

III - The Gospel Readings from the End of the Pentecostarion to the Beginning of the Triodion

A) The Gospel Cycle of St Matthew

(From the End of the Pentecostarion to the Feast of the Holy Cross)

*At the Divine Liturgy we read the epistles of St. Paul which are numbered “after Pentecost.”
We read the Gospel Cycle of St. Matthew which has its own numbering.*

IN THE BYZANTINE TYPIKA, the Scriptures read at the Divine Liturgy are chosen in two ways. On feasts the passages selected refer to the event being celebrated. The Gospel reading usually recounts the event while the Epistle selection often suggests its spiritual meaning.

On most days of the year the Church reads the Scriptures continuously according to the following pattern: the Gospel of St John and the Acts of the Apostles are read from Pascha to Pentecost; Matthew and the Epistles, beginning with Romans, are read from Pentecost to the Exaltation of the Cross (September 14). The Epistles continue in order after this feast with Hebrews read especially during the Great Fast. The Gospels are read as follows: Luke from the Holy Cross to the Great Fast and Mark on the weekends of the Fast as well as to fill on weekdays during the cycles of Matthew and Luke. Thus we are now at the start of the public reading of Matthew and Romans in the Byzantine Churches.

Matthew: the Gospel of the Kingdom

In printed Bibles the Gospel according to St. Matthew is the first of the four. For many years this arrangement was thought to reflect the sequence in which the Gospels were composed: Matthew first, then Mark, etc. Many contemporary scholars, however, feel that the simpler Gospel of Mark was written first (before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70) and then expanded by Matthew after that event.

The first ancient testimony to Matthew comes from the second century Bishop of Hieropolis, Papias. In a work now lost but quoted by others, Papias says that “Matthew composed the sayings [of Jesus] in the Hebrew dialect [of Aramaic]”. If Papias is correct, Matthew’s collection of sayings was written for a group of Jewish Christians who spoke the Palestinian (“Hebrew”) dialect of Aramaic. Matthew’s original work, then, may have been simply a collection of sayings later incorporated into the Greek narrative we now have.

Our Matthew, although written in Greek, was still written for Jewish Christians. Of all the Gospels Matthew is the one that most refers to the Old Testament. Jewish customs are mentioned but not explained since the readers would be familiar with them. Questions about observing the Law of Moses and the Sabbath come up again and again. We know that there were many Jews

who understood and spoke Greek – it was the universal language of the Mediterranean – and there were many Jews who no longer spoke Hebrew or Aramaic. It is thought that the Gospel was written in a Jewish Christian community in Syria, probably at Antioch.

Matthew's Gospel is clearly a literary work with specific movements and themes. Sandwiched between the infancy narrative and the story of the passion and resurrection of Christ, Matthew puts forth five narratives and discourses that remind us of the five books of Moses (the Torah). Jesus is the New Moses, giving the new law, written in the hearts of those who love Him. The Gospel is roughly divided in two, focusing on its main message. The first part leads up to the confession of Peter ("*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*") in chapter 16 and the transfiguration of Christ ("*This is my beloved Son*") in chapter 17. The second part then takes us to Jerusalem and the great events of the Paschal mystery. Jesus is revealed in His passion ("*Truly this was the Son of God*" – 27:54) and in His glorification ("*All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth*" – 28:18). Jesus is not only the "new Moses;" He is the "*One greater than the temple*" (12:7), "*greater than Jonah*" and "*greater than Solomon*" (12:41-42).

First Sunday of St Matthew

The Sunday of All Saints (See p.)

Second Sunday of St Matthew (Mt 4:18-23)

Fishers of Men

ON THE FIRST SUNDAY that occurs during the Apostles' Fast our Church regularly reminds us of the call of the leaders of these apostles by the Lord. The Gospel passage read at the Divine Liturgy is Mt 4:18-23, the call of the fishermen. Mark and Luke also tell of this incident, at the effective beginning of Christ's public ministry.

The call of these disciples seems unusually abrupt to many readers. Jesus approaches some fishermen and says "Follow me," and they do. In the Gospel of John we read of a previous encounter that may make this prompt response a bit less jarring.

Meeting Jesus at the Jordan

John describes both Jesus and some of those who would become His followers among those around John the Baptist at the Jordan. While Jesus and the apostles mentioned in John were from Galilee, they may have first met in Judea, where John was baptizing. John the Baptist had acquired a reputation for radical holiness and had drawn people from even farther away than Galilee (see Mk 3:8). It is not unreasonable than religious Galileans like Jesus and His future followers would have traveled to Judea as well.

In John we read: "*Again, the next day, John stood with two of his disciples. And looking at Jesus as He walked, he said, 'Behold the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. Then Jesus turned, and seeing them following, said to them, 'What do you seek?'*"

They said to Him, ‘Rabbi’ (which is to say, when translated, Teacher), ‘where are You staying?’ He said to them, ‘Come and see.’ They came and saw where He was staying, and remained with Him that day (now it was about the tenth hour). One of the two who heard John speak, and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his own brother Simon, and said to him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (which is translated, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus” (Jn 1:35-42).

The disciples’ question, “Where are you staying?” implies that Jesus was not at home; He was a visitor in lodgings. His fellow Galileans were thus doubly attracted to Him. He had John’s endorsement and He was from their own native region. It is also in light of this passage that the Byzantine Churches call Andrew the First-Called of the apostles.

Next called of the apostles, according to John, would be Philip and Nathaniel. As John tells it, *“The following day Jesus wanted to go to Galilee, and He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow Me.’ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.’ And Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Philip said to him, ‘Come and see”* (Jn 1:43-46).

Back in Galilee

The Gospels do not dwell on Jesus’ return from the Jordan. Matthew outlines it in a few words: *“Now when Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, He departed to Galilee. And leaving Nazareth, He came and dwelt in Capernaum... From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”* (Mt 4:12, 13, 17). This was the same message that John was spreading around Judea (see Mt 3:1) – it is as if Jesus was continuing John’s work in Galilee.

The Gospel of John reports how, soon after returning to Galilee, Jesus *“and His disciples”* (Jn 2:2) attended a wedding at Cana. This is the first we hear that Jesus has disciples. When did they begin to follow Him? Once Jesus began His own ministry He quickly surrounded Himself with local followers, some of whom had been attracted to John the Baptist.

When Jesus approached Andrew and Peter as they were fishing, He invited them to follow Him, but with a promise. *“Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men”* (Mt 4:20). This image becomes clearer at the end of Matthew’s Gospel when Jesus tells His eleven foremost disciples, *“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations”* (Mt 28:19). Ultimately these former fishermen would be catching their “fish” in Asia Minor and Europe.

The Kingdom of God

All through Jesus’ ministry the preaching of Jesus was filled with “kingdom talk.” The Lord’s Prayer, the parables, and even His final word to Pilate, *“My kingdom is not of this world”* (Jn 18:36), all use this term drawn from Jewish experience and expectation.

In Jewish history the kingdom of God was a worldly entity, the kingdom of David. This kingdom was short-lived. It was divided on the death of David’s son, Solomon, and then destroyed by the

Babylonians in the sixth century BC. From then until the coming of Christ the Jews largely lived under foreign rule, but always looked for the restoration of “God’s kingdom,” meaning their independence.

By announcing that the kingdom of God was at hand the Lord was dismissing the ideas that the kingdom was a matter of political independence and therefore something in the material future. For Jesus the “kingdom” was something of the spirit. With the incarnation it is “at hand.” With the spread of Christ’s public ministry through the ministry of the apostles it “*has come near to you*” (Lk 10:9) because the kingdom of God is inner communion with Him. It was already realized in Christ and would become possible for anyone with His death and resurrection which occasioned the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. As St Paul writes, “*For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross*” (Col 1:19, 20).

Thus the kingdom of God is life in and with God, which is now ours mystically through our sharing in the life of the Church and in the ways we make Christ’s teachings the basis of our life. The kingdom will come in power at the end of the age when “*Christ who is our life appears*” and those who are in Him will share in His glory (see Col 3:1-4).

Jesus’ “Good News”

The message preached by both Jesus and the Forerunner was that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. In Mark’s Gospel a comment is added: “*Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel”* (Mk 1:14, 15).

We associate the term “gospel” with the four New Testament texts which speak of the life and message of Christ. In the Roman Empire a “gospel” was an imperial proclamation heralded with fanfare – “good news,” as it is often translated. By adopting that word the apostles were saying that Jesus was the “real news” in our world.

“The kingdom of heaven has no price tag on it: it is worth as much as you have. For Zacchaeus it was worth half of what he owned, because the other half that he had unjustly pocketed he promised to restore fourfold. For Peter and Andrew it was worth the nets and vessel they had left behind; for the widow it was worth two copper coins; for another it was worth a cup of cold water. So, as we said, the kingdom of heaven is worth as much as you have.”

St Gregory the Great, Forty Gospel Homilies, 5.2

The Seed of the Word in the Gentiles

TODAY'S READING FROM MATTHEW (4:18-23) is, as it were, the kickoff to the earthly ministry of Christ. Christ calls His foremost disciples, the brothers Peter and Andrew and their fellow fishermen, the brothers James and John. He then sets out preaching "*the Gospel of the kingdom*" (v. 23) throughout Galilee.

The Jews equated the kingdom of God with the Hebrew commonwealth, those who believed in the one true God. When a kingdom, "*like all the nations*" (1 Sam 8:5) was established, people began to think of God's kingdom as a physical entity. After being a subject people since their subjugation to Babylon in 587 BC, the Jews sought freedom from their occupiers and looked to the Messiah as a political liberator. Jesus message contradicts this: "the kingdom of God has come upon you," He says (Mt 12:28), by His presence. He confronts the ultimate oppressor, through whom physical, psychological and spiritual traumas befall us, and He defeats him. The kingdom of God is where Jesus is

Israel during its formative period was a traditional society. In many respects it was similar to its neighbors in the Middle East with one exception that set them apart from others: Israel held strongly to monotheism, belief in only one God, and to a moral system believed to be given by Him. Neighboring peoples – such as the Assyrians, Babylonians, Canaanites – each revered a host of gods and goddesses which the Israelites held to be no gods at all. The Israelites classed all these peoples as *goyim*, a word which first referred to a horde of pests, such as locusts. Our Bibles translate *goyim* as "Gentiles."

Jewish identity was to a great extent defined by their monotheism, which was always threatened when they mingled with Gentiles. Their identity – and their purity before God – suffered when "*they mingled with the Gentiles and learned their works*" (Psalm 106:35). There were numerous occasions during the first millennium BC when the political elite fostered alliances with *goyim* and adopted some of their ways.

By the time of Christ permissible contact between religious Jews and Gentiles was severely restricted. Thus Jesus sent His disciples to proclaim the Kingdom of God first among Jews: "*Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*" (Matthew 10:5-6).

The Jews considered themselves the people of God, the nation through whom He worked in the world. The Lord Jesus was referring to this conviction when He told the Samaritan woman, "*You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews*" (John 4:22). This did not mean that their place as God's chosen people was given to them as a privilege but as a responsibility. God would work through Israel for the sake of all who would believe in Him. Gentiles, too, would take their place in God's People.

Third Sunday of St Matthew

The One who Gives Life to the World (Mt 6:22-33)

“THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT” (Mt 5-7) is the name given to the first of the five Discourses of Jesus in Mathew’s Gospel. The term – from its introductory phrase, “*Seeing the multitudes He went up on a mountain*” (Mt 5:1) – was popularized by St Augustine’s commentary on Mt 5-7, *De Sermone Domini in Monte* (c. AD 392- 396).

In Matthew’s Gospel three important moments take place on a mountain: what we call the “Sermon on the Mount” (Mt 5-7), the Holy Transfiguration of Christ (Mt 17:1-9), and the eschatological discourse in which the Lord speaks to the signs of His coming (Mt 24:3 and following). Each of them evokes the memory of an Old Testament event in order to proclaim the person and message of Christ.

Remember that Matthew was written for Greek-speaking Jewish believers in Syria, perhaps at Antioch. Their minds would immediately be drawn to another mountain, Sinai, where God gave the Hebrews the basics of their faith, the Law of Moses. They would find in Jesus’ teaching from this mountain the fundamental texts of their faith: the Beatitudes (Mt 5:3-12) and the Lord’s Prayer (Mt 6:9-13) as well as Jesus’ interpretation of the Commandments and the precepts to pray, fast and give alms. They would see Jesus portrayed as the New Moses and more for, unlike Moses, He taught on His own authority: “*You have heard it said... but I say to you...*” (Mt 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32 38-39, 43-44).

In both the Sermon on the Mount and the Transfiguration we see Christ depicted in terms recalling Moses’ encounter with God on Mount Sinai. There are several points of comparison and/or contrast which have been identified since the first Christian centuries:

Location – Both events take place “on a mountain;” however there are no mountains in Galilee on the scale of Mount Sinai. The place traditionally identified as the site of the Sermon on the Mount is a hillside on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, near Capernaum. It overlooks a plain which can accommodate thousands. A Byzantine church was erected there in the fourth century. In the 1930s Italian dictator Mussolini sponsored the building of the Church of the Beatitudes on this site to commemorate the Sermon on the Mount.

The place of the Transfiguration is not identified in the Gospels. Jesus took Peter, James and John, we are told, and “*led them up on a high mountain*” (Mt 17:1). In the third century Origen identified the site of the Transfiguration as Mount Tabor, west of the Sea of Galilee, a monadnock, or rocky hill which rises dramatically from the plain which surrounds it. It was a pilgrimage site by the fourth century with several churches at its peak. Today there are two: one Greek Orthodox, the other Roman Catholic, each with a monastery attached. Identifying these Galilee sites as “mountains” emphasizes the connections with the experience of Moses.

The Cloud and Glory – In the days of Moses, “*the glory of the LORD rested on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days*” (Ex 24:16). When the Father spoke at Jesus’ Transfiguration, the “*high mountain*” was overshadowed by “*a bright cloud*” (Mt 17:5). On Sinai “*when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off*” (Ex 20:18). On Tabor the disciples “*were fearful as they entered the cloud*” (Lk 9:34), sign of their greater intimacy with the divine presence.

On Sinai Moses asked to see the LORD's glory, but the LORD replied: "*You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live*" (Ex 33:20). At the Transfiguration, on the other hand, Jesus' face "*shone like the sun and His clothes became white as the light*" (Mt 17). What was concealed in the experience of Moses becomes manifested to the disciples on Mount Tabor. As John's Gospel has it, "*we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth*" (Jn 1:14).

