tall mountains are the image of the proud, and the valleys are the image of the humble: "Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low" (Luke 3:5). "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6).

So, "blessed are the poor in spirit," that is, those who consider themselves to be nothing, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven. At the beginning, the kingdom of God, Heaven, was inside people, in their hearts, as the Lord said: "The kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21). But then, after our forefathers disobeyed the will of God and listened to the devil who tempted them, it disappeared from the human heart, and sin and its perpetrator have reigned human hearts ever since, turning them from Heaven, enslaving them to earthly vanity. Simple people became cunning, good people became evil, the humble became proud, the pure became impure; those who were strong for the holy, became powerless for anything good, striving for evil instead, so that now, according to the Holy Scripture, "the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Gen. 8:21).

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