

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!



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20th Sunday after Pentecost–The Parable of the Sower

Sunday, October 25, 2020



A few years ago, seven Coptic Orthodox Christians were killed in Egypt as they were going on a pilgrimage to a monastery. A week after that, eleven Jews were killed as they worshiped in a synagogue in Pittsburgh. Houses of worship of whatever kind are increasingly targets for violence and vandal-

ism. Many of the perpetrators of such terrible deeds are motivated by distorted religious beliefs that lead them to think that God wants them to hate, kill, and assault people of other faiths or ethnic identities.

Nothing, of course, could be more contrary to the way of Christ, for how we treat other people is how we treat Him. Whether we are finding the healing of our souls through sharing in His life is shown by how we treat others, regardless of who they are or what they believe. Each person we encounter bears His image.

Today's gospel reading describes a man who found the meaning and purpose of life in rich food and expensive clothes. He was so absorbed in gratifying his self-centered desires that he had become blind to the humanity of poor Lazarus, a miserable beggar who
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**** 20th Sunday after Pentecost *****

St. Luke the Apostle & Evangelist

Epistle: Galatians 1:11-19

Gospel: Luke 16: 19-31

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.

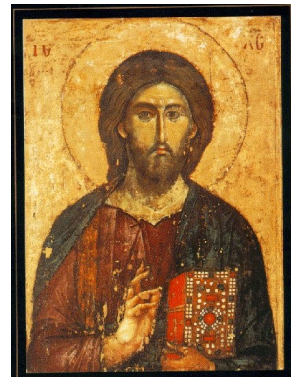
We worship God in Trinity -
Father+Son+Holy Spirit.

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.*

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
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The Struggle with Prayer, by Fr. Vasile Tudora Part 2

Creating a praying atmosphere: icons, candle light, incense, prayer bids all contribute to the sublimation of the senses and focus toward the inner kingdom

In the Orthodox Faith the prayer should also involve both the spirit and the body. Kneeling or standing, bowing the head, raising hands, making prostrations are means by which our body is actively participating in the prayer act.

Set reasonable expectations. In a society that

enjoys instant gratification on a daily basis one can easily be deceived by the answer they get in prayer. Most people don't have the patience anymore to wait for God's response, and abandon prayer after a couple of "failed" attempts. Learning to accept God's will is the answer to this problem.

This theme is present in the typical Orthodox Prayers as for example in the following prayer addressed to the Theotokos: *"O my gracious*

Queen, my hope, Birth-giver of God, who receive the poor and help the travelers; joy of those who sorrow, shelter for the oppressed; Behold my affliction and see my needs. Help me as you would one in despair; feed me as you would a stranger. You know all my troubles, absolve them according to your will, for I have no other help but you, no other ready shelter or comfort but you, O Mother of God to help and protect
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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. Because of COVID-19, our social hour has been canceled until we receive further instructions from the Department of Health.

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, Evan, Ryan, Kathleen, Sandy, Samuel, Anatoly, Alexey, Abraham, Susan, Jenny, Deb, Dan, Bob, Catherine, Skip, Doug, Heidi, Bonnalee, Vicky, Corella, Gail, Mike, Ron, Renee, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ.

Do Not Turn Back

In our spiritual tradition we come across the phrase: Don't turn back'. This isn't an incitement to avoid self-criticism. It's a recommendation that we shouldn't allow our brain to dwell on what can't be changed, on what we've left behind, on what belongs to yesterday. It's an invitation to transcend the thought that's sad-

dening us concerning what's irreversible, and a decision to get down to business in the conditions of the times as they are, in our today and tomorrow. Faith, like philosophy, is a continuous recollection of death, not as a cause of worry or sorrow, but as a wake-up call for what we can be doing. It's a constant reminder of Him Whom we need in order to stand up to life's challenges. To correct the mistakes which can be rectified. We should choose love where once our criterion was only ourselves. We should give and not be satisfied with just taking.

Don't turn back. The road ahead of us is important. Instead of judging and rejecting our spouse, ask to make a fresh start. Instead of dwelling on the memories of our mistakes and passions, let's wake up and choose the struggle for repentance, which isn't rummaging around the things of yesterday, but the beginning of a new life. And let our emergence from the past be practical. A smile surprises. A heart-felt apology moves. A word of thanks brightens a relationship. And, in particular, 'I'm working hard to do my best' galvanizes the course of our life in all areas.