The Giving of the Law – On Sinai Moses receives the Law from God, which he then transmits to the people. The heart of the Law is, of course, the Ten Commandments but there is much more besides: ritual precepts, commercial laws, jurisprudence, reparations, money-lending, etc. Chapters 21 through 23 are devoted to these laws.

On the mount near Capernaum the Lord Jesus also delivers a Law, the heart of which is expressed in the nine Beatitudes. While most of the Commandments are expressed negatively ("Thou shalt not..."), the Beatitudes are expressed positively as the path to perfection ("Blessed are the...").

As the Ten Commandments were but a part of the Law given to Moses on Sinai, there is more to the Law of Christ than the Beatitudes. In the Sermon on the Mount Christ continues with an expansion of the Ten Commandments (Mt 5:28-47). Not only external actions (e.g. murder, adultery) but interior passions (e.g. anger, lust) deviate from the Law. Love must replace the desire for vengeance and that love must extend to all, even our enemies. The result is that "*Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect*" (Mt 5:48), which has been described as the summary of the Beatitudes.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the Sermon on the Mount concerns the way Christ proclaims His Law. On Sinai God gives His Laws to Moses with instructions to set them before the people of Israel. In the Sermon on the Mount it is Christ Himself who teaches in His own name, placing Himself as the equal of Him who gave the Law to Moses: "*You have heard that it was said to those of old... But I say to you...*" (Mt 5: 21, 27, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44).

The Lord Jesus does not negate the Ten Commandments; rather, He gives them greater depth. As He said, "*Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill*" (Mt 5:17). He completes or fulfills the Law by addressing our inner motivations as well as our actions. If our aim as believers is to know God, then we must know Him from within, by assuming His attitudes and adopting His ways for living. As He is perfect, so ought we to be.

Is This for Everyone?

The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel is addressed to "the multitudes." Yet in the medieval West a common opinion was that the Beatitudes were "intended for those who strive for perfection; they are based on poverty, chastity and obedience and are therefore primarily for those who join the religious life." Ordinary Christians were counseled that salvation was assured for them if they devoutly observe the precepts of the Church. This opinion was rigorously denounced by Luther and others during the Protestant Reformation as undoing the Sermon on the Mount, but it is still frequently found even in contemporary Roman Catholic writings.

The East, on the other hand, has always seen the spirit of the Beatitudes as basic to the Christian life for both monastics and lay people. The ways in which monastics and laypeople will embrace humility, poverty of spirit, compassion, or the pursuit of righteousness will differ but their essential importance is the same for both. The Beatitudes point out the path to the kingdom of God, the goal for all Christians.

At two significant moments in our liturgical life the central place held by the Beatitudes in our spirituality is reflected. In many churches, particularly in the Slavic tradition, the Beatitudes are sung at the Divine Liturgy during the Little Entrance. As the Gospel Book is carried to the center of the church, this passage from the Sermon on the Mount is sung as the summary of the entire Gospel message of Christ.

The second liturgical moment pointing to the universal importance of the Beatitudes in our spirituality takes place at the burial service. The Beatitudes climax the funeral hymns at the funerals of non-monastics (laypersons and priests). They are sung with hymns such as the following inserted between the verses: “May Christ grant rest to you in the city of the living. May He open to you the gates of paradise and make you a citizen of His kingdom. May He remit your sins, for He loves you greatly.” Communion with Christ, is the ultimate goal of our life as Christians, whether monastics, clergy or laity. Living the Beatitudes is the universal means to that goal.

The third mountain in Matthew is the Mount of Olives near Jerusalem (Mt 24). The Lord Jesus speaks there of the destruction of Jerusalem, the end of the age and His return. This recalls Zechariah’s prophecy that “*The LORD will go forth and fight against those nations, as He fights in the day of battle. And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives*” (Zech 14:4) and all things shall be renewed.

“Seek First the Kingdom”

In our Byzantine typika the bulk of the Sermon on the Mount is read at the Divine Liturgy on the weekdays after Pentecost and the Sunday of All Saints. Mt 6:22-34 is reserved for Sunday, however, for it provides the principle underlying the entire discourse: “*Seek first the kingdom of God*” (v. 33).

Commentators have often said that it is practically impossible to put the precepts in this discourse into action and they are right, if we see these instructions in isolation from their underlying motivation. If a person is truly seeking the kingdom of God, then keeping the radical nature of these precepts will come naturally. If someone is following the Lord wholeheartedly they will see Him accepting and supplying the strength for every sacrifice they make to keep His commandments.

If a person does not put the kingdom first then his “*eye is bad*” (v.23). His outlook on life leads only to darkness, whether it is the dreariness of a life committed to unrighteous living or the shadowy world of one who seeks to serve two masters by doing “just enough” to get into heaven

without commending one's whole life to Christ. As St John Chrysostom observed, no further punishment is needed; having such a mindset is punishment in itself. "To have mammon for your master is already worse itself than any later punishment and enough retribution before the punishment for any one trapped in it. . . . Think of the lawsuits, the harassments, the strife and toil and blinding of the soul! More grievous, one falls away from the highest blessing – to be God's servant" (Homily on Matthew, 21.2),

What holds people back from seeking the kingdom of God wholeheartedly? – a preoccupation with what we eat and drink and with what we put on (v. 32). Can we afford the better cuts of meat and the best wines, or to be seen in the restaurants everyone is talking about? Can I afford the latest fashions? Do I have the right jewelry for this or that occasion? What about the right address, the furnishings everyone will admire, a more expensive car than my neighbor, a vacation to be envied, etc. etc.? Not that material things are sinful in themselves; the Lord said that we will have enough of these things to meet our needs (v. 32). We sin when we make acquiring them the chief aim and purpose of life. As St Augustine noted, there is a difference between seeing something as a *goal* and seeing something as a *means*. Those who claim to be believers and yet pursue the goods of the world as their first priority in life must listen carefully to the words which the Lord addressed at the end of the discourse: "*Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven*" (Mt 7:21).

This week prayerfully read the entire Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7) and reflect on what it says to you. Has your spiritual life lost its savor (v.13)? Is your life a light which can bring glory to God (v.14)? Think about your life and how Christ's teachings on the Commandments (5:17-48) concern it.

The Lamp of the Body

WHENEVER WE WANT TO DISTRACT an infant or a pet, we place bright colors or movement before their eyes. Their eyes focus on what they see before them and distract them from whatever potential disaster we envision.

We aren't much different; we, too, can be easily distracted from our more burdensome responsibilities by activities or objects we enjoy. Even the memory of past events, pleasant or painful, can intrude on us and deflect our focus from the task at hand. When these distractions take us away from our family obligations or our relationship with God, we have lost our way. At first, we may not feel lost, but over time the consequences of our choices will become clear.

Many people shook their heads in disbelief at the woman who expressed amazement when her daughter in college stopped going to church. "But we always took her to church," she reasoned, "if her soccer game was cancelled." This mother had let the "bright colors" of a good time

distract her entire family from making a meaningful connection to God and the Church the focus of their lives.

We don't have to wonder what the Lord Jesus might have thought about such a situation; He tells us in the Gospel: the alluring distractions that attract us can so cloud our vision that the lamp of our eye goes dark. *"The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!"* (Mt 6:22, 23)

What Clouds Our Spiritual Vision?

We may attribute an inability to focus on our spiritual life on a number of causes. Some of them are completely beyond our control; others can be curbed by our free choice, once we recognize their effect on us. Among these influences are:

- **The Fall:** We are told that Adam and Eve, for example, were distracted from God's way when they became convinced that *"the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise"* (Gen 3:6). They accepted the logic of the tempter and lost their previous intimacy with God. We inherit their naiveté and are easily tempted by similar false promises, making us spiritually weak.
- **The Passions:** As a result of the Fall, we are at the mercy of certain impulses within us which dispose us to sin. Some passions involve normal needs which, out of control, can dominate our soul – a disordered appetite for food or drink (*gluttony*), for sexual activity (*unchastity*), or for money and what it can buy (*avarice*). Provided that they are kept within the proper bounds, desire for these things is normal.

More spiritual passions include the need to dominate others (*anger*), to expect happiness as our right (*dejection, listlessness*), and to be egocentric (*vanity, pride and vainglory*). A person who values his or her feelings above all else will be subject to many if not all, of these passions. As St Maximos the Confessor noted, "[A person] errs when the irrationality of feeling is the only form of discernment. He is captured by pleasure and avoidance of pain."

- **The Culture Around Us:** We accept as normal the ways of the society in which we live. We do things because everyone else does them. Thus we expect to shake hands, rather than bow to one another as they do in the Far East. Because we live in a secular society, inclusive of all religions or philosophies, there are many ideas, viewpoints, and values freely expressed around us; some of them we as Christians should not accept, whether legal or not.

One facet of our society, for example, which is not only legal but promoted, is consumerism.

Americans are both enabled and encouraged to build their lives around acquiring the latest and best of whatever pleases them. This is in stark contrast to the Lord's ideal expressed in the Gospel: *"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon... But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you"* (Mt 6:24, 33). American consumerism has seduced our population in ways that make all

sorts of addictions inevitable. Consumer goods, for example, are regularly marketed by sexual images; can pornography and lust be far behind?

The most serious departures from a godly lifestyle in our society are those which ignore the Ten Commandments – refusing recognition of God in the public arena, denying a special place to the Lord’s Day, accepting murder (abortion, euthanasia) and adultery (divorce and the sexual “revolution”) – or which seek to redefine reality based on one’s individual wishes (same-sex marriage, gender “reassign-ment”). Because some disorder is not against the law or because “everybody does it” does not mean it is in accordance with God’s way. Christians should be committed to discerning His way for us.

Dealing with the Passions

Christians seeking to foster a relationship with Christ dwelling in them will want to overcome the power of the passions. The most important weapons which can help in this spiritual struggle are *vigilance* and *discernment*. The vigilant Christian is one who, regularly examining his world and his own reactions to it, seeks to ascertain whether his responses are determined by one of the passions listed above. Since all the passions are expressions of our ego, we must remain watchful to determine how much our desires (“*I want,*” “*I need,*” or “*I have the right to*”) reflect a hidden egotism. The discerning Christian is one who is able to determine this and frame a response to the enticements of the world in line with Christ’s way for us set forth in the Scriptures.

Dealing with the Culture

St Paul counseled new believers in the culture of his day, “*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may test what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God*” (Rom 12:2) and also, “*Test all things: hold fast to what is good and abstain from every form of evil*” (1 Thess 5:21, 22). Christians today need to distinguish what is good in our secular world from what is not.

Modern society is built on the idea that the freedom of the individual is the greatest good. The individual should be free to choose his or her own political leaders, values or religion and publicly promote that choice. Extreme expressions of this concept are the conviction that the individual determines his or her own “truth,” becoming the ultimate judge of his or her actions and identity, determining whether one is male or female, who or how many to marry, when and how to die, etc. irrespective of law or custom.

Are we, first of all, individuals or members of a community (and therefore unable to determine our own truth)? Do obligations to our family, Church or country outweigh our individual preferences?

We also are faced with competing Christian visions, all claiming to be based on the Bible, as well as Buddhist, Islamic or atheist perspectives. Is this advice, given to the Christians in multicultural Ephesus, good for us as well: “*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world*” (1 Jn 4:1). All of these counsels apply to us today.

Fourth Sunday of St Matthew

Signs of the Messiah (Mt 8:5-13)

THE GOSPELS PRESENT A PICTURE of the world in which Christ lived which is not always understood. While they focus on His interaction with the leaders of Israel, the Gospels also show us how many other groups and peoples He encountered. Official Judaism, centered on Jerusalem, was made up of several strains. We hear of the Pharisees (the rabbis, focused on the Torah) and the Sadducees (the priests, centered on temple worship). The Gospels also mention the Samaritans with their reverence for the ancient shrines rather than Jerusalem. And we know of others groups who did not esteem the Jerusalem establishment but retired to the Judean desert to await the expected Messiah. Many feel that John the Forerunner was one of them.

Besides these representatives of mainstream and fringe Judaism, the area was also home to Gentiles. Some were native to the area. Jesus often traveled to the east side of the Jordan, and to the area of Tyre and Sidon where He encountered many Gentiles as well. Then, of course there were the colonists who inhabited the cities of the Decapolis, ten Roman and Greek cities in today's Jordan and Syria, and the Roman presence, based in Caesarea on the Mediterranean which governed the area in the name of Caesar. Some of these Gentiles respected Jewish belief and were known as "God-fearing" although they were not part of the Jewish people.

The centurion in Mt 8:5-13 was probably one of these God-fearers, stationed at Capernaum. The corresponding passage in Luke cites the praise of the local Jews that "*he loves our nation, and has built us a synagogue*" (Lk 7:5).

The story of the centurion and his servant reveal two themes important to the Jewish believers for whom the Gospel of Matthew was written. The first theme is the belief that Jesus is the Messiah. Like all Jews, these believers held that the Messianic era would be marked by physical as well as spiritual renewal. In crafting the Gospel the Evangelist intersperses the five Discourses (Jesus' teachings) with accounts of how Jesus' presence revitalized people. This would be the proof that He was the Messiah, as we read in His encounter with the disciples of John the Baptist:

"Now when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, 'Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?' Jesus answered and said to them, 'Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them'" (Mt 11:2-5). In other words the messianic signs are evident – the Messiah is at hand.

The second theme would be increasingly important as more Gentiles entered the community of the Church. It is expressed in the words of Jesus concerning the centurion, "*Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel! And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing*

of teeth” (Mt 8:10-12). Gentiles would believe and by their faith they would displace the Jews in the people of God.

The Sun of Righteousness

One of the last of the Hebrew prophecies in the Old Testament, Malachi, spoke of the coming of “*the Sun of Righteousness*” in words which seem to summarize the entire Gospel. Early Christians saw this as a prophecy fulfilled in Jesus and His Forerunner, John the Baptist:

“Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple – even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,” says the LORD of hosts. ... But to you who fear My name the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings...” (Malachi 3:1, 4:2)

Early Christians soon connected this image of Christ as the Sun of Righteousness to the progress of the Gospel among the Gentiles. The Sun of Righteousness shone His light over the darkness of idolatry and eclipsed it. To this day we proclaim this in the troparion of the Nativity, speaking of the Persian magi, “through it [Christ’s birth] those who worshipped stars were taught by a star to worship You, the Sun of Righteousness.”

And so we hear Christ proclaimed today as the fulfillment of the Messianic hopes of the Jewish people and the One who shines the light of true righteousness among the Gentiles. He is, as we sing so often in the Canticle of Simeon, “Light to the revelation of the Gentiles and the glory of Your people, Israel.”

