

A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Orthodox Christian Church

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Christ is in our Midst! He is and ever shall be!



Volume 11 Issue 536

18th Sunday after Pentecost-The Parable of the Sower

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“A sower went out to sow his seed...” Christ’s classic parable today challenges us to consider how we personally receive and act upon His Gospel of life. He compares us to the seeds sown here in this parable and all of which have the potential for life and bearing fruit: “some fell on the wayside, some on the rock, some among the thorns, and some on the good soil. So, we consider, “What kind of

seed am I?” and “what kind of seed do I need to become?”

The context for considering this all-important question, is one of a farmer sowing, planting, growing, and desiring a good harvest from that which he’s sown. There are parallels to our own lives found in the garden as well. In fact, there’s something instinctual in us that draws many of us to want to garden: it was, after all, mankind’s first vocation, as we read in Gen. 2:15, “Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it.” Gardening is God’s vocation given to us before the Fall, before there was any sin in the world.

Like many of us, I like to garden—cultivating a garden is not so dissimilar to cultivating souls, so when I hear this parable, it brings to mind the
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++ 18th Sunday after Pentecost ++
+Martyr Longinus the Centurion+

Epistle: 2 Corinthians 9: 6-11

Gospel: Luke 8: 5-15

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, *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.*

A talk on the Divine Liturgy, Metropolitan Athanasios of Limassol (part 2)

The vinegar is transformed into sweet wine. And vice versa: grumbling, discontent, despondency, and melancholy, when we begin to say: “Oh, how terrible everything is for me. I can’t do it anymore. I don’t have the strength anymore.

It’s better to die than to live this way...”, leads to the fact that, even if there is a little sweet wine in our soul, it will very soon turn into vinegar. Therefore, it’s of great importance for man to be able to praise God.

The Church typicon, the order of divine services, prescribes for the Divine Liturgy to be served standing up—during the Liturgy, both the priest and the congregation stand upright. We don’t prostrate to the ground, as in other religions, but stand up straight and gaze upon God the Father face-to-face, like children.

God wants us to be His children, not His slaves; therefore we pray standing during the Liturgy, bending our knees only at certain exceptional points

in the service.

We glorify God, and He responds to our praise with His grace.

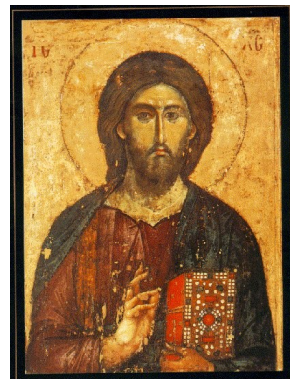
I repeat that we Christians have the greatest privilege to bless the name of God, to bless the Kingdom of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Such praise takes us out of the element of this world and leads us to another reality—the reality of God.

“Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Why do we
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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.





Troparion to St. George

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

News and Notes

We welcome all who are worshipping with us today. We are also happy to announce that coffee social has resumed following the Divine Liturgy.

Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17)

Please keep the following in your prayers: Mother Onufria, Fr. Michael, Meg, Larissa, Jack, Stephen, Evan, Ryan, Anatoly, Alexey, Heidi, Maverick, Corella, Ron, Daniel, Frankie, Loretta, Mackenzie, Mike, Jessica, Grace, Gladys, Lisa, Jeff, Bonnalee, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ

St. Longinus the Centurion

The Holy Martyr Longinus the Centurion, a Roman soldier, served in Judea under the command of Pontius Pilate. At our Savior's Crucifixion, it was the detachment of soldiers under the command of Longinus which stood watch on Golgotha. Longinus and his soldiers were eyewitnesses of the final moments of the earthly life of the Lord, and of the great and awesome portents that appeared at

His death. These events shook the centurion's soul. Longinus believed in Christ and confessed before everyone, "Truly this was the Son of God" (Mt. 27:54).

After the Crucifixion and Burial of the Savior, Longinus stood watch with his company at the Sepulcher of the Lord. These soldiers were present at the All-Radiant Resurrection of Christ. The authorities bribed them to lie and say that His disciples had stolen away the Body of Christ, but Longinus and two of his comrades refused to be seduced by money. They also refused to remain silent about the miracle of the Resurrection.

Having come to believe in the Savior, the soldiers received Baptism from the apostles and decided to leave military service. Saint Longinus left Judea to preach about Jesus Christ the Son of God in his native land (Cappadocia), and his two comrades followed him.

Pilate sent soldiers to Longinus's village, and he came out to meet the soldiers. The holy martyrs were beheaded, and their bodies were buried at the place where the saints were martyred.

