

A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Reformed Orthodox Christian Church



Rev. Matthew P. Binkewicz, Pastor

Glory be to Jesus Christ! Glory be Forever!



Volume 8 Issues 2

33rd Sunday after Pentecost-Sunday after Theophany

January 13, 2019



Many of us experience a letdown after the holiday season. Though it has its own stresses, a time of year filled with parties, rich food, and visiting with loved ones appeals to most people even as a cultural observance. The same is surely true for those of us who celebrated the Savior's birth at Christmas and His baptism at Theophany. We enjoyed the beautiful ser-

vices with their joyful hymns and familiar readings, as well as the blessing of the holy water. As the season of Theophany concludes today, we may have a sense of loss that this special time of year is coming to a close. That is understandable, but we will have missed the point entirely of this great feast if we think that we should now simply forget about it and get back to life as usual.

Today's gospel reading tells us what the Lord did after His baptism, at which it was revealed that He is the Son of God and a member of the Holy Trinity. He went to "Galilee of the Gentiles," an area where the Jewish people lived in a culture with such strong Gentile influence that it was called a place of darkness. The Lord went there in fulfillment of Isaiah's that, "the people who sat in darkness" (continued p. 3)

**** 33rd Sunday after Pentecost ****

***** Sunday after Theophany *****

Epistle: Ephesians 4: 7-13

Gospel: Matthew 4: 12-17

St. George Orthodox Christian Church is a community of believers who strive to live a life according to the Gospel of Christ and the 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.*

Time and the Church by George Mantzaridis (cont'd from last week)

And Christ, Who is 'the Alpha and Omega... he who is and he who is coming', (Rev. 1,8) is the Lord, the beginning and the end of history. Whoever has Christ, has life (I Jn. 5, 11).

The experience of this life already exists in the Church. Our renewal and glorification in Christ, which we await in the age to come, is also experienced in this life: 'Now we are God's children, and what we will be has not yet been manifested; but we do know

that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is' (I Jn. 3, 2).

Although the kingdom of God appears in the world 'through a glass, darkly' (I Cor. 13, 12) it is still truly present. The symbols by which it is known are not metaphorical or relative, but genuine. The uncreated light of the Transfiguration, of the Resurrection and of Pentecost, as seen by the saints of the Church, is the light of the kingdom of God. It is the real

symbol of His presence.

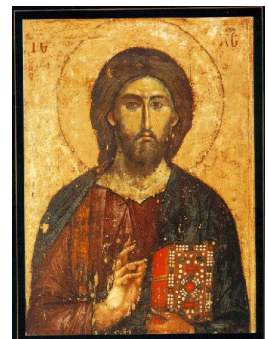
The enormous error made over this point by Western theology, particularly, is that the symbolic or 'partial' manifestation of the kingdom of God in the world should be understood as metaphorical or relative. This was rejected by Saint Gregory Palamas in his dispute with Barlaam the Calabrian.

The light of the Transfiguration, which is the same as the light seen by the saints of the Church, (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, Candice, Lillian, Anne, Claudia, Meg, Xavier, Pam, Jennifer, Larissa, Stephen, Louise, Marcia, George, Joseph, John, Katie, Regina, Dorothy, Peg, Christopher, Jackie, Karoline, the homeless, the hungry, those victims of abuse and violence, and those persecuted for their faith in Christ.

Sayings from St. Silouan of Mt. Athos

Compel Your Heart to Love your Enemies

"I ask you to try something. If someone grieves you, or dishonors you, or takes something of yours, then pray like this: "Lord, we are all your creatures. Pity your servants, and turn them to repentance," and then you will perceptibly bear grace in your soul. Induce your heart to love your enemies, and the Lord, seeing your good will, shall help you in all things, and will

Himself show you experience. But whoever thinks evil of his enemies does not have love for God and has not known God."

Prayer for All

"Christ prayed for those that crucified Him: 'Father, count not this sin against them; they know not what they do.' Archdeacon Stephen prayed for those who stoned him so that the Lord would not judge this sin against them. And so we, if we wish to retain grace, must pray for our enemies. If you do not find pity on a sinner who will suffer in flames, then you do not carry the grace of the Holy Spirit, but rather an evil spirit; and while you yet live, you must free yourself from his clutches through repentance."

On Forgiveness

"We have such a law: If you forgive, it means that God has forgiven you; but if you do not forgive your brother, it means that your sin remains with you."