Coming from East and West

BY THE TIME CHRIST BEGAN His public ministry, Rome had been ruling the Holy Land for almost 100 years, through a succession of local governors and administrators. The ruler of Galilee at the time was the tetrarch Herod Antipas, whom the locals called “King Herod.” The region of Galilee was the site of much of the Lord Jesus’ early ministry.

When the Lord’s teaching was rejected in His home town of Nazareth, we are told that “*leaving Nazareth, He came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is by the sea*” (Mt 4:13). It was there that He chose four local fishermen - Peter, Andrew, James and John – and called them to be His followers.

As a seaside fishing village, it is likely that Capernaum was a place where taxes would be collected, particularly from the local fishermen. Matthew the evangelist was collecting taxes there when Jesus called him (see Mt 9:9). It was perhaps to insure that taxes were collected that Roman soldiers were stationed in the area as well.

The Centurion at Capernaum

Matthew does not tell us anything about the officer who called on His help. In the Gospel of Luke we learn a bit more. In Lk 7, the first approach to Jesus on this matter was made by the local Jewish elders: “And when they came to Jesus, they begged Him earnestly, saying that the one for whom He should do this was deserving, ‘for he loves our nation, and has built us a synagogue’” (Lk 7:4,5). Some commentators have concluded that the centurion might have been a God-fearer or even a proselyte (Gentile convert), but this is not mentioned in either Gospel, as it was not pertinent to the story or its message.

In both tellings of this story, the centurion refrains from summoning Jesus to the servant’s bedside, “*for I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof*” (Mt 8:8, Lk 7:6). Perhaps the centurion knew it would violate local custom for a Jew (much less a holy man) to enter the home of a Gentile. This is not mentioned, because it too was not pertinent to the story or its message.

What was emphasized by the Lord in both Gospels is the centurion’s faith. Many of Jesus’ contemporaries relied on their being members of the people of Israel to, as it were, guarantee their status before God. But, as the Lord said elsewhere, “*Do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones*” (Mt 3:9).

Many looked to the correct observance of the precepts of the Law as the sign that they were doing God’s will. The centurion, not being a Jew, could not rely on either of these principles. His response, however, showed that he had the deep reliance on God which validates any religious observance then or now.

Christian tradition has also stressed the man’s humility and made it the model for our response when the Lord is near. In both East and West, his words are incorporated into our prayer as we approach the Eucharist.

In the Byzantine prayers before receiving Communion we say, “I know that I am not worthy or sufficient that You should come under the roof of my soul, for all is desolate and fallen” (Second Prayer) and “I am not worthy, O Lord and Master, that You should enter under the roof of my soul” (Seventh Prayer). The centurion’s humble protestation is clearly the model here.

What is the Principal Message Here?

The “punch line” in Matthew’s story of this healing tells us what his principal message is for us. Jesus marvels at the centurion’s faith, then He adds: “*And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*” (Mt 8:11,12).

The idea that Gentiles would be preferred to Jews in the heavenly realm was scandalous to Jews. When Jesus had expressed a similar idea in the synagogue at Nazareth, it nearly got Him killed: “*Assuredly, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own country. But I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a great famine throughout all the land; but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarephath, in the region of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And many lepers*

were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” So all those in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, and rose up and thrust Him out of the city; and they led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw Him down over the cliff. Then passing through the midst of them, He went His way” (Lk 4:25-30).

The Lord referred to times in the ninth century BC when the Jews fell away from the worship of the one God, accepting the Phoenician deities Baal and Asherath. The prophets Elijah and his successor Elisha confronted the Jews for their apostasy but ministered to Phoenicians and Syrians who were disposed to hear their message. As the widow of Zarephath confessed to Elijah, *“Now by this I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is the truth”* (1 Kgs 17:24). Their stories are told in the first and second books of Kings.

The story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman (Mt 15:21-28) is another example of a believing pagan contrasted to contentious Jews. After a confrontation with Jewish leaders from Jerusalem, the Lord went to the region of Tyre and Sidon where a woman begged His help for her daughter. After at first appearing to decline because she was not a Jew, Jesus obliged her saying, *“O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire”* (Mt 15:28). Again, a Gentile’s faith is contrasted to the argumentative response of God’s own people.

In each case, the prophets and the Lord Himself step outside the box to respond to a believing Gentile, who is then held up as an example to Jews who doubted Him and as an encouragement to the Gentiles who were being added to the company of His followers.

St John Chrysostom on the Centurion

Great is the pride of those who are in places of command; not even in afflictions do they take lower ground. In John 4, for example, the nobleman is all for dragging Him to his house, and says, “Sir, come down before my child dies!” (Jn 4:49) But not so this man; rather he is far superior both to him, and to those who let down the bed through the roof. For he does not seek His bodily presence, nor did He bring the sick man near the physician... he says, *“speak the word only... not looking so much to the health of the servant, as to the avoiding all appearance of doing anything irreverent.*

Homily 26 on Matthew

Fifth Sunday of St Matthew Of Demons and Pigs (Mt 8:28-9:1)

THE PASSAGE FROM ST MATTHEW'S GOSPEL describing the healing of the demoniac begins with the words, "*When Jesus had come to the other side...*" (Mt 8:28). "The other side of what?" we may ask, raising questions of where Jesus went and what it meant for His ministry. How does knowing where He lived and where He travelled contribute to our understanding of who He is and to our way of following Him?

The Lord Jesus spent most of His earthly life in the province of Galilee, the northernmost district of the Holy Land. Galilee, north of Samaria, was the ancient territory of the Israelite tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. With Samaria it had formed the northern kingdom, Israel, after the split following Solomon's death (c. 931 BC). In 740 BC the northern kingdom had been conquered by the Assyrians; it would not be ruled again by Jews until 140 BC.

Galilee of the Gentiles

Already in the eighth century BC the prophet Isaiah referred to this territory as "*Galilee of the Gentiles*" (9:1), a phrase which will be quoted in Mt 4:16. Isaiah may have been referring to an event mentioned in 1 Kings 9: 10-13. There we read that Hiram, the King of Tyre, had supplied cedar, cypress and gold to build the temple at Jerusalem. To repay him, "*King Solomon then gave Hiram twenty cities in the land of Galilee...*"

The story of Hiram is the first of two rather disparaging references to Galilee in the Scriptures. Solomon's gift did not please the King of Tyre "*So he said, 'What kind of cities are these which you have given me, my brother?' And he called them the land of Cabul, [good for nothing] as they are known to this day.*"

For the 600 years after the Assyrian conquest much of Galilee had been all but abandoned by the Jews, who concentrated on rebuilding Jerusalem and Judea. Like Samaria, Galilee saw foreigners – in this case Phoenician farmers and Greek mercenaries employed by the Persians – among its new residents, apparently not the result of any intentional efforts by the various ruling powers, none of whom introduced a substantial number of colonists.

Jewish resettlement of Galilee proceeded very slowly until the reestablishment of Jewish rule in the second century BC. According to the evidence of archaeology, there was a sudden change at the beginning of the first century BC. Within a few decades, dozens of new villages appeared, indicating that a new population had come into Galilee. By the first century AD Galilee included 204 prosperous villages and 15 fortified cities (Josephus, *Vita*, 45). Was St Joseph's family, whose roots were in Bethlehem of Judea, one of those who emigrated to Galilee at that time?

Nazareth vs. Sepphoris

The town of Nazareth where Jesus was raised was on the outskirts of one such city, Sepphoris, the administrative center of Galilee and the home of the region's prosperous Jewish elite.

Nazareth was a working man's town in the shadow of Sepphoris, of no importance to anyone but its residents. When the Lord's disciple Philip told Nathanael that he had found the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, Nathaniel responded, "*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*" (Jn 1:46)

The cosmopolitan and deeply Hellenized city of Sepphoris is never mentioned in the Gospels. Jesus is never depicted as going there – although it was only 3½ miles from Nazareth – and none of His closest followers are said to have lived there. Instead the Lord spent His time in and called disciples from the nearby working-class towns of Cana and Capernaum where He found "*the poor in spirit*" (Mt 5:3), people more likely to accept His words.

The contrast between Nazareth and Sepphoris exemplifies Christ's preference for the poor in spirit, the attitude of spiritual poverty before God contrasted with the proud, exemplified in the Beatitudes, and which He personified in the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee. The figures associated with His birth – the holy Virgin, St Joseph, the shepherds, Simeon and Anna, even the magi – all display this quality.

Contemporary writers often use the Hebrew term *Anawim* to describe those people who look to God for everything. It was the word used by the Essene community to describe themselves. The *Anawim* usually have nothing that the world wants; their "wealth" consists in God. These are the people to whom Jesus referred in His first sermon at the synagogue in Nazareth, quoting Isaiah 61:1, 2: "*The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor*" (Lk 4:18).

The Lord's identification with the humble – the needy widow, Lazarus the beggar, the blind, the lame, and the lepers – has led churchmen throughout the ages to assert that the Church is called to imitate Christ by declaring its preference for the poor and powerless of this world. "Prove yourself a god to the unfortunate by imitating the mercy of God," wrote St. Gregory the Theologian (Oration XIV, *On the Love of the Poor*). "There is nothing so godly in human beings as to do good works." Sixteen centuries later Pope Benedict XVI taught that "love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 22).

Foreigners and Samaritans

Archaeologists suggest that the population of Galilee at the time of Christ included transplanted Judeans. They joined many Gentile Galileans (Phoenicians and Greeks) and Idumeans who some scholars say had been forcibly converted to Judaism. If so, Galilee in Jesus' day contained many Jews whose ancestors had only been Jewish for about a century.

At the same time the Galileans were surrounded by native pagan peoples: Phoenicians to the north, Amonites and Moabites to the east, Edomites to the south and Palestinians to the west, while their immediate neighbors to the south were the Samaritans. Strict Jews like the Pharisees reviled all these peoples as unbelievers or as heretics and therefore unclean.

The Lord Jesus was not put off by the isolationism of the scribes and Pharisees. Not only did He eat with sinners and with the tax collectors, who were collaborators with the occupying Romans, He ministered to Samaritans (Jn 4:5-42) and soldiers of the Roman occupation (Lk 7:1-9). He visited pagan territories such as Tyre and Sidon, where He helped the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mk 7:24-30), and Gadara, across the Jordan, as we see in today's reading.

A Galilean befriending sinners, embracing the poor and powerless, foreigners and Samaritans despite the precepts of the Torah – is it any wonder, then, that the Lord Jesus made enemies among the scribes, the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law?

The Problem with Pork

Just what is it about pork? Any contact with it is prohibited in the Torah. There we read: “*Now the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying to them, ‘Speak to the children of Israel, saying, ‘These are the animals which you may eat among all the animals that are on the earth: Among the animals, whatever divides the hoof, having cloven hooves and chewing the cud—that you may eat. Nevertheless these you shall not eat among those that chew the cud or those that have cloven hooves: the camel, ... the rock hyrax, ... the hare, ... and the swine, though it divides the hoof, having cloven hooves, yet does not chew the cud, is unclean to you. Their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall not touch. They are unclean to you’*” (Leviticus 11:2-8).

Here the reason given seems arbitrary: is there a divine reason for preferring animals which have cloven hooves and chew their cud? If so, we are not told.

Modern commentators have suggested ecological and hygienic reasons for the Jews' attitude. It has been suggested, for example, that because pigs will eat anything – garbage, offal, even carcasses – they were thought of as “unclean,” that is, unfit for God's People.

The Quran also prohibits the consumption of, and even contact with, pork: “*He has made unlawful to you only that which dies of itself, and blood, and the flesh of swine, and that on which the name of any other than Allah has been invoked*” (2.174). This and similar texts record the prohibition but do not explain it.

The prohibition in the Quran does suggest another possible reason when it couples pork with “*that on which the name of any other than Allah has been invoked.*” In fact, pigs were regularly sacrificed to “other names” at the time of Moses. In the Egypt of his day pigs were sacrificed to the gods, especially to Set, the ruler of Upper Egypt, and the pork was consumed in a ritual feast. One of their most important gods, it was Set, along with Horus, the ruler of Lower Egypt, who were depicted as crowning Pharaoh.

Pigs were also sacrificed to various deities by the Philistines, the Greeks and the Romans. Would this ongoing association of pigs with pharaoh and idolatry have influenced the condemnation of

pork by the Hebrews? Idolatry and its attendant practices would certainly have been the greatest uncleanness to an observant Jew of the day; anything connected with idolatry would have been equally condemned. Perhaps the same reasoning applies to the Jewish prohibition against mixing meat and dairy. Would the fact that Canaanites offered lamb cooked in its mother's milk to their gods, make it unfit for God's People?

In any case, pigs became the ultimate symbol of uncleanness in Judaism and, later, in Islam. When Jesus tells the story of the Prodigal Son, for example, the lad's final degradation was to feed husks to the pigs.

The Pigs of Gedara

Jesus' encounter with the demoniacs is directly connected with the story of how He calmed the sea (Mt 8:23-27) which precedes it. The Gospel says that Jesus and His disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee when a storm erupted. Commentators have stressed that Matthew used the same word here as he did in the account of the Lord's crucifixion when the earth quaked. It represents an apocalyptic event, heralding the coming of the Messiah and the Kingdom of God to the Gentiles.

When Jesus and His disciples get to the eastern side of the sea, they come upon the demoniacs whose healing is described in Mt 8:28-34. Part of Jordan today, this was a region inhabited by Jews, local Gentiles (Amonites and Moabites), and Greco-Roman settlers. Early manuscripts of the Gospel story vary, locating this event in Gadara (the center of Hellenism in the region), or Gerasa (modern Jerash). Both were Gentile towns, more Greek than Semitic, with pagan temples side by side with Jewish synagogues. Pagan festivals were observed, with dramas depicting the gods and sacrifices offered to them. Pork would have been considered acceptable here.

In the Gospel narrative the demons are given leave to enter the pigs and plunge into the sea. All that is unclean in this world (the idolatrous pigs) and in the spiritual realm (the rebellious demons) are destined to plummet into the abyss to make way for the kingdom of God.

While crossing the Sea of Galilee the disciples had asked one another "*Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?*" (v. 27) – they had yet to experience Christ as more than a holy man. When Jesus confronts the demons, however, there is no need for a discussion. "*What have we to do with you, Jesus, you Son of God!*" they whine. "*Have you come here to torment us before the time?*" (v. 29) – these invidious spiritual powers know what, at this stage the disciples do not. Much of Matthew's Gospel is concerned with the disciples' growing awareness of Christ's unique relationship with the Father. Those "*of little faith*" would before long be spreading faith in Christ much farther than they had ever gone before.