A talk on the Divine Liturgy, cont'd from p.1

...speak of the Kingdom, and why is God called King? Because in antiquity, when a king ruled in a city, he ruled over everything that was in it. Everything in the city belonged to him, and all the inhabitants were his subjects. So when Christ reigns in our souls, then everything we have—mind, heart, body, our entire being—belongs to Him. Everything is sanctified when God reigns in the soul of man. There is nothing and there should be nothing in my life that would be outside the gates of the Kingdom of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We must carefully ensure that everything in our lives, from beginning to end, is illuminated by the light of this Kingdom. Our conscience should bear witness that Christ reigns over us, that we are in His Kingdom.

I remember one incident from our monastic life. Our ever-memorable elder, Fr. Joseph of Vatopedi, told us that in his time as a novice under St. Joseph the Hesychast, every evening, when the brothers dispersed to their

cells to do their evening rule, he would ask himself: "What I thought, said, and did today—was it sealed with the blessing of God? Do I bear the blessing of my Elder? Have I con-



cealed anything from the Elder, even if involuntarily?" And if his conscience testified that he had concealed nothing from the Elder, that he had done everything with the Elder's blessing, then he could calmly begin to pray.

But if his conscience reproached him for some act of self-will, then he would immediately go and tell the Elder everything, so nothing would prevent grace from coming to him during his prayer rule. I must say that in general, all the Fathers of the Church were extremely attentive and strict with regards to purity of conscience.

I'll tell you two stories from the life of one great contemporary ascetic, who was still little-known then because he didn't receive any visitors. Only a few monks knew him, including our brotherhood, because he was a spiritual brother of our Elder. I'm talking about St. Ephraim of Katounakia, that great spiritual giant, known for his especially strict preservation of conscience. He really was incredibly strict with his conscience. He didn't accept even the slightest compromise with it; he didn't allow himself to deviate from the law of conscience in the slightest; he observed it in both spirit and in letter.

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(Homily on The Parable of the Sower, cont'd from p.1)

many joys *and struggles* of gardening and pastoring.

To me, the best part of gardening is getting to see the garden I've planted and tended, growing and then thriving on its own, the plants growing into their fullness, the colors and shapes creating a beautiful patchwork, the fruiting plants producing their bounty, the birds of the air and buzzing insects all participating in my little corner of Eden. And then, I find myself responding to the life, the growth, the beauty, expressing interior gratitude to the Creator of all life.

It's an exhilarating feeling when you see the fruit of your labors and have the opportunity to glorify God for the beauty of His creation, as you participate in this work so reminiscent of that of our first parents who saw the beauty of the creation as an 'icon' of God's goodness and expressed their gratitude toward God in their worship of Him.

But every gardener knows, that the garden won't produce good results unless properly and patiently tended. I can have the best seeds or the best starter plants, but if they fall on hard clay or the roots of a tree or because they are ravaged by insects or weeds, they will fail to thrive.

The same temptations that Christ laid bare in His parable of the Sower are true today: How easy it is to be the seed that fell among the rocks, that is, those who receive the Gospel and Orthodox Faith, but who in times of temptation fall away. Likewise, how easy it is to be as those seeds that fall among the thorns and whose souls are smothered by the temporal cares and concerns and priorities of this present life, by our secular society, and who don't bring forth fruit to maturity. Great are the temptations today to keep Christ and His Church on the periphery, to be in the world and of the world while giving head-knowledge to God. One has to truly be "counter-cultural" to, as Christ says, "seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness" in our world today.

When we keep ourselves at a distance from Christ and His Church, as only a tangential priority, we are, in a sense, *choosing* to be the seed by the wayside; we're easily trampled down and devoured by the culture—

maybe not in such dramatic ways, maybe perhaps in 'safe,' mundane ways: working all the time, skipping church or worship when inconvenient to attend, not making time for our daily prayers, neglecting the Sacraments or opportunities to learn and study the Scriptures and Holy Fathers. These mixed priorities mean that our souls slowly wither.

St. Cyril of Alexandria says of those who are on the wayside that they are just like it, "hard and unyielding" (*Sermon on the Parable of the Sower*). Indeed, many today proudly prefer their own way over the revealed and timeless way of Christ and His Church. Even in the Church, pride, obstinacy, lack of a teachable spirit is often the norm. Where stubbornness and pride are rooted, there is a 'wayside' in the soul that prevents growth in the knowledge and love of God.

If a 'teachable spirit' is lacking and one isn't open to learning or doing the hard 'spade work' necessary to be purified of the passions that cause sin, necessary to be obedient to the disciplines prescribed by Christ and the Church, then we cannot grow, be fruitful, or work out our salvation.

