

A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Orthodox Christian Church

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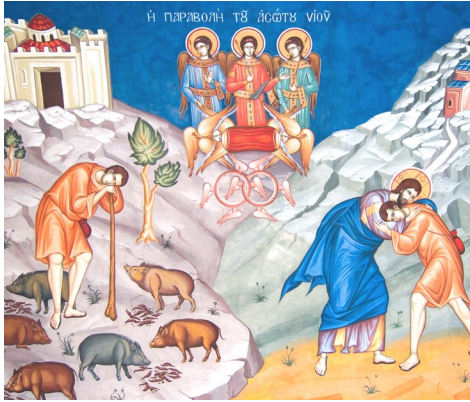
Glory be to Jesus Christ! Glory be Forever!



Volume 12 Issue 553

35th Sunday after Pentecost-Sunday of the Prodigal Son

February 12, 2023



Today we turn our attention to our Lord's parable of the prodigal son. This young man was focused only on himself at the beginning of the story, which is certainly a form of pride. His father meant nothing to him at that point other than as a source of money which he could use to indulge himself in the pleasures of the flesh. That is why he asked for his inheritance and left his family and homeland.

Before long, however, the young man was humbled by the consequences of his way of living when the money ran out and he was simply a stranger in a strange land in the midst of a famine. He was so miserable that he actually envied the food of the pigs which he was hired to tend there. Truthfully, he had lived like a pig and now he ended up with them in their filth.

At that point, the young man came to himself, recognizing that even the hired servants of his father were well fed. By suffering the consequences of his actions, his eyes were opened to how he had treated his father; he knew he was no longer worthy to be his son. He wanted only to become a servant in his family's home and rehearsed his apology to the old man as he undertook the long journey home. The
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++ 35th Sunday after Pentecost ++
+ St. Meletius of Antioch +

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Gospel: Luke 15: 11-32

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 18)

I often think while serving funerals: What an amazing And when there's no service, we still have to behave reverently and seriously in church.

We pray for those who come to church with "the fear of God." The fear of God doesn't mean the usual fear that people experience, for example, when they pass by a cemetery or enter a dark room. It's about a sacred fear that appears when a man senses the presence of God.

When you feel that God

is near, then you feel love for Him, sacred fear, deep reverence. This is what "the fear of God" means in liturgical language. Even if a sacred place—which a church of God is—is destroyed down to the ground, it doesn't lose its grace.

I'll give you a well-known example. You've read the life of the New Martyrs Raphael, Nicholas, and Irina. None of the locals knew there was a monastery on the island in ancient times. According to tradition, every year on Bright Tuesday,

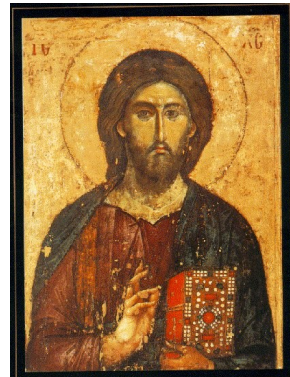
the faithful would climb the hill, light candles, and sing Paschal hymns, although there was no church there, no chapel—nothing.

From time to time, people would see a light on the hill, or hear hymns from invisible singers, and smell the smell of incense. And it was only more than 400 years after their martyric end that, by the goodwill and *economia* of God, the saints began to appear and talk about how there used to be a monastery on this
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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 worshiping with us today. We 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, Fr. Michael, Meg, Larissa, Jack, Stephen, Evan, Ryan, Anatoly, Alexey, Heidi, Mackenzie, Mike, Jessica, Lisa, Jeff, Bonnalee, Joanne, Skip, Georgia, Colleen, Stan, David, Carol, Norris, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ

Words about the Pharisee

Christ rejected pharisaic pride and judged it, not only because pride destroys all virtue in the believer, but rather because it destroys all sense of truth in him. The beginning of pride appears in judging others, self-justification, and self-righteousness. The sin of self-justification is the antithesis of repentance; it not only makes a man seem righteous in his own eyes, but also feeds his egotism and at-

tachment to his own thoughts and will. These serious passions are a veil over our spiritual eyes.

The Pharisee didn't see the need to seek God's mercy and the forgiveness of his sins. And whoever sees only his own righteousness judges others easily and despises them. The Pharisee prayed like any other person, but a prayer like his, with a spirit that is haughty and unaware of its sins, is a prayer offered to the demons, not to God. He who prays truly must be filled with compassion for others and love—not judgement—for sinners. The Pharisee took pride in his fasting, while the goal of fasting is to break and humble the soul, so that it may advance in control over the bodily passions, the purification of thoughts, and renunciation of earthly cares. He took pride in tithing all his belongings, while the goal of tithing is to transform our egotism into sensitivity to others, and to free us from avarice and the love of money. This is the pharisaic spirit that is opposed by the humble spirit—a spirit that loves Christ more than itself.