The Time Has Come

What is “*the time*” mentioned in the demons’ complaint? These demons were not prepared to lose their power. They are depicted here like many Jews of their time, who expected to have sway until the Last Day, the apocalyptic end of all things, when the Lord’s Anointed would come in glory and judge the world. They were not prepared to encounter the King of the ages in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

This Jesus would come in glory, but not when and how anyone expected. Christ would be glorified when, triumphant over sin in Himself, He surrendered Himself to death in order to abolish it and overturn its power over mankind. Christ’s sacrificial death was His glory, the victory of self-offering in the face of a sterile world.

What is Clean and Unclean?

When scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem criticized Jesus and His followers for not observing the practices of ritual purification, He responded, “*Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man*” (Mt 15:11). Impurity is not a matter of ritual practices but of our actions and intentions.

Not without some initial disagreements, the early Church came to maintain that there would be no clean vs. unclean foods, for all food is from God. As St. Paul insisted, keeping Torah laws does not justify us; rather we put our faith in Christ and in His saving acts. Nothing I do can “save” me. The source of all human uncleanness is that idea that I can save myself by doing this or refraining from that. Our efforts cannot bring us into relationship with God; it is only in God’s work, manifested in Jesus Christ, that we can find security and hope.

Do Demons Have Power?

IN EASTERN ICONS, such as the traditional representation of the Gergasene demoniacs, demons are often portrayed as little winged black men. In the medieval art of the West the horned, bat-winged and fork-tailed red giant was the most popular representation of the devil. What is the origin of these images and what do they actually represent?

Any representation of a demon in iconography, whether Western or Eastern, is an attempt to interpret Scriptural teaching. The imagery itself is not found in Scripture but strives to graphically depict a Biblical doctrine. Physical depictions of non-physical realities, however, are always doomed to fail. This is why in our Tradition depicting the Father or the Holy Spirit in human form is considered inappropriate since they were not incarnate. Icons of Christ, on the other hand, are considered so important because they point to the truth of His incarnation: that He actually became human to join His nature to ours.

One artistic convention frequently employed in images of demons is the use of wings. This device “interprets” the Scriptural image of Satan as a fallen angel. As the Lord Himself said, “*I*

saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Lk 10:18). Since “everyone knows” that angels have wings, artists assumed that fallen angels have wings too.

Does Size Matter?

The size of demons in icons or other images is a commentary on the power of Satan as understood by the artist and, ultimately by his Church. Medieval artists in the West often depicted Satan as larger than other figures in their paintings. They were interpreting Christ’s description of Satan as “*the ruler of this world*” (Jn 12:31) and St Paul’s characterization of him as “*the god of this age*” (2 Cor 4:4). A being of such power was in their eyes larger than life.

But Christ had said that, as a result of His passion, “*the ruler of this world will be cast out*” (Jn 12:31). Thus, in the Eastern icon of Pascha, Satan is not depicted as a superman but as a colorless corpse bound in chains, defeated by the sacrifice of Christ. This image illustrates the teaching on Christ’s victory on the cross, “*that through death He might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil.*” (Heb 2:14). This is also why our Great Saturday liturgy puts these words in Satan’s mouth: “My power has been swallowed up! ... Death’s power has lost its strength.”

In Eastern icons Satan and demons are regularly depicted as insignificant pests: tiny black creatures futilely attacking man. This illustrates the term for Satan used in all the Gospels, *Beelzebub* (see Mt 12:24, Mk 3:22 and Lk 11:18). This is a satiric parody of the Canaanite title for their god meaning “Lord of the princes.” The Jewish parody used in the Gospels, “Lord of the flies,” points to the trivial nature of Satan before Christ’s power – little more than a gnat.

Demons in the Scriptures

The Old Testament presents Satan or the devil as “the Accuser” (in Hebrew, *ha satan*; in Greek, *ho diabolos*) who misleads or slanders people and thus incites them to sin. He is depicted as a tempter, a persuader who convinces people to choose other than godly ways to live. When his influence spreads among the influential figures in society, an entire culture can be perverted. But Satan cannot force anyone to comply with his ways; we can always reject his temptations.

Old Testament-era Jews also came to speak of other diabolical figures in addition to Satan. The devil had his minions, angels who fell with him and who sought to drag people down with them. As the New Testament Book of Revelation describes it: “*So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him*” (Rev 12:9).

By the first and second centuries BC, belief that there were demons active in Israel had become common in popular Judaism. Deliverance from demons was an important part of the ministry of Christ in the Gospels and of the apostles in Acts. It is assumed today that many of the people in the Gospel accounts believed to have a demon were actually afflicted with some form of psychosis. This does not explain the absence of demonic possession in Jewish writings before Christ. Could it be that the coming of the Messiah prompted a last-ditch effort of Satan and his angels to assert power?

Jesus became quickly known as a healer and exorcist, confronting physical maladies and the assault of demons: “*Then His fame went throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all sick people who were afflicted with various diseases and torments, and those who were demon-possessed, epileptics, and paralytics; and He healed them*” (Mt 4:24).

Jesus sent His disciples out to preach the kingdom of God and gave them authority over demons: “*He gave them power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease*” (Mt 10:1). They continued to exercise this power even after Pentecost (see Acts 8:7; 16:16ff.).

The Church has continued to exercise this power over unclean spirits. The second-century apologist St Justin the Philosopher told a Jewish acquaintance named Trypho that “now we, who believe in our Lord Jesus, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, when we exorcise all demons and evil spirits, have them subjected to us” (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 76.6).

By the third century it was common that people entering the Church through baptism first be freed from the power of any unclean spirits. In our Byzantine ritual today, four prayers of exorcism are part of the reception of a catechumen, calling on Satan to “Depart, and admit the vanity of your power which could not even control the swine.” When blessing water, oil or sacred vessels or when consecrating churches, the bishop or priest first prays that the influence of unclean spirits be averted from this place or object.

Our sacramental books also include prayers to deliver people from unclean spirits. In many places use of these prayers is on the increase as a result of people becoming involved with occult practices, thus opening themselves to influence by unclean spirits. A Coptic priest, Fr Sama’an Ibrahim, conducts prayers of deliverance weekly in his church carved into the rock of Moqattam Mountain, home of Cairo’s garbage collectors. Most of those who fill the 2000-seat church seeking deliverance are Muslims, says Father Ibrahim. “Christians rarely get possessed, because they are baptized young.”

First Exorcism of St. Basil the Great

O God of gods and Lord of lords, Creator of the fiery spirits and Artificer of the invisible powers, of all things heavenly and earthly: You whom no man has seen nor is able to see; You whom all creation fears and before whom it trembles; You who cast into the darkness of the abyss of Tartaros the angels who fell away with him who once was commander of the angelic host, who disobeyed You and haughtily refused to serve You: now expel by Your awesome name the evil one and his legions loose upon the earth, Lucifer and those with him who fell from above. Set him to flight and command him and his demons to depart completely. Let no harm come to them who are sealed in Your image and let those who are sealed receive power “to tread on serpents and scorpions and all the power of the enemy.” For You do we praise and magnify, and with every breath do we glorify Your all-holy name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

Sixth Saturday of St Matthew

For His Name's Sake (Mt 10:37-39)

THERE ARE A NUMBER OF CONTROVERSIAL passages in the New Testament. One of them is read at the Divine Liturgy on the sixth Saturday after Pentecost. We hear the Lord tell His followers, “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it” (Mt 10:37-39).

A Special Audience

The first thing we should note is that in Matthew's Gospel these words are not addressed to all Jesus' followers but to the Twelve whom He was sending out to the surrounding towns and villages to proclaim the Kingdom of God. In time, as we know, they would bring this Gospel throughout the Roman Empire, the first of countless men and women who would leave everything for distant lands in the service of the Gospel.

He warned them what to expect in their mission and consoled them that God will be with them, “But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues. You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you” (vv. 17-20).

What the Lord Jesus seems to be doing in v. 37 is revising the Ten Commandments for His disciples – hardly something an ordinary rabbi would dream of doing! In fact, Matthew is presenting Jesus as more than a rabbi or even as a prophet but as the One who is entitled to edit the Law because He is the one who originally gave the Law to Moses. As He restated the commandments about killing and adultery (“You have heard it said... but I say to you...”), so here He puts the commandment to honor one's parents in a new light, for His closest followers. Blood relationships are not as important as the union they would have with God in Christ.

The Family in Society

We all learned the first part of the command to honor parents when we were children. We may never have heard the remainder of this precept which roots it in the social order of Israel. The fullest form of the commandment found in the Torah is this: “*Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may be well with you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you*” (Dt 5:16). Keeping this commandment was seen as essential to the well-being of the people of Israel.

Parenthood in our society is colored by images of the nuclear family and the sentiment of Mother's Day and Father's Day. In the ancient world – and in some traditional societies even today – the family existed more for social than sentimental purposes: for the preservation of the clan or race rather than for domestic bliss. People married in order to have children so that their family or nation could continue.

Survival of the race or family was dependent on the strength of the next generation and so the greatest responsibility of the present generation is to produce sons and daughters. This is why, in the psalm which we still sing at the mystery of Crowning, a family's blessedness is described in terms of childbearing: "*Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the very heart of your house, your children like olive plants all around your table. Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD*" (Ps 128:3, 4).

In our society the decision to have children is viewed purely as a matter of personal choice with no reference to any wider interest. In Israel this was not the case. If a couple did not have children it was thought a curse, and their relatives and neighbors would revile them – they were failing their people in a most fundamental way. Thus, when the childless Elizabeth had conceived John the Baptist in her old age she cried, "*Thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people*" (Lk 1:25).

A New Community

The new community Christ was establishing did not depend on giving birth to children as the means of perpetuating it. The Church would be built on something else. Two incidents in the Gospels show us what Christ considered as the basis of His new people. In both He presents a new alternative to blood relationships as the determining characteristic of His people.

The first scene is found in Matthew. "*While He was still talking to the multitudes, behold, His mother and brothers stood outside, seeking to speak with Him. Then one said to Him, 'Look, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, seeking to speak with You.' But He answered and said to the one who told Him, 'Who is My mother and who are My brothers?' And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, 'Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother'" (Mt 12:46-50). At that time James and the Lord's other relatives were not among His disciples. That changed when the risen Christ appeared to James (see 1 Cor 15:7). Several family members would become leaders of the fledgling Church.*

Another incident is recorded in Luke. "*And it happened, as He spoke these things, that a certain woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, 'Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You!' But He said, 'More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!'" (Lk 11: 27-28).*

While physical descent from the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob made a person a member of the people of Israel, this would not be the case in the Church. It was now hearing God's word and doing His will, rather than any physical relationship, which would make a person part of Christ's new family. As St Paul would write, "*For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (Gal 3:26-28).

The Witness of the Martyrs

The stories of the early martyrs show that the first Christians took the Lord's teaching seriously. Christ's teaching about the value of blood relationships took root in the early Church. One's clan, tribe or race was not as important as the kingdom of God. Early martyrs such as St Barbara and St Christina refused their fathers' demands that they renounce their new-found Christian faith. Their fathers had them beaten and, when that did not change their minds, handed them over to the authorities. In the case of St Barbara, her own father was her executioner, fulfilling Christ's warning, "Now brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved" (Mt 10: 21, 22).

In other cases Christian family members encouraged their relatives to stand firm against their persecutors. The wife and mother of St James the Persian and the mother of Meliton, one of the forty holy martyrs of Sebaste are remembered for the way they supported their suffering loved ones, confident that he who endures to the end will be saved.

Sixth Sunday of St Matthew

The Son of Man Forgives Sins (Mt 9:1-8)

WE READ IN MATTHEW 9: 1-8 that, when people brought a paralyzed man to the Lord Jesus, He healed the man's paralysis, but not before telling him, "*Your sins are forgiven*" (Mt 9:2). The bystanders' initial thought that Jesus had blasphemed was replaced by wonder. As Matthew described it, "*they marveled and glorified God, who had given such power to men*" (Mt 9:8).

The Lord Jesus, of course, was more than just a man. His full humanity was joined without confusion to the divine nature of the Word of God. He forgave sin, then, as the only-begotten Son of the Father. But the onlookers' amazement would be justified in time: God *would* give men the power to forgive sin, in the Church.

When the glorified Christ appeared to His disciples after His resurrection, He told them, "*Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained*" (Jn 20:22, 23). The Church was to extend the presence of Christ in the world both physically and spiritually by imparting the forgiveness of sins to those who came to it in faith.

"First" and "Second Baptism"

The first place where the Church bestows forgiveness of sins is in the **Mystery of Baptism**. When we are buried with Christ in baptism we rise to a newness of life marked by deliverance from the power of sin. Infants brought for baptism, of course, have no sins of which they may be guilty; adults who receive baptism with repentance are freed from their past sins. As the priest announces at the eighth day removal of the baptismal garments, "you have been baptized, enlightened, chrismated, sanctified and cleansed in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit!"

The early Church recognized that believers might fall into serious sin, particularly when threatened with imprisonment and death during the Roman persecution of Christians. It began using its ability to forgive sin in a new way. Those guilty of serious sin would be reconciled to the Church after confessing their sin and undergoing a period of repentance – what came to be called the **Mystery of Repentance**.

Today we express repentance and experience the forgiveness of sins through the Church in a number of ways:

Daily prayer of repentance – For a member of Christ’s Body, the Church, prayer is the most basic way to experience God’s forgiveness. As St John of Kronstadt said, “Often during the day I have been a great sinner, and at night, after prayer, I have gone to rest justified and whiter than snow by the grace of the Holy Spirit, with the deepest peace and joy in my heart” (*My Life in Christ*, Part 1).

Regular Self-Reflection – Periodic, even daily self-examination helps us to see the direction of our lives. Our entire existence should be lived in the light of the Holy Spirit. We examine our actions, thoughts and feelings, then, not to condemn ourselves but to affirm our true selves in Christ who has taught us to live for God’s glory.

A Relationship with a Confessor/Spiritual Father – Each person is in a different place in his or her journey. We may on occasion find thoughts in the Scriptures or the Fathers that touch our hearts, but finding someone who knows you and knows the ways of Holy Tradition is like taking a giant step in the Christian life. The fullest dimension of spiritual guidance involves sharing our thoughts and yearnings, not just our sins with this spiritual guide.

