

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 9 Issue 404

3rd Sunday of Great Lent-Veneration of the Cross

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Today we venerate the precious and life-giving Cross upon which Jesus Christ offered Himself for the salvation of the world. By entering into death through the Cross and rising in glory on the third day, He has enabled us to become participants by grace in His eternal life. To honor the Lord's Cross requires much more than simply conducting a religious service on a

particular day. It requires taking up our own crosses and uniting ourselves in sacrificial obedience to Christ.

We must offer more than beautiful words and sentiments if we are to do that, for the way of the Cross is participatory. Our Great High Priest offered Himself fully for our sake, even to the point of death. It will be impossible for us to share in the joy of Christ's resurrection unless we offer our lives to Him by dying to our distorted sense of self. For we will only become the uniquely beautiful people He created us to be in His image and likeness when we experience the healing of the human person that He worked through the Cross.

To participate in the life of Christ requires becoming like Him from the depths of our souls, which is why He told the disciples that they must deny
(continued p. 3)

****Veneration of the Holy Cross****

*** Priest Martyr Basil of Ancyra***

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 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.*

On these Difficult Times, by an Orthodox Priest

Whatever has to do with the spiritual life, whatever we experience within the Church, can be dealt with in two ways: one is not to engage your heart with any of it at all. Everything is formal, theoretical and logical. The heart's never touched, the heart's never concerned with all that's happening in your spiritual life.

In other words, people deliberately distance their heart from what's going on and in this way are able to feel that, es-

entially, they're even in control of things. This is a great trap, because whenever we discover that our heart's on the outside of things, we realize that we, too, are on the outside, that we're not taking part in the life of the Church, in the life of the spirit.

The other way is to see your heart sharing in things, which means that whatever occurs externally has repercussions internally, in the heart. In other words, whatever happens externally,

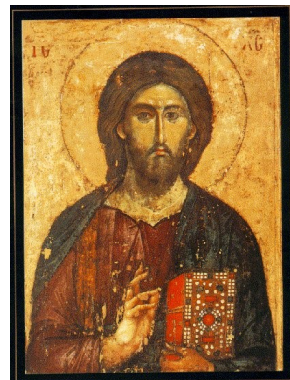
whether truly, in the Church, in the worship of the Church, or personally in the struggle of each one of us, should be seen as seeping into our existence, into our heart, involving our heart, concerning our self on a personal basis. Then everything acquires a personal feel, a personal function, everything's now true, everything affects the person and, in essence, everything reflects what it is that we experience.

To go from the formal
(continued 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.





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
for our souls
salvation.

News and Notes

We welcome all who are worshipping with us today and invite you down to the church hall for our social hour.

Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17)

We ask that you keep the following in your prayers: Esther, Clement John, Mother Onufria, Olga, Lillian, Meg, Larissa, Stephen, Louise, Marcia, George, Lorraine, Evan, Ryan, Kathleen, Sandy, Samuel, Anatoly, Alexey, Abraham, Susan, Jenny, Deb, Dan, Bob, Catherine, Skip, Doug, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & the persecuted for their faith in Christ.

The Cross in our Life

Let us not then be ashamed to confess the Crucified. Be the Cross our seal made with boldness by our fingers on our brow, and on everything; over the bread we eat, and the cups we drink; in our comings in, and goings out; before our sleep, when we lie down and when we rise up; when we are in the way, and when we are still. Great is that preservative; it is without price, for the sake of the poor; without

toil, for the sick; since also its grace is from God.

It is the Sign of the faithful, and the dread of devils: for He triumphed over them in it, having made a shew of them openly; for when they see the Cross they are reminded of the Crucified; they are afraid of Him, who bruised the heads of the dragon. Despise not the Seal, because of the freeness of the gift; out for this the rather honor thy Benefactor. (St. Cyril of Jerusalem)

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The cross is the door to mysteries. Through this door the intellect makes entrance in to the knowledge of heavenly mysteries. The knowledge of the cross is concealed in the sufferings of the cross.

And the more our participation in its sufferings, the greater the perception we gain through the cross. For, as the Apostle says, 'As the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds by Christ.' Be Crucified but do not crucify others. (St. Isaac of Syria)

On these Difficult Times, (cont'd from p. 1)

to the substantial, that is to go from the logic of things to a personal understanding, to the life of the heart, is not at all easy. We have to humble ourselves. It's only humble people who have a life of the heart. Proud people weigh everything logically, buoyed up as they are by their arrogance.