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

hill, and how their holy relics lay there, underground.

Our Elder Joseph of Vatopedi told us that his friends, originally from Asia Minor, once went to visit their native village where there used to be a church of St. John the Forerunner. They wanted to find this church (similarly, many Cypriots sometimes go to the occupied part of the island to find the church in their home village). So, they arrived, they searched for it, but they couldn't find anything because the little old church had long since been destroyed. One of these people sighed and said:

"Eh, holy Forerunner... We left, and so did you."

Hearing these words, one local Turk told him:

"You left, but he stayed."

"What do you mean?"

"He stayed here. We often hear the bells ringing and chanting and we smell incense. So your saint stayed here. He didn't leave."

Indeed, the grace of a place remains; it doesn't disappear.

Even if the building of a church crumbles to the ground, the grace remains. Therefore, the Church canons forbid using a holy church for anything else. If the church was consecrated, that's it—it remains a church



forever, and the place remains holy. In the West, you can see how they're selling Catholic and Protestant churches now. Priests come, they read a special prayer, and the church as if ceases to be a church.

That is, today they read a prayer for the consecration, and the building becomes a church, and tomorrow,

when they want to sell it, they read a different prayer, after which the church supposedly stops being a church. Just imagine if they read a prayer over you and you became unbaptized...

Such things are impossible in the Orthodox Church. A place is consecrated once, and that's it—it's holy forever. This is about not only the place, but also the things inside. For example, some carpet from the church can't be used for other purposes. The broom we use to sweep the floor in church can't be used to sweep the floor in the kitchen or bathroom. The rag you use to wash the floor in church can't be used to clean your house. The church has its own things, and everything in a church or anything that has something to do with it is consecrated, dedicated in some way to the service of God. Even if a church is completely destroyed, nothing else can be built on this site, inasmuch as this place is consecrated.

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(Homily on the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, cont'd from p.1)

prodigal son certainly grew in humility through that process. He made no excuses for his behavior and knew that he would be lucky to be taken back into the household as a servant.

His father's reaction was, of course, entirely different than he had anticipated. The old man must have scanned the horizon for him every day, for he saw his son when he was still a long distance away. The father then ran out to greet the son. Before the young man could finish his rehearsed apology, the father did what was unthinkable: He fully restored this miserable wretch of a son. He threw a party and celebrated because "this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."

Pride takes different forms. Some like the Pharisee think that they are so much better than anyone else and become blind to their own sins. Others insist on being so self-reliant that they would rather remain isolated in misery than to ask for mercy that they do not deserve and cannot control. Some would prefer to continue suffering the consequences of their actions than to risk exposing themselves to the healing grace that is beyond their power. Some who are quite well aware of how miserable they are prefer simply to wallow in the corruption of their sins than to acknowledge that they need help well beyond what they themselves can provide.

In contrast to that form of pride, there is the courageous humility of the prodigal son. Think for a moment how he must have felt. He had no idea how his father would react to him. By taking the long journey home, he might have been setting himself up for final rejection and condemnation. Thankfully, he was not so enslaved to being in control or completely self-reliant that he chose the isolation of perpetual suffering over the possibility of even a low level of reconciliation with his father. He was no longer the self-centered fool who had insulted and abandoned his father in order to waste his inheritance on prostitutes.

No, he had developed the eyes to see the gravity of what he had done to himself and to those who loved him. He risked what little shred of dignity he had left by going home, apologizing, and facing the consequences of actions. His only hope was in his father's mercy. It

took courage for him to face the old man under those circumstances.

By taking that difficult trip home, the prodigal son put himself in the place to receive the father's overwhelming love, forgiveness, and restoration. The father was not interested in exacting justice or requiring the son to pay a penalty. He did not condemn or embarrass him or even remind him of the bad things he had done. No, he simply welcomed his son back into the family with joy beyond what anyone would have expected.

If we take the spiritual disciplines of Lent at all seriously, we will gain a deeper level of insight into how we have used our Heavenly Father's blessings selfishly for the satisfaction of our own distorted desires. We will see how we have weakened and diminished ourselves to the point that we have become slaves to pride, anger, lust, gluttony, and many other passions. We will know

that we have debased ourselves to the point that we deserve the full consequences of our actions, hardly being recognizable as those called to become like God in holiness.