Receiving the Eucharist – Several times during the Divine Liturgy we are reminded that the Eucharist is given to us “for the remission of sins.” To receive this gift we must approach “discerning the Body,” as St Paul says: sensing the depth of this Mystery and our unworthiness to take part in it. And so before receiving we say the prayer “I believe, Lord, and profess” specifically asking for the pardon of our offences – the deliberate and the indeliberate, whether committed knowingly or inadvertently – so that we may receive the remission of sins and eternal life in this mystery.

Observing the Church’s Fasts - The Fasts are another liturgical expression of repentance. Rearranging our lives in obedience to the Church’s weekly and seasonal fasts is a most practical way of affirming our commitment to life in Christ, a daily reminder that “*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*” (Mt 4:4).

The Mystery of Confession – As we have seen, Confession was at first considered a “second baptism,” a starting over in the Christian life, when a person had committed serious sin. Over the centuries it became more widely used and is considered appropriate today whenever a person feels the need for it, particularly:

- When a serious sin has been committed;
- When a habitual sin has overwhelmed the Christian;
- When a Christian has stopped growing spiritually and needs a reorientation of priorities.

Confession, along with prayer and fasting is also a customary preparation for important spiritual experiences such as receiving the Eucharist or other mysteries and observing the Great Feasts of the Church year as a part of the Christian's ongoing repentance. Thus we read in the *Didache* (late first or early second century), "On the Lord's Day come together and break bread ... having confessed your transgressions that your sacrifice may be pure."

No "Cheap Forgiveness"

Some people think that for us to obtain forgiveness we simply need to say a prescribed prayer or undergo a stipulated rite without any real connection to one's heart. Obtaining God's forgiveness is not the religious equivalent of paying a traffic ticket. Our sin is forgiven only when two conditions are met.

The first condition is that we extend to those who may have hurt us the same forgiveness we seek to receive from God. We are reminded of this each time we recite the Lord's Prayer: "forgive us...as we forgive." If this is not clear enough we also have the Lord's caution, "*For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*" (Mt 6:14, 15).

The second condition is that we do something about our sin. This may mean that we make some kind of restitution: return stolen property, try to rebuild another's reputation which we have harmed, or the like. It may mean that we take steps to avoid repeating the same kind of offence in the future, particularly if our sin is habitual like indulging in gossip or unseemly talk. As the nineteenth century Greek Orthodox saint, Cosmas the Aetolian, once remarked: "Even if every spiritual father, patriarch, and hierarch, with all the people forgive you, you are unforgiven if you don't repent in action."

To repent in action does not simply mean resolving not to sin again. Like New Year's resolutions, such declarations rarely are kept for long. We simply do not have the power to keep ourselves from sin. Repenting in action means, first of all, turning to God in prayer to be delivered from our sin. We are counseled to repeat continually the prayer of the tax collector, "O God, be merciful to me a sinner." Only God, who forgives us when we sin, can prevent us from falling into sin... and that only when we continually desire Him to do so. The sincerity of our prayer to be delivered from sin is shown by how often we are moved to utter it.

Seventh Sunday of St Matthew

The Hidden Messiah (Mt 9:27-35)

THE NINTH CHAPTER of St Matthew's Gospel records several miracles in succession: the healing of a paralytic, of the ruler's daughter, of a woman with a flow of blood, two blind men and a mute man. Only in the case of the two blind men do we find that the Lord Jesus "...*sternly warned them, saying, 'See that no one knows it'*" (Mt 9:30). Why did the Lord want these two to keep quiet while not demanding that the paralytic and the others do the same?

The key seems to be in the way the blind men approached Jesus. Unlike the others healed in this chapter, the blind men called out to Him, “*Son of David, have mercy on us!*” (v. 27) They accorded Him the messianic title “Son of David.” But was Jesus ready to be acclaimed as Messiah at this stage of His life?

What Kind of Messiah?

Many Jewish people at the time of Christ were looking for the Messiah, God’s “Anointed One”. Most looked for a royal warrior – another David – who would drive out the Romans from the Holy Land and restore the power of Israel in the region. This political Messiah would usher in a period of prosperity and power for the people of Israel.

Others in that period thought that the Messiah would restore the old priestly line and the temple rites used before the exile of the Israelites in Babylon. He would be a priestly Messiah, renewing the temple and restoring the original spirit of its liturgy.

The Lord Jesus had a very different view of His role. He was not to be an earthly king; He never urged political dissent or encouraged revolt against Roman rule. As He was to tell Pilate, “*My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here*” (Jn 18:36).

Neither did the Lord Jesus attempt to restore the usages of Solomon’s temple. He would fulfill the entire Old Covenant in Himself, becoming the new temple, the house of God on earth. It was with this in mind that the Lord told the Jews on driving away the money-changers, “*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*’ Then the Jews said, ‘*It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?*’ But He was speaking of the temple of His body. Therefore, when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this to them; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said” (Jn 2:19-22).

The “Messianic Secret”

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, biblical commentators began using the term “Messianic secret” to describe Jesus’ reluctance to be described as Messiah. Had Jesus allowed Himself to be proclaimed “Messiah” while not fulfilling His hearers’ this-worldly expectations, He would have made it impossible for anyone to come to believe in Him. He would have given them the right word, but the wrong idea. He might also have come to the attention of the religious and political authorities before He had developed followers nurtured to any degree with His vision of the Kingdom of God.

Rather we see Jesus beginning a long process of choosing disciples and allowing them to discover for themselves that He was God’s Anointed. Jesus never claimed the title of Messiah for Himself and only hinted at it among those most committed to the Kingdom of God. Thus we are told: “*...when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, ‘Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk;*

the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me” (Mt 11:2-6). Jesus leaves John and his followers to draw their own conclusions.

Some people perceived that Jesus was more than just a teacher. When two of John’s disciples went after Jesus, He turned and asked *“What do you seek?”* The tongue-tied Andrew could only say, *“Where are you staying?”* But after spending the day with Jesus, Andrew would tell his brother Simon, *“We have found the Messiah”* (Jn 1:41).

The Gospels record the disciples’ slow process of learning what the Lord Jesus’ mission actually was. At times they seemed no more attuned to Jesus’ teaching than were the crowds. When Jesus taught the importance of inner purity rather than the ritual purity of “clean” and “unclean” foods, the disciples found it hard to accept. *“Are you thus without understanding also?”* Jesus replied (Mk 7:18).

While the Gospels show how gradually the disciples grew to appreciate Jesus as the Messiah, they also note that others had no hesitation in proclaiming His true identity. The demons, as bodiless powers, understood from the start just who Jesus was. The spirit which Jesus expelled in Capernaum affirmed, *“I know who You are – the Holy One of God”* (Mk 1:24). The Gergasene demoniacs protested, *“What have we to do with You, Jesus, Son of God?”* (Mt 8:29). Jesus silenced them all and *“...did not allow them to speak, for they knew that He was the Christ”* (Lk 4:41).

Neither Power Nor Glory

The disciples found it hard to think of God’s kingdom except in terms of power. When the Lord began preparing His disciples to see that the Messiah must suffer, *“Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, ‘Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!’ But He turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men’”* (Mt 16:22-23). Later in Jesus’ ministry – despite several previous warnings that the Messiah must suffer – the Lord reiterated His teaching (Lk 9:44-48): *“‘Let these words sink down into your ears, for the Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of men.’ But they did not understand this saying, and it was hidden from them so that they did not perceive it; and they were afraid to ask Him about this saying.*

“Then a dispute arose among them as to which of them would be greatest. And Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart, took a little child and set him by Him, and said to them, ‘Whoever receives this little child in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me. For he who is least among you all will be great.’”

Despite all this, when Samaritans refuse to allow Jesus entry into their village, the disciples’ reaction still shows their lack of understanding. They had yet to comprehend the ways of God’s kingdom. *“And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, ‘Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?’ But He turned and rebuked them, and said, ‘You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them’”* (Lk 9:54-56).

Even the experience of the resurrection was not sufficient to turn the disciples from their pursuit of power. When they were all gathered in Jerusalem with the risen Christ, the Book of Acts relates, "... they asked Him, saying, 'Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?' And He said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth'" (Acts 1:6-8). It would only be by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that the first Church came to understand the real mission of the Messiah.

Eighth Sunday of St Matthew

A Table in the Wilderness (Mt 14:14-22)

THE MIRACULOUS FEEDING OF 5000 with five loaves and two fish is reported in each of the four Gospels. In both the earliest and latest Gospels there is an unusual unanimity in the details they relate: more than most other Gospel narratives, including the resurrection. This reflects the great importance which the first Christians attached to this narrative. In it they saw the Lord Jesus connected to the great movements of God in the past, the present and the future.

The Past: the Exodus from Egypt

As is well known, the Gospel of Matthew was written for Jewish believers who were convinced that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. They also saw many Old Testament events as "types," pointing to New Testament events which fulfill and surpass the Old in God's plan for our salvation. The early Church Fathers in the Greek and Latin worlds had the same vision. Thus St. Cyril of Alexandria would write, "All that is written about the blessed Moses we affirm to be an icon and a type of that salvation which comes in Christ" (*Glaphyra [Illumination] on Exodus*, 1.3).

The feeding of the 5000 was one such event, in which Christ's actions reflect that He is the New Moses and more: the One who worked through Moses on behalf of the children of Israel. Just as the exodus from Egypt begins with Pharaoh oppressing the Israelites, the Gospel story begins with Herod's murder of John the Baptist. While Pharaoh oppresses the Israelites because they were so numerous, Herod kills John because of his moral stance.

Hearing about John's death, Jesus goes apart, to "*a deserted place*" (Mt 14:13). Jesus, His disciples and the people who came to Him from the cities were in a "desert" just as Moses, his soldiers, and the crowd were in Sinai.

When the Israelites were in the desert with Moses God fed them with manna and quail, which Psalm 78:24 calls "*the bread of heaven.*" While the Galileans were in the wilderness with Jesus, He himself fed them with bread and fish.

The feeding of the Israelites in Sinai was connected to their passage through the Red Sea “*on dry ground*” (Ex 14:23 et al.). The feeding of the 5000 is connected to the miracle of Jesus “*walking on the sea*” (Mt 14:25) which follows immediately. While the Israelites walked on the ground exposed by the parting of the sea, Jesus walks on the sea itself.

The Present: Jesus Nourishes the Church

This event marks the first time in the Gospel that the whole crowd will be invited to eat together with Christ, showing His desire to gather all His followers around a common table with Him. St Hilary of Poitiers noted that the first Church – those who responded to the preaching of Peter – numbered about 5000 men (Acts 4:4). The 5000 fed in the wilderness point to those 5000 who were the first to be nourished by the presence of Christ in His Church.

On that “table” in the wilderness was bread and fish. We recall that, for Christians during the Roman persecutions, the fish was a code-sign for Christ. The letters of the Greek word for fish – *ichthys* – were an anagram for the profession of faith, “Jesus Christ Son of God, Savior.” The bread – which Jesus “*took...blessed...and broke*” (Mt 14: 19) – was an “icon” for the early Christians of the Eucharist in which we receive the Son of God our Savior, the Bread of life.

Thus the feeding of the 5000 points to the Church and its communal meal, the Eucharist.

The Future: the Messianic Banquet

Earlier in Matthew’s Gospel we see Jesus pointing to the future: “*I say to you that many will come from east and west and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven*” (Mt 8:11). He was alluding to the idea of the Messianic Banquet, the great feast that represented for Jews that communion with God, which the coming of the Messiah would bring about.

This feast is described in Isaiah 25:6-9 in terms which make us think of the feeding of the 5000: “*And in this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all people a feast of choice pieces, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of well-refined wines on the lees. And He will destroy on this mountain the surface of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces; the rebuke of His people He will take away from all the earth; for the LORD has spoken. And it will be said in that day: ‘Behold, this is our God; we have waited for Him, and He will save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for Him; we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation.’”* The Messiah would come and restore Israel. The scattered Jews of the world would be drawn back to their homeland and they would all sit down to a great meal of celebration. How could the first Jewish believers in Christ not have thought of this banquet when reflecting on the feeding of the 5000?

When Jesus spoke of many “*coming from east and west,*” He was adding a new note to the concept of this banquet: it would be open to Gentiles and many “*sons of the kingdom*” would be

excluded. The kingdom of God – and this, the great feast of the kingdom – would feature Jews and Gentiles eating together (an act forbidden in Jewish tradition). And so in Mt 15:30-38 we find Jesus' miracle repeated, after He heals the Canaanite woman in the area of Tyre and Sidon. But this time it is 4000 Gentiles who were fed. The feeding of these multitudes – Jews and Gentiles – would proclaim to believing Jews that the time of the Messiah had arrived.

In Our Worship

Byzantine worship includes several allusions to the feeding of the multitudes. In the Divine Liturgy it is prescribed that five loaves be used to prepare the oblation. The Lamb is cut from one of them; the others are used to provide the particles representing the Theotokos and the saints, and the living and the dead for whom we pray. Once again the Church is fed from five loaves.

Five loaves are also used in the rite of *artoklasia* (breaking of the bread) celebrated on major feasts. The priest prays, "O Lord Jesus Christ our God, who blessed the five loaves in the wilderness and thus sustained five thousand men, bless these loaves, along with this wheat, wine and oil, and multiply them in this holy city and for Your whole world, and sanctify the faithful who partake of them..." Traditionally in some Churches many other loaves would be provided to feed the needy while the people sing, "*Rich men have turned poor and gone hungry, but they that seek the Lord shall not be deprived of any good thing.*" Thus the Messianic banquet and the soup kitchen have something in common: both point to the Lord as the ultimate and unfailing nourisher of all mankind.

Ninth Sunday of St Matthew

Who Is Able to Walk on the Sea? (Mt 14:22-34)

THE STORY OF CHRIST coming to His disciples in the midst of the sea is found in all the Gospels except for Luke. The version in Matthew, however, is the only one containing the disciples' confession: "*Truly You are the Son of God!*" (Mt 14:33).

John describes the scene in a much simpler way: "*...they saw Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near the boat and they were afraid. But He said to them, 'It is I; do not be afraid.' Then they willingly received Him into the boat...*" (Jn 6:19-21).

Mark's version ends with these words: "*They were greatly amazed in themselves beyond measure and marveled for they had not understood about the loaves, because their heart was hardened*" (Mk 6:51-52).

Feeding the Multitude

In each of the Gospels the story of Christ in the sea follows the report of how He fed the five thousand from a few loaves of bread and two fish. Both of these incidents came to be understood as pointing to the divinity of Christ.

In John's Gospel Jesus confronts the crowd which had followed Him around the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum: "*You seek me, not because you saw the signs but because you ate the loaves and were filled. Do not labor for the food which perishes but for the food which endures to everlasting life which the Son of Man will give you because God the Father has set His seal on Him*" (Jn 6:26-27).