Time and the Church (cont'd from p.1)

is not a created symbol. That is, it is the same light as in the kingdom of God, which is made apparent 'partially', so that it will be accessible to us. Just as the dawn, which comes from the light of the sun, is the physical symbol or prelude to the sun's appearance, so the uncreated light which is made manifest in the Church is the physical symbol of the kingdom of God (Gregory Palamas, *On the Holy Hesychasts*).

The eschatological nature of the Church is revealed especially in the sacrament of the Divine Liturgy. The celebration of this sacrament is the central and pre-eminently eschatological action of the Church. It is its Liturgy (= function). It constitutes the perfect community which overcomes the divisions of space and time and manifests the kingdom of God to the world. Participation in the Divine Eucharist is communion with Christ. It is participation in His eternal life (See, *Jn. 6, 33-7*). It is entry into His kingdom.

These things are not presented meta-

phorically, but are real features which are presented as experiences to the members of the Church. The Christian life is of an empirical nature. And the content of this experience is the presence of the kingdom of God. This presupposes that the life of the faithful in the Church is directed towards it and nourished by it.

Participation in the kingdom of God means that time is transcended. Just as the presence of the kingdom of God in the world abolishes the divisions of time. The Liturgy of the Church, the Divine Eucharist, which is the pledge of the kingdom of God, overturns any notion of a sequence of time. It is the supper of the Christ Who offers His body and blood before His Crucifixion, and Who continues to act after His Resurrection.

The Church of Christ is not a conventional local social group, but a catholic [i.e. universal] society. It is catholic because it extends not only 'to the whole of the world', but also 'to the whole of time' (St. John Chrysostom, *Interpretation of Psalm*

144,4). The Church also alludes to eternity in the world and directs the world towards it. The institutions of the Church, as Saint Basil the Great points out, transport people's intellect 'from things present to those of the future'.

In this way, the same bishop continues, every time the faithful kneel down and then stand up, they are testifying in practice to that fact that 'through the sin into which we have fallen and through the love for humankind of our Creator, we have been recalled to heaven' (*On the Holy Spirit 27, 66*). This simple and expressive gesture of kneeling provides St. Basil with the opportunity to mention the new dimensions within which the life of the faithful unfolds.



(continued next issue)

have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned." Christ went there to begin preaching openly as He said "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."

The miraculous events that occurred at the Lord's baptism were not ends in themselves, as though all had been completed when the voice of the Father declared "This is my beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased" and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in the form of a dove. The truth about Him had been revealed, and the Savior blessed the waters and restored the entire creation when He lowered Himself into the Jordan for baptism by John. Even with their cosmic significance, these extraordinary events were preparatory for the Lord's public ministry. They showed that He is the Light Who shines on those who live in darkness, who remain captive to the fear of death and blind to His divine glory. In order for people to benefit from the revelation that He is truly the Son of God, they had to respond to His call for repentance. Christ proclaimed the good news in order for them to be able to respond to Him with obedient faith.

St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians that the One Who ascended into heaven is the One of Who first "descended into the lower parts of the earth." The same Lord Who lowered Himself to Hades after His death then rose up in glory and ascended into heaven. At His baptism, He also descended into the dark waters of the Jordan, into the physical creation itself which had been "subjected to futility" because of human sin. (Rom. 8:20) The wages of sin is death, and the Savior took upon Himself the full consequences of our estrangement from God in order to conquer them and bring us into the holy joy for which He created us in the first place.

After the Savior's resurrection and ascension, the Holy Spirit, Who descended upon the Lord in the form of a dove at His baptism, fell upon upon His disciples as flames of fire upon their heads, enabling them to heal the sick, to raise the dead, and to minister boldly and prophetically in His Name. Christ's followers became the Church, His Body, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The point of this great blessing was not for them to rest content with their personal religious experience, but to strengthen all the members of the Body in their ministries "until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature man-

hood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." The Lord provided them with spiritual gifts in order to strengthen the Church in faithfulness as they drew the world to salvation, not for their own glorification.

As we conclude the season of Theophany today, our focus should not be on regretting that we are back at work or school or that the beautiful trappings of the holiday season have come down. It should also not be on how we have fulfilled a religious duty by focusing on the spiritual truth manifested at Christ's baptism: that He is truly the Son of God and member of the Holy Trinity. Instead, our focus must be on becoming ever more brilliant epiphanies of the Light of Christ in our darkened world. We do not do that as isolated individu-

als or on the basis simply of our emotions, our opinions, or even our morality. No, we do that when we live our lives faithfully as members of Christ's Body, the Church. We must use our gifts "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." There is no other genuinely Christian way of life.