The Struggle with Prayer. , cont'd from p. 1)

*me unto ages of ages. Amen.
(Morning Prayers)*

Don't look for mystical experiences. Most of the Fathers warn the novices against extraordinary visions and experiences that May have a dubious origin. The Desert Father's collections are rich in stories about young monks deceived by the devil who lures them into the false mystical encounters. Accepting them only attracts pride and a false sense of achievement. Prayer is not a competition, it is a serious matter between us and God.

Prayer cannot exist in a vacuum, cut-off from the other things necessary for a pious life. Prayer needs to be linked with repentance, humility, charity and fasting. Only in this holy company the prayer will flourish and fill our life with the asweet aroma of the Holy Spirit. *"Whatever you have endured out of love of wisdom will bear fruit for you at the time of prayer."* (From the Sayings of the Holy Fathers)

In the end prayer is an encounter

with God, is building up a personal relationship that needs nurturing and perseverance. The more we communicate the closer we become to the



other Person and the conversation becomes more rewarding every time. St. Symeon of Thessaloniki writing in the 12th century, tells us that: *Prayer is a conversation directly with God, being always with God, having*

one's soul united with Him and one's mind inseparable. A person becomes one with the angels and unites with them in perpetual praise and longing for God.

* * * *

Morning Prayer of Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow

Lord, give me the strength to greet the coming day in peace. Help me in all things to rely on Your holy will. Reveal Your will to me every hour of the day. Bless my dealings with all people. Teach me to treat all people who come to me throughout the day with peace of soul and with firm conviction that Your will governs all. In all my deeds and words guide my thoughts and feelings.

In unexpected events, let me not forget that all are sent by you. Teach me to act firmly and wisely, without embittering and embarrassing others. Give me the physical strength to bear the labors of this day. Direct my will, teach me to pray, pray in me.

Amen.

(Homily on The Rich Man and Lazarus, cont'd from p.1)

beggar who wanted only crumbs and whose only comfort was when dogs licked his open sores. There could be no greater contrast than the difference in life circumstances between these two men.

After their deaths, their situations were reversed. The rich man had spent his life rejecting the teachings of Moses and the prophets about the necessity of showing mercy to the poor. As such, he had done his best to turn away from God and weaken himself spiritually. In life, he had made himself unable to recognize even the basic humanity of Lazarus as one who bore God's image. Consequently, after his death he was blind to the glory of God and perceived the divine majesty as only a burning flame that tormented him. When the rich man asked Father Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers to warn them of the consequences of living such a life, the great patriarch responded, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead."

It would be hard to overstate the importance of that response. We all have the ability to make ourselves blind to the most obvious teachings about how we are to treat our neighbors. Since every neighbor is an icon of God, how we treat them reveals our relationship to the Lord. Christ taught that what we do "to the least of these," to the most wretched people, we do to Him.

If we spend our lives hating and disregarding the people around us, we will become those who hate and disregard our Lord. That way of life is so corrupt that it will make us blind to the good news of our salvation, to our Lord's victory over the power of sin and death in His glorious resurrection on the third day. It is a way of shutting ourselves out of the joy of the Kingdom.

If we want examples of where that path leads, just look at those who have become so spiritually blind that they think it is good to despise and kill others in the name of God. They are not that different from the rich man in the parable, who stepped over starving, bleeding Lazarus every day as he served only his desires for pleasure and self-indulgence. He had lost the ability to see Lazarus as a neighbor and lived accordingly.

Terrorists and murderers may seem very different from self-centered people who ignore the needs of others, but

the roots of their spiritual problems are the same. They lie in the passions, in our slavery to the distorted desire to find meaning, purpose, and fulfillment in anything other than God. It is impossible for us to have spiritually healthy relationships with anything in creation if we make idols out of them. Since we are all made in the divine image and likeness, we will never find peace or satisfaction when our lives revolve around pleasure, possessions, power, revenge, or anything else but the Lord.

The more we give our lives to them, the more we will be their slaves and the more we will justify doing anything to gratify them. The resulting spiritual blindness leads only to more blindness, more corruption, and more depravity. When we lose the ability to see any human person as an icon of God and a neighbor in whom we are called to serve Jesus Christ, we become just like the rich man in the parable.

St. Paul taught the Ephesians that the very ground of their life was "God, Who is rich in mercy... [and] even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ..." They did not somehow earn God's favor by doing enough good deeds by their own power, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not of your own doing, it is the gift of God." The apostle also

teaches that those who have received His grace are "created in Christ Jesus for good works... that we should walk in them."