Prayer, fasting, worship and the Sacraments are our tools. When we make sacramental Confession, for instance, we have the opportunity to remove from ourselves all those rocks—hardness of heart—all the weeds, those temporal preoccupations, that take the place of prioritizing our life in Christ.

But when we give them over to Christ, He purifies us, renews us and creates a "clean and right spirit within us" (Psalm 50). In this way, we prepare the 'soil' of our souls for growth to bring forth a bountiful harvest, pleasing to God, fit for His Kingdom. In the garden, you can't weed or prepare the soil or remove the rocks just once; you have to be ever vigilant and patient in tending it on an ongoing basis or you'll find your choice plants choked, withering, or dead. So it is with the 'garden of our souls.' If we want to become mature children of God, thriving in the Life He alone is, then we have to work diligently to tend to the needs of our souls. They

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need to be nourished. God is always doing His part; He is the Master Gardener of our souls. But we have to do our part in response. Just as in the garden, there is also a synergy at work in us. We all start out as these little 'seeds' of faith. If we wish to grow and thrive, then we cannot be passive when it comes to the health and growth of our souls.

It's all here for us—all the tools of the 'garden of our souls' are found in the Church. Those who wish to be as the seed cast among the good soil, are vigilant to fight to not let themselves be redirected to other preoccupations and temptations apart from their life in Christ, apart from prioritizing the worship and Sacraments of Christ's holy Church. If you and I wish to have Christ for *eternal* life, you and I have Christ as our main focus in *this* life. We bring Him into our daily lives—into all our stresses, anxieties, temptations, trials, and joys.

So that you and I may be like the seed that fell on the fertile soil, St. Cyril urges us to "drive away from our minds all worldly cares." In this way, through repentance, taking each thought 'captive' to obey Christ (II Cor. 10:5), availing ourselves of the Sacraments Christ has entrusted to us and our daily prayers, we can become the seed that brings forth fruit from our lives, for our families, in our church, and in our community where we witness to the truth of Christ within us and which liberates every man and woman who puts their trust in Him.

May we be open, obedient, and trusting as we patiently and diligently work to prepare the 'garden of our souls,' taking up "pick and shovel," making use of all the tools Christ has entrusted to us. In this way, we will be filled to overflowing with the presence of Christ and can be confident, "that He who has begun a good work in you will complete *it* until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). We will be as those seed that have fallen on the good soil, who have heard the word of the Gospel and bear good fruit with *patience*.
To God be The Glory. Amen.

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(Talk on the Divine Liturgy)

And for this he was granted abundant grace from God.
One day Fr. Ephraim came from Katounakia to New

Skete where we lived. He spoke with our Elder, and before leaving, he wanted to write something down. Our Elder gave him a pen. It was an ordinary ballpoint pen—not some fancy Parker pen, but an ordinary Bic. At that time, ballpoint pens were just coming into widespread use. Fr. Ephraim wrote his note, and giving the pen back, said: "Fr. Joseph, what a wonderful pen you have!" And our Elder immediately replied: "Take it, Father. I have another one. And when I go into the world on business, I can buy another one." (I should add that Fr. Ephraim never went into the world.)

Fr. Ephraim took the pen, said goodbye to us, and went back to his place in Katounakia. It was already getting dark when he left. It was a considerable distance from New Skete to Katounakia, and the road was uphill. The path was not some pleasant walk along the shore, but ascents and descents along mountain trails. With good weather and a quick pace, the road took at least an hour and a half or two hours.

Night fell. We were doing our evening rule according to our custom, on the prayer rope.

Somewhere around midnight there was a knock at the door of our kallyva. Who could be wandering around at that hour? We opened the door, and there on the threshold stood Fr. Ephraim. He came in and said, turning to our Elder:

"Fr. Joseph, take this pen back. I don't want to have it."

"What happened?"

"Please, take it back. I took it without a blessing. And since I acted according to self-will, now I can't serve the Liturgy. I sense that there's an obstacle to serving."

He convinced Fr. Joseph to take the pen back. See, Fr. Ephraim came to see us, then left for Katounakia, then returned to us, and then went back to Katounakia. Think about how much time he spent on the road. Practically all night. Someone else in his position could have said: "Well, whatever. I'll return the pen tomorrow. It's no big deal if I have it in the kallyva for a night. I'm not going to use it." However, Fr. Ephraim couldn't do that—he felt that his connection with Divine grace in his soul had been interrupted because he allowed himself to do something that was, in his opinion, self-indulgence, self-will. He explained to Fr. Joseph that he hadn't gotten a blessing from his Elder to take the pen.

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