Through our struggle to pray, fast, give to the needy, confess and repent of our sins, and heal broken relationships with our neighbors this Lent, we will open our eyes at least a bit to what we have done to ourselves in turning away from the blessed life for which our Lord made us in His image and likeness. Christ used this parable to encourage those who know their guilt and brokenness not to give up hope. Repentance is precisely the long journey home that the prodigal took in order

to return to his father. It is the journey that we all must take this Lent.

If we have any doubt about the mercy of our Heavenly Father, we need only remember that Lent is preparation for following our Lord to His cross and empty tomb. What greater expression of the infinite mercy of God for sinners could we possibly want? Christ has taken the full consequences of all human sin upon Himself in order to deliver us from them in His glorious resurrection. So like the prodigal son, let us come to ourselves and return to our Father with true humility. Without excuses of any kind, let us open ourselves to the great joy of those who were dead returning to life, of those who were lost being found.



In cases such as that of the Canaanite woman, or of the father with the possessed son, Christ seems to make things difficult, not so much for the invalid personally but more to provide a lesson for those present, particularly those in the circle of his disciples. And we should also consider something equally important. The Biblical narrative shows that Christ liked to heal the sick when a third party asked it of him. In other words, when the request for healing was made by a neighbor, especially in a climate of humble courtesy, as was the case with the centurion. This was even more true when the neighbor came from a different social class, nation, race and so on. To put it another way, Christ cedes a part of his healing power to someone who proves to be an imitator of him by expressing the dual commandment of love by humility towards God and loving kindness towards one's neighbor.

Naturally, none of this means that sickness disappeared with Christ's coming into the world, despite the fact that Christ himself marks the presence of God through his own person, when he proclaims the healing of the sick. Apart from 'Sin no more', Christ prophetically warns 'So that worse may not befall you'. This warning wasn't directed merely at the particular invalid, but was also a prophetic dramatization of the miseries that would ensue for the future of humankind. The mystery of the divine dispensation is now an accomplished historical fact, because of the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection. Our flesh has been assumed in a therapeutic and unifying manner by divine nature and has been seated at the right hand of the Father.

Even so, the whole edifice of salvation can't remove the all-powerful essential, human freedom, which is given to each of us without reservation, since we're all made in the image of God. So, despite Divine Benefaction and God's warning, both in Paradise and also in the Gospel, through Christ, humankind reverted to sin and brought 'the worst' upon itself. In this case, 'the worst' is not simply that there is a danger of someone falling more ill than before. It is the hardening of the heart when a person forgets or, even worse, scorns the gifts of God: when healing from sickness and sin does not lead to joyful praise and the security of repentance. Then,

out of self-love and egocentricity, we alter the healing from an opportunity for salvation into a chance to sin.

This is where a particularly notable fact of the therapeutic process becomes clear. If the healing is to be complete, it requires human acceptance and cooperation. God heals as being almighty, but not as an autocrat. He awaits the response of human freedom to his gift, so that, apart from the sickness of the body, he can also heal the will. So that he can make us able to desire and love him, freely. So that the image can permanently be turned towards the Archetype.

In the Bible narrative, then, it is clear that Christ considers sin to be the basic sickness of human nature. This is why he often begins the healing by granting remission of sins. As Creator, he knows the terms of our nature better than anyone, and so he understands that it is

difficult for people to be instructed either through the fear of sickness or the benefaction of healing. He offers his death on the cross as the drastic and final healing of sin which is the central feature of sickness. That is where sickness and human pain in general acquire a different content. Christ proclaimed that when he was raised up he would draw everyone to him.

This attraction marks a qualitatively different perspective to human existence, one which, to a large extent, reverses things. The prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled and Christ does for us what we cannot do for ourselves, that which is expressed in such tragic language by Saint Paul in his

Epistle to the Romans: 'Wretched man that I am. Who will deliver me from this body of death?'. Sin is defeated once and for all through the cross, and death is conquered through the resurrection.

All of this is, in the end, a mystery for us, inexplicable in its essence but one in which we can participate through the life of the Church. The sacramental change people undergo through baptism, chrismation, the divine eucharist, and holy unction gives them the opportunity to view their ailment as participation in the cross, which leads to the resurrection. No longer as a means of instruction, but as a state of grace which leads to deification. In this way, sickness is viewed through the perspective of the dispensation of salvation.

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