A life that displays the love of Christ in relation to our neighbors is not something that we achieve simply by trying to follow a rule. Instead, it is a sign of being healed from slavery to our passions by the grace of God. Healing comes to our corrupt souls through our Lord's mercy, which we cannot earn and do not deserve. The point of the Christian life is not simply to follow laws or develop virtues based on our own ability. It is instead to be transformed personally by the gracious divine energies to the point that the boundless love of our Lord becomes characteristic of who we are as we live and breathe in this world. If we know that we are being saved through the undeserved grace of God, despite our sins, we must manifest that same grace in relation to our neighbors, especially those we are inclined to

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Homily Rich Man and Lazarus (cont'd p.3)

hate, condemn, or disregard.

Jesus Christ modeled such a gracious life by ministering to the despised Samaritans and Gentiles, and even praising the faith of a Roman centurion as being superior to that of anyone in Israel. (e.g., Lk 7:9) When some of the disciples wanted to pray that fire would destroy a Samaritan village that had rejected them, the Lord refused and corrected them for having the wrong spirit. (Lk. 9:54-55) He died for the salvation of those who crucified Him, and even prayed for their forgiveness from the cross.

Throughout His ministry, the Savior rejected the temptation to become the expected nationalistic ruler who would serve passions for revenge and domination against enemies and foreigners. He refused to become a conventional worldly leader by hating and destroying people for being of a different faith and ethnicity. He had nothing to do with the dark paths that continue to lead people to such spiritual blindness to this very day.

If we recognize the love and mercy that the Savior has extended to us, despite our past and present sins, we will understand that our lives must become icons of His love and mercy to our neighbors. If we are not being transformed by the Lord's grace in a fashion that leads us to serve Him in the Lazaruses of our lives, including our enemies, then we risk becoming ultimately like the rich man in the parable. If we blind ourselves to His presence in the suffering and difficult people around us every day, then we will prefer slavery to the passions over the great victory that our Lord has achieved through His glorious resurrection on the third day. How we treat others manifests whether we are finding the healing of our souls.

Since we have received grace, let us show grace to our neighbors, no matter who they are or what they believe. Otherwise, we will reject the gracious Lord Who has made even "strangers and foreigners" like you and me into "fellow citizens of the saints and members of God's household." (Eph. 2:19)

* * *

The Kingdom of Heaven begins on Earth

Today I would like to tell you a few words about the parallel universe. Recently, I watched a TV show where various scientists, doctors of sciences, professors, astrophysicists were talking about how and where the universe came from. One of the scientists said that, of course, the

The Kingdom of Heaven begins on Earth

universe came from a big bang: something exploded there and it began to fly apart. This happened 13.8 billion years ago. Another scientist objected: it was nothing of the kind, there was no big explosion, but there were several explosions, first one, then another, third, fourth, and then everything began to fly apart. The third scientist argued that they got it all wrong: at first, in a fraction of a second, everything exploded, began to fly apart, but then it slowed down. This hypothesis is called the "inflationary model of the universe," when the universe first exploded and then slowed down.

All these people, with solid diplomas from the most famous universities, talked about how the universe came about, but none of them, of course, could answer the question: if there was an explosion, what exploded then, and most importantly, who blew it up? Likewise, the scientists discussed whether there are parallel universes or the universe in which we are with you, where there are planets and galaxies, which is the only one of its kind. Some said: yes, of course, there are certainly parallel universes and it will be very pleasant for us if it turns out that we are not alone. Others argued the opposite: no, there can be no parallel universe.

To all these questions, we the faithful have one simple answer: the whole world was created by God. The world was created in several stages, which are called days of creation, although we understand that the days of creation do not have to be perceived as calendar days. These were some stages, some kind of evolution, which was moved by the Creator.

Is there a parallel universe? Of course there is. This is a spiritual world, which is inhabited not by some imaginary aliens or humanoids, or creatures, which are sometimes written about in science fiction books, and sometimes scientific theories say that such creatures exist. The parallel universe, which opens up to us, is inhabited by angels, saints, and the departed: the people who, having finished their earthly journey, crossed into another world after they crossed the threshold of death.

We each have a parallel universe. We come into contact with it when we turn to God in prayer, when we participate in church sacraments, when we invisibly feel the presence of angels at divine services, or when we feel that there are people next to us who have already passed into another world.

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