The people, John suggests, followed Jesus to Capernaum looking for another meal. Jesus' closest followers, Mark affirms, were not much better. The first disciples "*did not understand about the loaves*" either. They needed another push to help them see just Who was in their midst.

By the time the Gospels were written, however, Christ had risen from the dead. "*Beginning with Moses and the Prophets He had expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself*" (Lk 24:27). The disciples had received the Holy Spirit and began to speak of Jesus in terms reminiscent of God's dealings with the Jews in the Old Testament. The Gospel pictures of Christ feeding the multitude and walking on the water were drawn with specific Old Testament allusions in mind.

Christ feeding the multitude with bread and fish is described in terms reminiscent of God feeding the Israelites with manna during the exodus from Egypt. Jesus' words to Philip, "*Where shall we buy bread that these may eat?*" seemed to echo Moses' words, "*Where can I get meat to give to all this people?*" (Num 11:13) Jesus' action answered for the believers the response of God to Moses, "*Is this beyond the Lord's reach?*" (Num 11:23).

The Gospel writers had come to see the One who nourished the Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai as the same One who nourished their descendants on the hillside. But they described the Old Testament feeding with manna as surpassed by the act of the incarnate Christ. While the Old Testament says that each Israelite was allowed only one omer (c. 3½ liters) of manna, for example, those receiving the bread and fish could eat "*as much as they wanted*" (Jn 6:11). While the manna would spoil if not immediately consumed, the bread which Christ gives produces twelve baskets of leftovers. The message would be clear to Jewish believers: Christ is the One who fed Israel in the wilderness and now outdoes what He did in the past!

Walking on Water

The image of Christ walking on the sea is also rooted in the Old Testament which contains several references to walking on water. The fifth-century disciple of St Jerome, Chromatius, writes that God is the One who walked on water in the Scriptures and He is the One who walks on water today:

“Who was able to walk on the sea if not the Creator of the universe? He, indeed, about whom the Holy Spirit and spoken long ago through blessed Job: ‘*He alone stretched out the heavens and walked on the sea as well as the earth*’ [Jb 9:8].

“Solomon spoke about Him in the person of Wisdom: ‘*I dwelt in the highest places and my throne was in a pillar of cloud. I orbited the heavenly sphere alone and walked on the waves of the sea*’ [Sir 24:4-5]

“David likewise declared in his psalm: ‘*O God, Your way was through the sea, Your path through the great waters*’ [Ps76:19, LXX]...

“What is more evident than this testimony? What is more clear? It points to Him walking on the water as well as on the ground. This is God’s only begotten Son, who long ago according to the will of the Father stretched out the heavens and at the time of Moses in a pillar of cloud showed the people a way to follow” (*Tractate on Matthew* 52,2).

Both the feeding of the multitude and the walking on water show Christ acting as only God had acted in the history of Israel.

The Confession of Peter

Only in Matthew’s narrative do we read of Peter’s attempting to walk on the water. Peter was an experienced fisherman by trade; presumably he knew how to handle himself in water. In any event Jesus’ rescue of Peter prompts the others in the boat to affirm, “*Truly You are the Son of God*” (Mt 14:33).

The Gospel of Matthew is so crafted that its climax is Peter’s own confession of faith two chapters later: Jesus said to the disciples, “*Who do you say that I am?*” *Simon Peter answered and said, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’*” (Mt 16:15-16). Jesus responds with the praise of Peter and his faith, “*on this rock I will build my church*” (v.18). What was so special about Peter’s confession if the disciples in the boat had previously said the same thing?

Although most English-language Bibles translate both confessions the same, there is a significant difference in the original Greek. While Peter says, *Su ei o Xristos o uios tou theou* (“You are the Christ, the Son of God”), the disciples in the boat say, *alithos theou uios ei*, without the definite article *o*. This is perhaps better translated as “Truly you are a son of God.” The disciples confess Jesus as a holy one, as one beloved of God. But Peter confesses Christ’s unique sonship, which would indeed be the cornerstone of the Christian Church’s faith.

A Spiritual Interpretation

The fourth-century Bishop of Poitiers, St Hilary, lived during the major theological controversies on the Trinity and the Incarnation which shook the Church. He saw this event as a preview of the Lord's Second Coming which would bring an end to these and any tribulations affecting the Church on earth:

“Once [Jesus] got into the vessel, the wind and the sea calmed down. After His return in eternal splendor, peace and tranquility are in store for the Church. With His arrival made manifest, all people will exclaim with great wonder, ‘Truly You are the Son of God.’ Everyone will then declare absolutely and publicly that the Son of God has restored peace to the Church, not in physical lowliness but in heavenly glory.”

Tenth Sunday of St Matthew

Mustard Seed Faith (Mt 17:14-23)

THE HEALING OF AN EPILEPTIC described in Matthew 17:14-21 took place late in Christ's public ministry. One indication is that the very next verses speak of Christ warning His disciples about His coming Passion (vv. 22-23). It was only as the time of His earthly ministry was drawing to a close that He began insisting on what was about to happen to Him.

Another sign that this healing took place late in Christ's earthly ministry is the reaction of His disciples. Their question, *“Why could we not cast it out?”* (v. 19), shows that they had already been healing the sick and exorcizing evil powers in Christ's name. As we read earlier in Matthew's Gospel, Christ had already given them this power: *“And when He had called His twelve disciples to Him, He gave them power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease...Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give”* (Mt 10:1, 8).

Mustard Seed Faith

Despite all this, we find the apostles powerless here. Furthermore Christ says that they could not heal this epileptic *“because of your unbelief”* (v. 20). Granted that the Gospels show how uncertain the disciples' faith actually was, even after the resurrection. It was only when they received the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost that they became bold in their proclamation of Christ. Then the sureness of their faith was matched by the hardships they endured and by the signs and wonders they freely performed. At this point, however, the apostles had faith, but it was not extraordinary.

Every believer is by definition a person of faith but not every believer has the kind of unwavering faith the Lord describes in Mt 17:20 – *“...assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”* This kind of faith – some commentators call it “deep faith” – is clearly not common, but it does exist in the Church to witness the truth of the Lord's words.

This is why, in 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, St Paul identifies a number of particular gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit, among them healings, miracles, prophecy... and faith. This may strike us as odd. Working miracles is clearly a gift given to some, not to all, but also, it seems, is “mustard seed” faith.

Countless examples of extraordinary faith have been recorded both in the Scriptures and in the annals of the saints. Although we may not see them ourselves, there are numerous examples of “mustard seed” faith in our own day. Two such instances are described here as a reminder that Christ’s idea of “mustard seed” faith is not an exaggeration.

“Moving Mountains” in Siberia

Imprisoned in a Soviet work camp during the 1940s and 50s, Father Arseny, a Russian Orthodox priest, intervened in a fight to help a young prisoner named Alexei. For “troublemaking,” he and Alexei were both sentenced to 48 hours in an unheated cell where the floor and walls were covered with sheets of metal. Outside it was -22°F. They would probably freeze to death within a few hours.

Alexei was sure they were going to die, but Father Arseny had a different view. “We are here all alone, Alexei; for two days no one will come. We will pray. For the first time God has allowed us to pray aloud in this camp, with our full voice. We will pray and the rest is God's will!”

As Fr Arseny’s biographer would later tell it, “The cold had taken Alexei completely; his entire body was numb. But suddenly the cell, the cold, the numbness of his whole body, his pain, and his fear had disappeared. Father Arseny's voice filled the cell, but was it a cell? Alexei turned to Father Arseny and was stunned. Everything around had been transformed. An awful thought came: ‘I am losing my mind, this is the end, I am dying.’”

“The cell had grown wider, the ray of moonlight had disappeared. There was a bright light and Father Arseny, dressed in brilliant white vestments, his hands lifted up, was praying aloud. The clothing on Father Arseny was the same as on the priest Alexei had once seen in church. Alexei saw with surprise that there were two men assisting Father Arseny. Both were dressed in the same bright vestments and both shone with an indefinable white light. Alexei did not see their faces, but sensed that they were beautiful.

“How much time had passed he did not know, but Father Arseny turned to him and said, ‘Go, Alyosha! Lie down, you are tired. I will keep praying; you will hear me.’ Alexei lay down on the metal-covered floor, closed his eyes, and kept on praying. The words of prayer filled his whole being. All was peaceful and warm. It was important not to forget these words, to remember them all his life.

“Father Arseny prayed, and the two others in bright garments prayed with him and served him. The only things that remained in Alexei's memory were the words of the prayer, a warming and joyful light, Father Arseny praying, the two others in clothes of light, and an enormous, incomparable feeling of inner renewing warmth.

“Somebody struck the door, the frozen lock squealed, and voices could be heard from the outside of the cell. Alexei opened his eyes. Father Arseny was still praying. The two in garments of light

blessed him and Alexei and slowly left. The blinding light was fading and the cell at last became dark and, as before, cold and gloomy.

“Get up, Alexei! They have come for us,’ said Father Arseny. [*Two days had passed. One of the party, a prison doctor was astounded.*] ‘Amazing! How could they have survived? It’s true, though; they’re warm.’ The doctor walked into the cell, looked around it, and asked, ‘What kept you warm?’

“Our faith in God, and prayer,’ Father Arseny answered...’

“The barracks met them as if they had risen from the dead. Everyone asked, ‘What saved you?’ They both answered, ‘God saved us.’” (*Father Arseny, 1893-1973: Priest, Prisoner, Spiritual Father* by his spiritual son, Alexander)

“Moving Mountains” in the Ivory Coast

The faith of ordinary people is often helped by that of extraordinary believers, the saints. After buying her sons, Christian and Elie el-Chartouny, a new car, their mother took them to the Maronite church in Abidjan for the Divine Liturgy on May 8, the birthday of St. Charbel. However, the boys decided to skip the Liturgy and go for a drive instead. Their mother knelt in front of Saint Charbel’s icon, asking him to protect them and bring them back safe.

At about 11:30 p.m. the woman heard her sons when they came back home; relieved, she went to sleep. When she woke up in the morning, she found the boys on the balcony, still awake, and the new car wrecked. The boys told her that they were driving too fast and their car went off the road, hitting an electrical post 10 km away from home. At that moment, an old monk showed up, but they didn’t see his face. He came up to the car and pulled it away from the post! He tied a rope to it and pulled it extremely fast, crossing those 10 km in two minutes. Stopping the car in front of their house, he removed the rope and disappeared. The mother’s prayer and Saint Charbel’s intervention had saved the boys.

Unwavering faith can move mountains, cars or freezing cold. Just so you know.

A Prayer of Faith

WHEN THE LORD’S DISCIPLES ASKED why they could not cast out the demon from the epileptic in today’s Gospel reading, He responded, “*Because of your unbelief*” (Mt 17:20). This statement raises several questions, such as the following, which are answered by referring to other Scripture passages:

Were the Disciples Without Faith?

The Gospels show us glimpses of the apostles’ mindset during the Lord’s public ministry, during His passion, after His resurrection and as a result of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon them. At the beginning of Christ’s preaching, they are depicted as devout Jews who were drawn to Him, “*astonished at His teaching, for His word was with authority*” (Lk 4:32) and amazed at the signs He worked. Incidents during the next three years show that their faith in Him was limited, but

developing. Even after witnessing numerous signs, including the Transfiguration on Mt Tabor, the leading disciples were still jockeying for position (see Lk 9: 46-48), jealous of competition (see Lk 9: 49-50), and seeking revenge on hostile Samaritans (see Lk 9: 51-55). When James and John asked Jesus “*Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?*” But He turned and rebuked them and said, “*You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them*” (vv. 54, 55).

The Gospels portray the disciples as falling asleep when the Lord asked them to keep watch, fleeing when He was arrested, and doubting the myrrhbearers’ report of His resurrection. It was only when He “*opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures*” (Lk 24:45) and when they received the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost that they became His faith-filled witnesses to the ends of the earth.

Prayer, the Art of Believing

To many people, faith is simply agreeing that certain concepts are true: there is a God, Jesus is His Son, Jesus saves, and the like. In his general epistle, St James, the Lord’s Brother, puts such an idea to rest in no uncertain terms: “*You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!*” (Jas 2: 19). Faith that stays in the mind is not faith at all. Faith must prove itself in the actions it inspires.

In Matthew’s telling of this miracle, Jesus privately explains what He means by unbelief: faith must show itself in prayer and fasting (see Mt 17:19-21). Prayer is faith that shows itself in humble supplication; evidence that we actually do put our trust in God. Fasting is prayer that is more than just talk.

Many of us frequently assure people of our prayers for their intentions. This may mean little more than putting names on a prayer list. “Prayer and fasting” suggests intense prayer, as does the amount of time or the number of prostrations accompanying our prayer. Enlisting others to prayer with us for such-and-such a result is another example of intense prayer, particularly before the age of social media.

The Truest Prayer

The Gospels frequently tell us that the Lord went off by Himself to pray. The content of His prayer is only reported once: His sorrowful prayer to the Father in the garden after the Last Supper (see Mt 26; Mk 14; and Lk 22). In Matthew’s Gospel we are told that Jesus “... *fell on His face, and prayed, saying, ‘O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will’ ... Again, a second time, He went away and prayed, saying, ‘O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done’*” (Mt 26:39-42). The “cup” of which He spoke was, of course, the suffering He was about to undergo. He was not eager to undergo it, but He submitted it, like all things, to the will of His Father.

“What prayer could be more true before God the Father than that which the Son, who is Truth, uttered with His own lips?” This is Saint John Chrysostom’s comment: for our prayer to be true, it should always include the act of submission to God’s will as expressed in Christ’s own prayer.

This should hardly surprise us, as these same words – “*Your will be done*” – are at the heart of the Lord’s Prayer which we say so often. This prayer teaches us what to ask for, according to Christ. After teaching us to pray that God be glorified and His kingdom come, He continues, “*Your will be done.*”

While we might prefer to skip this whole first part of the Prayer and focus on “give us...,” that is not Christ’s way. Rather He teaches us by word and example to offer our requests only in submission to the Father’s will.

One Last Condition

The Epistle of St James gives us one last condition for a successful “prayer of faith.” After describing how to pray for and anoint the sick, he writes: “*The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much*” (Jas 5:16). He then cites the Prophet Elias as an example of what he means by a righteous man!

Elias was revered by the Jews – and is revered that way in our Church as well – as the greatest of the prophets. If we need to be as righteous as Elias to pray for the sick, then we should give up all hope of effective prayer! Fortunately, our prayers can always be accompanied by those of “other Eliases” – the saints, those proven intercessors before God.