But when we humble ourselves, everything within us becomes true. The heart now begins to have experiences, begins to have feelings, spiritual emotions, everything in our life starts to become true. Then, for the first time, we discover that we have a personal life, a spiritual life, a personal spiritual life. And, moreover, that the Person of God begins to concern us on a personal level, not in terms of our internal, utilitarian level, but on a personal level.

Everything resonates within us. That's where we'll see to what extent God is present in our life, that's where we'll see how open we are to the Spirit of God, or how far our fears, insecurities and human reason

have established themselves within us.

We'll see how much room there is for the presence of God within us, how far we feel our sinfulness, how deeply this sinfulness has taken root within us as a hindrance to our rela-



tionship with God and the extent to which the presence of God is imperiled by our own personal life. Then everything takes on a personal dimension. Then the pain and the repentance are a very personal matter and a very genuine matter.

Prayer is something very true because it concerns the cry of a soul to God- but a sincere cry- which proceeds from within the person, not from our reason. Everything is now true. We now live our own truth before God. But this has been preceded by a lengthy stage in which we have had to come to humility, so that we can hear our heart ourselves, so that we ourselves can be in contact with our heart.

I say all this so that we can understand that these days of ours are somewhat difficult, in external terms, because we're under pressure from external circumstances. It's time for each of us to see how far their personality is active and functioning in their personal life, how far their identity is active and functioning personally, their heart personally, how far they're affected personally by their relationship with God, the extent to which they can struggle within themselves with their fears and difficulties, how far the often hostile can be

(continued p.4, column 2)

themselves, take up their crosses, and follow Him. Doing so requires losing our lives for the sake of the Lord and His Gospel; ironically, that is the only way to save our lives. If we make success or happiness in this world on our own terms our ultimate goal, we will pursue a path that amounts to a complete rejection of the Savior.

Remember that Satan tempted Christ in the desert with worldly power and popularity, as did those throughout His ministry who wanted Him to become a successful political and military leader against the Romans. No one expected or even understood a Messiah Who died on the Cross, which was seen as a sign of complete failure. By doing so, however, He has destroyed our captivity to death through His victory over Hades and the grave in His glorious resurrection. His Kingdom stands in stark contrast to the ways and expectations of our world of corruption.

We take up our crosses whenever we embrace the struggle to become more like our Lord in any circumstance of our lives, despite the inevitable tension that we experience whenever we do so. It is as simple as that, for He is the perfection of humanity as the God-Man and we most certainly are not. We open ourselves to His gracious healing of our souls when we accept the painful struggle to turn from serving ourselves to serving Him and our neighbors.

We must not denigrate the small opportunities that we have each day to do so in our familiar routines, for it is what we think, say, and do daily that makes up the bulk of our lives and shapes us and others most profoundly. Instead of imagining rare and heroic acts of sacrifice, we should focus on the opportunities already before us to put faithfulness to God and serving our neighbors before fulfilling our own self-centered desires, however noble we may think that they are. If we cannot respond faithfully to small challenges, we will never be prepared for the large ones.

We all face situations in our lives that challenge us to become more like Christ in selfless love, forgiveness, and patience. Whether involving our families, our health, our financial situation, or anything else, there is no shortage of opportunities to find the healing of our souls by living as those who are not ashamed of the Lord's Cross. Instead of focusing on what we can get

out of these difficult circumstances for ourselves or on our own will being done, we must offer our challenges to Christ as we unite ourselves more fully to the One Who offered up Himself for the salvation of the world.

When we do so, we will experience in our own souls the great tension between making what we want our god and taking up our crosses in obedience to the one true God. There is no way to find the healing of our souls without embracing that tension, for that is what it means to deny ourselves as we deliberately turn away from serving our self-centered desires to following the Savior Who has conquered death through His Cross.

The spiritual disciplines of Lent certainly provide important opportunities to gain strength in denying ourselves as we take up our crosses. Instead of indulging in unnecessary distractions, we must stretch ourselves a bit by devotion to prayer and reading the Scriptures each day. We must endure the internal struggle of keeping a close watch on our hearts and mouths and avoid gossip, slander, and other vices. Otherwise, we will become enslaved to the habit of welcoming thoughts that inflame our passions and speaking in ways that cause others to stumble. Instead of excusing ourselves from generosity toward our needy neighbors, we must find ways to serve them as Christ has served us. By appropriate fasting and other forms of self-denial, we will gain experience in saying "no" to ourselves so that we will be able to say "yes" to the



Lord and those in whom we encounter Him each day. When we take Confession, we open ourselves to healing from the prideful illusion of self-righteousness as we confront how little of our lives we have truly offered to Him.