Our calling is nothing less than to become an epiphany of the communion of divine love shared by the members of the Holy Trinity. We have certainly not ascended into heaven, but we have died to sin in being baptized into the death of the One Who is now seated at the right hand of the Father. We have put Him on like a garment, being clothed in the robe of



light. We are Christ's Bride, the Church, and He is the Bridegroom. In receiving Communion, we become one flesh with Him through union with His Body and Blood. We are also one flesh with one another, with all who commune with Him, for we are members of the same Body.

So after celebrating Theophany, we simply cannot go back to life as usual. In order to respond faithfully to the revelation of the Holy Trinity, our common life must shine with the light of God's salvation in our darkened world. There is no other genuinely Christian form of witness, no other way to attain to "the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God" than to love and serve our Lord in one another. That is how the worship of the Trinity will be made manifest in the life of our parish, as we build up the Body of Christ. That is how we will obey the Lord's command: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."

Holy Theophany-Beyond the Symbols by Athanasios Stogiannidis

The celebration of Holy Theophany certainly has a most important place in the life of the Orthodox Church. This is because the order of service for the feast sets out in a very expressive way the prospects and horizons which are opened up to every human being through Christ's coming into the world. 'Today the things above celebrate with those below and those below converse with those above [...] Today the Lord hastens towards baptism, to raise human nature to the heights'. Essentially, this means the opportunity for each person to taste the joy and the glory of God; the opportunity for people to fill their lives with the life of God.

At Christ's Baptism, the Holy Trinity is revealed: the Son, Who has taken on our human nature completely; the Father, from Whom we hear only His voice; and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. In the end, what's revealed isn't only 'Who God is', but more particularly 'What God does for our sake'. And what He does is to become human so that we can become gods. This is of incredible importance for the whole of humanity: we're no longer alone. The very name attributed to Christ - Emmanuel - means 'God is with us. We have God with us.'

The religious experience in the realm of the Orthodox Church isn't a relationship on the basis of which we seek to guarantee ourselves either a place in paradise, after death, or to salve our consciences over moral issues. Our religious experience isn't merely a reference to a supernatural being, in whom humanity should believe simply because He surpasses our own powers. The religious experience in the Orthodox Church isn't just about establishing a relationship with a supernatural force so that our unanswered questions will be answered. Nor is it simply about creating a reservoir of knowledge about human life. It's much more. The religious experience creates new perspectives for our existence and for our encounter with God. This is why some people have observed that Christianity isn't a religion; it's a church.

In the Orthodox Church, the religious experience is an ecclesiastical event. It's a relationship and, moreover, a relationship of life. It's an association between unique, inimitable persons. In this context, we don't approach God as a supernatural being but as the Person who offers us the chance to defeat anything that overcomes us, anything that makes us weak, anything that subjects us to death and corruption. God became incarnate for our sakes,

so that we wouldn't have to remain in subjection to corruption, that is, to anything that has a sell-by date! Egotistical relationships have a sell-by date: they don't live, they barely survive, or rather, they're parasitical.

God is a power Who enriches human existence so that it can be saved, that is so that it can be preserved whole, sound, and intact. When we receive Divine Grace, in essence we're blessed by enjoying a new way of life in which we overcome every impediment which alienates us, every form of egotism which separates us from others, everything which distances us and cuts us off from our Creator.

The new element which appears with Christ's coming is the opportunity to approach and taste our uncreated God

in the tiniest detail of the created world. This is the reason why the waters are sanctified: it's not merely a blessing, but the entry of God into human affairs, into what we're accustomed, with our pious disposition, to calling 'material' and 'vain'. Christ came into the world for all these vain things, so that they wouldn't be vain any longer, but immortal.

The shedding of the light of the Triune God on every dimension of creation, and the opportunity for us to fight for our life, not alone, but with Christ, is what the blessing of the waters states, in the end. The waters aren't a symbolic expression, nor does the blessing of the waters merely lead us to some sort of allegory.

Saint Athanasios the Great says that, behind the symbols there is a reality. What we see and experience in the Orthodox Divine Liturgy are things which are given to us symbolically. What does this mean? Let's have a closer look at the meaning of 'symbol' in the Orthodox Church so that we can better understand the significance of the blessing of the waters.

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