Since the apostolic era, healing miracles have been recorded in connection with saints, either while they were alive, or through their relics and their prayers after death. Today such healings can be medically verified as never before, giving an impartial testimony to the effective prayers of the truly righteous.

In 1949 construction worker Giovanni Savino was working at the friary where Roman Catholic ascetic Padre Pio lived. For three days Padre Pio unaccountably assured Giovanni of his prayers: “*Courage, Giovanni, I'm praying to the Lord that you might not be killed.*” On the third day Giovanni was seriously injured while attempting to dynamite a boulder. He was taken to a hospital here it was found that his face had been severely damaged, shrapnel from the blast had penetrated the cornea of his left eye and his right eye was found to be completely destroyed.

For the next three days Padre Pio and his parishioners prayed for Giovanni. He was heard to say, “Lord, I offer You one of my eyes for Giovanni, because he's the father of a family.”

The next morning Giovanni sensed that someone was standing near his bed. He believed it was Padre Pio. Later that morning the ophthalmologist came to examine Giovanni Savino's left eye. When the doctor took the bandages off Giovanni immediately said “*I can see you!*” After further examination, it was clear that Savino was blind in the eye from which the shrapnel had been removed, but he was seeing perfectly from the eye that had been shattered to a bloody jelly. Completely astounded, the ophthalmologist, who up to that time had been an atheist, exclaimed, “Now I too believe, because this has happened right before me.”

Similar healings in the lives of Maronite St Charbel Makhlouf, Greek Orthodox St Nectarios of Pentapoulos, and the Russian Orthodox Archbishop of San Francisco, St John Maximovich, attest that the prayer of the righteous is truly effective.

Eleventh Sunday of St Matthew

70x7 = Infinity (Mt 18:23-35)

WHAT IS THE HARDEST THING to accept in Christianity? Is it the doctrine of the Trinity? The idea that God became man? Or that the Eucharist is the body and blood of Christ? While these teachings may meet with obstacles in our minds, the hardest thing for us to accept in practice is the absolute need to forgive others.

In our broken humanity we are much more at home with seeking vengeance. We are often more comfortable with the pre-Christian vision of a vengeful God: *“And the LORD said to him, ‘Therefore, whoever kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold’* (Gen 4:15).

The Torah enshrined the concept of vengeance in its laws concerning violence: *“But if any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe”* (Ex 21:23-25). While modern law is not as demanding, it still endorses the idea of vengeance, clothed in modern dress as “Justice” and “Closure” (which often comes down to a question of money). Perhaps the best comment on this principle is by the Lebanese author Kahlil Gibran, “An eye for an eye, and the whole world would be blind.”

Forgiveness: the Heart of the Gospel

Contemporary Catholic writer Scott Hurd describes the Gospel ideal of forgiveness as “...both the central idea of Christianity, and an assault on the conventional human understanding of justice.” It is an “assault” because it challenges the very nature of the world’s way of handling things. It is the heart of our faith because it is the basic attitude of God toward us and the model of how we can act as the images of God.

“Yours it is to show mercy...” we say to God in many prayers, because He is by nature the forgiving Father, the One who runs to welcome home His prodigal children after they stray. God incarnate in Jesus Christ expresses this forgiveness in His humanity when He prayed for His killers, *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do”* (Lk 23:34). And so it is in imitation of God that His disciple, the Protomartyr St Stephen, prayed for those who delivered him to death: *“And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not charge them with this sin.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep”* (Acts 7:59-60).

That forgiveness is required, not an option, in the Christian life we see from the Lord's words in the Sermon on the Mount. Christ would come back to this theme again and again, doubtlessly more often than the Gospels record:

- *“Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you”* (Lk 6:37-38).
- *“Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him”* (Lk 17:3-4).

Forgiveness is particularly necessary when we presume to pray:

- *“And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.”* (Mk 11:25-26).

It is especially necessary when we look to make an oblation:

- *“Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift”* (Mt 5:23-24).

The kiss of peace at the Eucharist of all the historic Churches is a rite based on this requirement of the Lord.

The Parable of the Unjust Debtor

In story form this passage, unique to Matthew, repeats the Lord's fundamental teaching that forgiving others is a prerequisite for being forgiven by God.

The call for the godly-minded to forgive others was already common in late Judaism, but in a limited way. Thus the second century rabbinic scholar Issi ben Judah wrote, “If a man commits an offence once, they forgive him; if he commits an offence a second time, they forgive him; if he commits an offence a third time, they forgive him; the fourth time they do not forgive.” Rabbi Yossi bar Hanina, writing in the second half of the third century AD counsels, “He who begs forgiveness from his neighbor must not do so more than three times.”

By this standard Peter was being downright generous when he suggested forgiving seven times as the new standard. Christ replies by turning around Lamech's rule of vengeance (*“If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, Then Lamech seventy-sevenfold”* – Gen 4:24). Now, Christ says, consider forgiving others seventy times seven, a number meaning “without limit.”

St John Chrysostom saw a particularly damning indictment of the tendency to hold grudges or seek vengeance in this parable. Pointing to the fate of the unforgiving servant, Christ says, “*So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses*” (Mt 18:35). Chrysostom offers this interpretation: “Note that He did not say ‘your Father’ but ‘my Father’ for it is not proper for God to be called the Father of one who is so wicked and malicious” (*Homily on Matthew 61, 4*).

These harsh words go unheard by many in the Church who hold grudges, often for many years. People often feel that broken relationships have nothing to do with our faith. In reality our unwillingness to forgive says that we think God is a sucker for being so compassionate: we know better. As Mother Teresa of Calcutta once said, the rift is with more than our relative or neighbor. “For you see, in the end, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.”

Imitating the Father of Compassion

THERE ARE MANY DIFFERENCES between the three world religions originating in the Middle East (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). One thing which they all share is the emphasis on God as Compassionate. In the biblical story of Moses, for example, God reveals Himself to the prophet in these words: “*The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness*” (Ex 34:6).

The prophets of Israel continually returned to this theme, adding a new dimension. They saw compassion as a parental trait, paving the way for the Lord Jesus’ description of God as our Father.

In His parables the Lord often returned to themes of compassion. In the parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt 18:23-35) the king, an image of God, is described as “*moved with compassion*” (Mt 18:27), in contrast to his servant who shows no compassion to his fellow. The father of the prodigal son, is described, on the bedraggled boy’s return, as “*filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him*” (Lk 15:20).

The Gospels describe Christ as “deeply moved” with compassion by the death of the widow’s son in Nain (Lk 7: 11-17), and of his friend Lazarus in Bethany (Jn 11). When recording the miraculous feeding of the four thousand, Mark tells us “*Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called His disciples to Him and said, ‘I have compassion for these people...’*” (Mk 8:1, 2). In each case He did something concrete in response.

In the Church God was proclaimed from the beginning as “*the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort*” (2 Cor 1:3). In our prayers today we regularly address God as “the only Compassionate One,” in contrast to the evident lack of that quality in our own lives.

What Is Compassion?

When the Gospels describe Christ as being “*deeply moved*” or being “*moved with compassion,*” they use a word which points to the heart of that quality. A literal translation of the Greek term would be “to be moved from the bowels.” (i.e. to feel deeply). Compassion is at the other end of the spectrum from the casual “I’m sorry” that people fling out at any unpleasant circumstance. Compassion is a “gut feeling” which we experience when we allow ourselves to be moved by the suffering of others.

People often equate compassion with sympathy, but true compassion is more. A person may express sympathy in response to sorrow with kindness and concern, then move on with their own lives. True compassion, on the other hand, includes expressions of care and concern, but moves on to concrete action. The compassionate person involves himself in the suffering of the other. Unlike the priest or the Levite in the parable, the Good Samaritan directly engages himself in the troubles of the man who was a victim to robbers and does not leave him until the man has recovered.

The compassionate Samaritan, like the compassionate king in Mt 18 is an icon of God. He it is who involves Himself in the sufferings of the human race to such an extent that He sends His Son and Word to share in their suffering. This Word “*...did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage; rather, He made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death — even death on a cross!*” (Phil 2:6-8).

Compassion as getting involved is put forward to us as a way of being godlike: “*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful*” (Lk 6:36). God is, as we have seen, “*the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort*” (2 Cor 1:3). St Paul goes on to say that God is compassionate to us “*... so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God*” (2 Cor 1:3, 4). Reflecting on how God has extended His compassion to us, should energize us into extending compassion to others.

Radical Compassion

Sometimes opportunities for compassion present themselves in daily life, such as taking in the child of a hospitalized neighbor. At other times people have been led to extend compassion in a more radical way. Perhaps no one in our society has personified this degree of compassion more than the late Servant of God Dorothy Day, the twentieth century convert extolled by Pope Francis as one of four “inspiring” Americans in his 2015 address to the US Congress. Foundress of the Catholic Worker movement during the Great Depression, Dorothy Day described one of her early ventures in these heart-rending words, revealing the depth of her compassion: “Every morning about four hundred men come to Mott Street to be fed. The radio is cheerful, the smell of coffee is a good smell, the air of the morning is fresh and not too cold, but my heart bleeds as I pass the lines of men in front of the store which is our headquarters...It is hard to say, matter-of-factly and cheerfully, 'Good morning.' ...One felt more like taking their hands and saying, 'Forgive us -- let us forgive each other! All of us who are more comfortable, who have a place to sleep, three meals a day, work to do -- we are responsible

for your condition. We are guilty of each other's sins. We must bear each other's burdens. Forgive us and may God forgive us all!"

The Power of Compassion

Every year on Meatfare Sunday we hear Christ's parable of the Judgment (Mt 25:31-46). In this story, people are judged based on the degree of their compassion. Christ identifies Himself with those in need to the degree of saying that "*I was hungry and you gave me food...*" and the rest. . Christ identifies Himself completely with those in need: the essence of compassion.

What we may forget is that Christ begins the parable by saying, "*All the nations will be gathered before him...*" He is describing the judgment of the nations – the Gentiles – not the house of Israel. The faithful will be judged on the basis of their faith – the 'nations' will be judged on the basis of their compassion.

If compassion is so important in the Lord's eyes that He calls the compassionate "blessed of my Father" even though they never knew Him, what should it mean to us?

In contrast to this blessing of compassionate Gentiles, we read a condemnation of the uncompassionate at the close of Christ's parable of the unforgiving servant. We are told that, "*In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.*" Then the divine Narrator of the parable presents the moral of the story: "*This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother [or sister] from your heart*" (Mt 18:34, 35).

While true compassion often demands a radical generosity, the lack of compassion can separate us from God. The Russian spiritual writer, Fr. Alexander Elchaninov, expressed it this way: "Our lack of compassion, hardness of heart, and mercilessness towards others form an impenetrable curtain between ourselves and God. It is as if we had covered a plant with a black hood, and then complained because it died from lack of sunlight."

Twelfth Sunday of St Matthew

In What Is Our Joy? (Mt 19:16-26)

THE THREE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS – Matthew, Mark and Luke – all record Christ's meeting with a rich young man who sought His guidance. The young man (Luke calls him a "ruler") seeks to know what to do to have eternal life. Christ responds by telling him to keep the commandments. When pressed to be more specific, the Lord begins by listing the Ten Commandments. Then He quotes the Great Commandment from Leviticus, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*"

The young man says that He has kept all these commandments from his youth and presses the Lord to tell him what more he should do. The Lord Jesus then attempts to lead him from a stage

of merely being obedient to God's commandments to one of being in a relationship of love with God.

Christ tells the young man what must happen "*If you want to be perfect*" (v. 21): he must give his wealth to the poor and follow Jesus as He went from place to place proclaiming the Kingdom of God. The Lord offered this inquirer the chance to join the company of His disciples, to show that he preferred life with Christ to enjoying his possessions. The young man declined.

What Does It Mean to Be Perfect?

The Lord has held out this goal of "perfection" before, in the Sermon on the Mount. Being "perfect" seems an impossible task if we think it means absolute perfection without any fault or stain. In the Greek of the New Testament (and our Liturgy), however, to be "perfect" or to be "complete" might best be translated "to be all we were meant to be:" living in the light of the Lord, walking in His way. Jesus pushed His hearers to go beyond the commandments to arrive at a more godly way of life.

The Lord then contrasted regard for God with attachment to one's belongings. They will ever be competing for a person's devotion. As Christ tells His listeners, "*Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*" (Mt 6:21).

The path to perfection as Christ teaches begins with making a choice between following Him and devoting oneself to enjoying the things of the world. As He said so clearly, "*No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon*" (Mt 6:24).

Do I Serve Mammon?

Most of us do not think that we are "serving mammon." We may even look down on the obviously greedy or on people driven by addictions. Yes, there are people who "serve" money, drugs or sex. They may be slaves to alcohol or tobacco. We don't believe that we are controlled like that.

We may not be overly driven to making inordinate amounts of money, but we should consider that dependency on mammon takes many forms. We should become more conscious of how many of this world's riches we feel that we "need," that we "can't do without," from our morning coffee to the latest smart phone. We don't physically need these things; it is our ego that requires them. Is this not another form of serving mammon?

To reflect on just how ego is tied to the things of this world we are, consider how difficult it is to fast for any length of time: how much we feel the loss of a favorite food and to what lengths we go to find a pleasing substitute... and how happy we are when the Fast is over.

In addition “mammon” can also include the non-material wealth of this world: power, prestige or social position. How do we feel when another is promoted over us, receives a bigger bonus or a more lucrative assignment. Serving mammon takes many forms and they all interfere in some way with our relationship to God.

The Fathers on the Power of Mammon

When St John Chrysostom commented on this Gospel passage he noted that being devoted to the things of this world did not make you free. “The rich man is a slave, being subject to loss, and in the power of every one wishing to do him harm” (Homily 46 on Matthew). Serving mammon is a form of slavery

In another place Chrysostom said, “If you see someone greedy for many things, you should consider him the poorest of all, even if he has acquired everyone’s money. If, on the other hand, you see someone with few needs, you should count him the richest of all, even if he has acquired nothing. Be accustomed to judge poverty and affluence by the disposition of the mind not by the substance of his possessions.” Serving mammon is a kind of poverty.

A century before on another continent, St Cyprian of Carthage had said much the same thing. “The property of the wealthy holds them in chains . . . which shackle their courage and choke their faith and hamper their judgment and throttle their souls. They think of themselves as owners, whereas it is they rather who are owned: enslaved as they are to their own property, they are not the masters of their money but its slaves.”