Lent prepares us to follow the Lord to His Cross and empty tomb. There is no way to do that other than by uniting ourselves to the Savior in holiness, which inevitably requires the tension and struggle of serving Him and not simply ourselves. The spiritual struggle makes it possible for us to embrace the joy that He has brought to the world by delivering us from bondage to the fear of death, which is the wages of sin. Let us venerate the Cross, then, not only in this service, but by taking up our crosses in our daily lives so that we will grow in union with the One Who offered up Himself purely out of love for our salvation.

Prayers for the Dead by Michael Bressemer (pt. 4)

Finally, there are many anecdotes from Orthodox saints who have visions of the departed. The deceased relate to the saint of having benefitted in the afterlife from prayers for them. A famous example is the account of St. Perpetua, who while in prison saw her deceased brother, Dinocrates, being tormented with heat and thirst. St. Perpetua prayed day and night for her brother that God would be merciful to him. She then received a second vision of her brother who was now in a cool and beautiful place where he could have plentiful access to water.

Therefore, in light of its widespread use, praying for the dead has always been a practice of the Orthodox Church. What of the other branches of Christianity? The Roman Catholic Church has never ceased offering prayers and masses for the dead. Interestingly, the Protestant reformers Martin Luther (1483-1546), John Calvin (1509-1564), and later John Wesley (1703-1791) never prohibited praying for the dead.

The 1549 Anglican Book of Common Prayer included a prayer for the departed: "We commend into Thy mercy all other of Thy servants, which are departed hence from us with the sign of faith: grant unto them, we beseech Thee, Thy mercy and everlasting peace." However, prayer for the dead gradually became denounced in Protestantism, particularly in present day Evangelical churches.

The Golden Rule

There are practical reasons why we pray for the dead. First, the commemoration offers some consolation to the grieving. Second, it benefits the faithful to be reminded of their own mortality, not in an intentionally morbid way, but rather that we would "strive to enter through the narrow gate" (Luke 13:24) and "be diligent to enter that rest" (Hebrews 4:11) promised to us if we are obedient to God. The memorial regularly confronts us with the fact that now is the time to work out our salvation "with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12) so in the afterlife we may "be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless" (2 Peter 3:14). Third, each of us should pray for the dead to the measure we would want the living to pray for us after our passing (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31).

None of us exactly knows what awaits us in the intermediate state between our death and the final judgment. If the prayers of the living could in any way ease our time of waiting then such prayers are of tremendous value. "God of spirits and of all humankind, as You trampled down death, overthrowing the evil one and granting life to Your world, will You, Lord, grant rest to Your servant now asleep in death, in a place of light, a place of renewed life, a joyous place, shunned alike by pain and sorrow and sighing" (From the Orthodox Memorial Service)

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On these Difficult times, cont'd from p.2

thoughts which arise against them can be kept at bay through faith, love and trust in God. How far all these things are really true in their life.

Is it time to see what the spiritual life of us Christians is like? How much real faith we have in God? The degree to which fear is diminished in the face of faith? How sincere we are towards God? How we live the experience of God within ourselves? How far each of us feels their sinfulness as an obstacle and suffers and weeps over it? How far we feel the presence of God as a power? Very often it's difficult to surrender our existence into His hands. All of this demonstrates who we really are.

When such trials come upon us, when things come that pressurize human existence, it's an opportunity for all of us to see who we really are vis-à-vis God. Who we really are when faced with our conscience. Who we are when faced with our existence. It's a chance for us now to see how full of faith our prayer is. How true it is. How far it really opens up to God. The extent to which it rests on confidence. How restful it feels before God, even if, outside, there are battles and pressures. It's a chance for each of us to see what we really, really want within us. What's our personality like. What our personal life is like as regards God.

It's a great opportunity we have now. Why? Because we often read in the lives of the saints about their labors and their struggles, their difficulties, their achievements and the solutions they found to the pressures they felt. But very often we understand these things emotionally, logically, not really and existentially. The time comes in our own lives when the truth of life knocks at our door and wants to know what we've done so far. What have we achieved? Who are we, really? Who are we in our self?

I felt today, intensely, how important it is for us to exploit such moments. Not to exorcize a fear, but to see, to feel ourselves revealed, true, naked in the face of God's truth.

The things that pressurize us will come and go. They'll come, but then they'll go, as things do. But we have to gain some benefit from all this. We should be part of God's truth and this should become our reality. Put simply, we should fight against everything within us that's sick, weak, hollow and hypocritical. First, these have to be fought against. And they are fought against in the deep darkness of our cell. It's there where they can be fought against. That's where you see who you really are. I pray with all my heart that we will emerge greatly benefited from these vicissitudes which our country and the whole world are experiencing. More humbled before God, more true before God and before our conscience. And God will take care of all the rest.