Asceticism and the Pursuit of Perfection

The choice between serving God and mammon is at the heart of Christian asceticism, where making that choice is lived and experienced on a daily basis. It is most intensely observed by monastics but also by Christians living in this world, married or single. A person living an ascetic life tries to distance himself or herself from being tied to the passing pleasures of the world so as to be more open to following Christ and living the life of God.

People often equate life with God to the world to come. It is clear to most people, even in the wider society, that our earthly attachments have no place in heaven. A recent installment in Dan Piraro’s widely syndicated cartoon strip, *Bizarro!* makes this point. Two long- time residents of heaven are observing two younger ones. “Most of the new arrivals seem incapable of conversation,” the eldest notes. “They just stare at their hands in despair” trying to text, but there are no electronic devices in heaven!

Yes, there are no cigarettes, no movies, no alcohol, in heaven. To be without them would surely frustrate someone who had made enjoying these things the focus of life. Thus some Christian thinkers have observed that to be in heaven without the object of one’s passions would actually

be to dwell in hell.

But the differences between this age and the age to come are not really the point. Life with God, transformation into the image of Christ, begins now with baptism. That life is meant to be experienced in ever deeper ways as we mature in the Christian life here as well as in the life of the age to come. The Christian ascetic seeks to avoid anything which can captivate our minds and, at best, distract us from that relationship to God. Following Christ is meant to be the real source of our joy here on earth as well as in the world to come. Serving Christ in worship and ministering to Him in the needy should be our joys, rather than obligations to be gotten through as quickly as possible. The Christian life, to paraphrase St Catherine of Siena, is meant to be “heaven all the way to heaven.”

Thirteenth Sunday of St Matthew

The Vineyard of the Lord (Mt 21:33-42)

THE HOLY LAND IS DESCRIBED in the Torah as “*A land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of olive oil and honey*” (Deut. 8:8). All of these so-called seven species have figured in Biblical imagery, decorative arts and liturgy, but none more than the vine, the vineyard and the grape.

The prophet Isaiah used the image of a vineyard to describe the condition of Israel in his day, the eighth century BC: “*My Well-beloved has a vineyard on a very fruitful hill. He dug it up and cleared out its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. ... For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are His pleasant plant*” (Is 5:1-2, 7).

Isaiah’s imagery reappears frequently in the Scriptures and resonates deeply among believers to this day. The vineyard represents God’s people – Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New – and we continually ask God’s blessing upon it in the words of Psalm 80: “*Look down from heaven and see, and visit this vine and the vineyard which Your right hand has planted*” (vv 15, 16). At hierarchical Liturgies the bishop still prays over the people with the words of this psalm.

Trouble in the Vineyard

But all was not right in Isaiah’s vineyard: the crop was not as the landowner expected. “*He looked for justice, but behold, oppression; for righteousness, but behold, a cry for help*” (v. 7). Found wanting, the vineyard would be judged and left desolate.

Those who heard Jesus' parable of the vineyard (Mt 21:33-46) knew well that it echoed Isaiah's imagery. But the Lord was even more specific in laying the blame for the vineyard's poor state on the vinedressers. They were the ones who mistreated the landowner's servants and even his son.

After the Lord cataloged the sins of the vinedressers – beating, stoning, and killing those who were sent to them – He asked His hearers, *“Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?”* (v. 40) He does not depict the landowner as vengeful, but His hearers are quick to see the consequences of the vinedressers' actions. *“He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons”* (v. 41).

The punch line to this parable is not included in the passage read liturgically. The Lord concluded by saying, *“Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it”* (v. 43). The vinedressers will lose control of the vineyard they have mismanaged and others will take their place.

Christ could not have confronted the Jewish leadership in a clearer or more challenging way. The Gospel goes on to say that they got the point: *“Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them. But when they sought to lay hands on Him, they feared the multitudes, because they took Him for a prophet”* (vv. 45-46).

The Stone Rejected

In the Gospel Christ tells this parable in Jerusalem a few days before His arrest. It follows on His cleansing of the temple and climaxes the message that He has been proclaiming throughout His ministry: that the Kingdom of heaven is near at hand and that the Kingdom will be accomplished in Him. With that in mind He quotes Psalm 118:22-23, *“Jesus said to them, ‘Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?”* (v.42)

The Lord Jesus Himself is the stone rejected by the builders, the Jewish leadership, who becomes the chief cornerstone with His death and resurrection. Life in God will depend on a person's acceptance of Christ, and so He adds *“And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder”* (v.44).

Many of those who witnessed Christ's crucifixion were alive to see the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. The temple was razed to the ground and the high priests and the Sadducees ceased to exist. The Kingdom had been taken from them and a new Israel, the Church, was being erected with Christ as the chief cornerstone.

Fourteenth Sunday of St Matthew

Are You Invited? (Mt 22:2-14)

THE GOSPEL PARABLE READ at today's Divine Liturgy is actually two stories with two different if complementary points. The first concerns those invited to the banquet and those who finally came. The second is the issue of the so-called "wedding garment."

The Gospel of Matthew depicts Christ encountering increasing opposition the closer He came to the center of the Jewish establishment, Jerusalem. In Matthew 21:1-17 Jesus enters the Holy City, ejects the money changers from the temple and confronts the chief priests. Then we read four vignettes, each criticizing the Jewish leadership in the harshest of terms.

The first such condemnation is the episode of the withered fig tree (Mt 21:18-22). Then, in Mt 21:28-32, we read about the two sons: one who professed obedience to his father but in words only – a veiled criticism of the Pharisees who claimed to know the will of God – and the second who actually did the father's will.

In the words of St Hilary of Poitiers, the religious leaders "...put their faith in the Law and despised repentance from sin, glorying instead in the noble prerogative that they had from Abraham" (*Homily on Matthew 21*, 13). The second son recalls the sinners who repented at the preaching of John the Baptist: the tax collectors and harlots who enter the kingdom of God before "the righteous" because one can repent of greed and lust, but not of the denial for the need of repentance. Finally in verses 33-46 we read the parable of the wicked vinedressers whose infidelity leads the owner of the vineyard to lease it to others. And, as the Gospel reminds us, "*When the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them*" (Mt 21:45).

The Royal Wedding

The story of the wedding banquet is in many ways an echo of the parable of the vinedressers. In each story an important person reaches out to his people; he is rebuffed, and finally turns to others. The vineyard owner in the first parable and the king in the second represent God. The disdainful tenants and the invited guests signify the people of Israel. The new tenants of the first story and the new guests of the second represent the Gentiles who would respond in faith.

It may be hard for us to imagine the reaction of the invited guests to the banquet. An invitation to such an occasion would be esteemed, even coveted. "*But,*" as the Gospel says, "*they made light of it and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business*" (Mt 22:5). It is as if Matthew were describing our own day rather than his. This is the way many Christians – our own friends and relatives sadly among them – react to their invitation to the Eucharistic Banquet week after week. But how could an invitation to a royal wedding be dismissed so easily?

Couching this parable in terms of a royal wedding is a way of saying that the initiative of God in sending the prophets to Israel, announcing the coming Messiah was at least as compelling as a kingly gala. One after another, prophets came and were recognized in some way as foretelling

what was to come. At last the Forerunner came and proclaimed “Everything is ready – this is the Lamb of God” but was ignored by many who heard him. Those invited had so lost themselves in the concerns of the everyday world that they treated the invitation like junk mail.

Those Who Accept the Invitation

The messengers seek out – not the pillars of society at their farms and businesses – but the insignificant on the highways, representing the Gentiles. According to the Jewish opinion of the day, the Gentiles are inferior in God’s eyes to the Chosen People. Nevertheless, they respond to the king’s invitation where the important people did not.

Churchmen are often criticized for catering to the well-to-do: landowners, benefactors, etc. Pope Francis of Rome has repeatedly pushed Catholic leaders to focus their efforts on the poor without ignoring the leaders of society. In fact he notes, what generally happens in our world is the opposite. “If investments in the banks fail, ‘Oh, it’s a tragedy,’” he said at a Pentecost vigil in Rome; “But if people die of hunger or don’t have food or health, nothing happens. This is our crisis today.” In the language of Mt 22, Pope Francis might be called the Bishop of the Highways.

The Wedding Garment

In the second part of this parable the people from the highways have come to the banquet, but one is not wearing the appropriate “wedding garment.” In Jewish tradition this meant finery, one’s best clothing. A Jewish parable tells of a king inviting people to a banquet. Some went home and prepared immediately; others continued working and therefore arrived still in their work clothes and so were not allowed in. In the Gospel this theme of readiness is frequently found in Jesus’ teachings, particularly in the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Mt 25:1-13).

Many Fathers interpreted the “appropriate garment” to mean a virtuous life. The Gentiles may have replaced the leadership of Israel in the People of God, but if they ignored the Gospel way of life, they too would be excluded. St Gregory the Dialogist saw the garment as woven out of love of God and love of others. “These are great precepts,” he wrote, “sublime precepts, and for many they are hard to fulfill: nevertheless this is the wedding garment. And whoever sits down at the wedding feast without it, let him watch with fear, for when the King comes in, he shall be cast forth.”

The “Bridegroom Matins” of Holy Week uses this interpretation as the basis of its beloved exapostilarion, “I see Your bridal chamber adorned, O my Savior, but I do not possess the right garment that I may enter therein. Brighten the robe of my soul, O Giver of light, and save me!” We much acknowledge our own spiritual emptiness (“I have no garment”) and seek God’s grace (“Brighten the robe of my soul”) to be made worthy of a place at the banquet.

How shall I enter the splendor of Your holy place, for I am unworthy? If I dare to enter the bridal chamber, my clothing will accuse me, since it is not a wedding garment, and I shall be chained and

cast out by the angels. O Lord, cleanse the stain of my soul and save me, for you are the Lover of Mankind.

O Bridegroom more beautiful than all men, who have called us to the spiritual banquet of Your bridal chamber, remove from me the ill-clad image of my iniquities by this sharing in Your sufferings. Adorn me with the glorious robe of Your beauty and manifest me as a radiant guest of Your Kingdom, for You are compassionate.

From the Bridegroom Matins of Holy Week

The Marriage of the Lamb

PEOPLE USUALLY THINK of the Holy Mysteries according to the ways they have experienced them in churches which they have attended. Western Christians, for example, who are used to seeing a few drops of water poured on a baby's head in baptism, may be astounded to see a baby fully immersed at an Eastern Christian baptism.

The Scriptures contain a number of references to the rites which we call Holy Mysteries, but sometimes these references are not as obvious to us as they were to the first-century readers for whom they were written.

Christian Initiation

St Paul wrote two epistles to the first Christians in Corinth which have become part of the New Testament. The Corinthian believers were divided among themselves over rival teachers and practices. Before addressing any of these issues, he reminded the Corinthians of their baptism! The relationship we have with God in Christ should be our basis for dealing with any practical matters. What may surprise us is that he makes no mention of water at all, or even of baptism in the name of the Trinity. Rather he emphasized the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In the time of the apostles, Christian initiation already included a rite for the bestowal of the Holy Spirit. The Acts of the Apostles records that, ever before the conversion of St Paul to Christ, baptism was not considered complete until the Spirit had been given. We read in Acts 8 how Philip, a deacon, preached the Gospel in Samaria and baptized many people there. The passage continues: *“When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit”* (Acts 8:14-17).

The Samaritans' baptism was not a complete Christian initiation until they received the Holy Spirit. The rite which the apostles employed was prayer, with the laying-on of hands.

St Paul, on the other hand, describes the bestowal of the Spirit in terms of anointing and sealing: *“He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come”* (2 Cor 1:21, 22). The anointing was a visible mark, attesting that the new believer belonged to Christ. This bestowal of the Spirit is what we call the Mystery of Chrismation.

The second image in this brief description is the mention of the Holy Spirit as a kind of “Deposit” or down-payment, guaranteeing the divinizing presence of the Spirit in us. This presence would be fulfilled in the life of the world to come, *“so that God may be all in all”* (1 Cor 15:28).

The Wedding Banquet

Even more sacramental allusions are found in the image of the wedding banquet of the king’s son. This portrayal of a future when God is all in all is at the heart of Christ’s parable of the wedding banquet (Mt 22:1-14). A similar parable is found in Lk 14:15-24. In Luke Christ tells this parable in response to this praise of the kingdom to come by one of His hearers, *“Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God”* (Lk 14:15).

In Matthew, this feast is described as celebrating the union of the king’s son with his bride, which represents the Messiah becoming one with his people. It is the long-awaited union of the Lord and His beloved. St John Chrysostom explains the wedding imagery in this parable and connects it with similar expressions in other Scriptures.: *“You may ask, ‘Why is it called a marriage?’ – That you may learn God’s tender care, His yearning toward us, the cheerfulness of it. There is no sorrow there: all things are filled with spiritual joy. This is why John also calls Him a bridegroom and Paul says, ‘I have espoused you to one husband’ and ‘This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the Church.’”*

Those who are invited, however, do not see the eternal significance of this event. They are busy with the things of this age – their view of reality was limited to their business interests. Their short-sightedness cost them everything and others were invited in their place. In Luke, even family life is considered a poor excuse for ignoring the invitation to the king’s banquet.

The setting of this parable in Matthew gives us a key to its meaning. The Lord has just entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He teaches using three parables against the Jewish leaders: the parables of the two sons, the vineyard tenants and the wedding banquet. Each of them features an ungrateful and unresponsive reply to the master’s call.

The parable of the two sons (Mt 21:28-32) concludes with this admonition: *“Truly I tell you, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him”* (v. 32). This reference to John the Forerunner points to the coming of the Messiah as the event which people were called to acknowledge and to which they refused to respond. Official religious leaders will be replaced by prostitutes and the Jewish people by Gentiles in the Messianic age which has already begun.

Matthew adds a final scene describing the king welcoming his new guests to the banquet. One of the guests has come without a wedding garment. The parable ends with this man too losing his place at the table. Here Matthew has made the parable apply to us and the sacramental life to which we have been admitted. Having accepted Christ, we are invited to the table, provided that we have preserved the baptismal garment with which we were clothed. If it has been sullied, it may be laundered by repentance. But if we have not repented, we too shall lose our place at the table.

Fifteenth Sunday of St Matthew **No Greater Commandment (Mt 22:35-46)**

IN OUR SCHOOL DAYS we all were subjected to “trick questions,” designed to fool us into giving an incorrect answer. Is this the kind of question which the “expert in the Law” described in Matthew’s Gospel asked Jesus to “test Him”? Was he trying to trick Jesus with this question or does “test” here mean something else?

The way in which this encounter is described in the Gospel of Mark can help us understand how the lawyer was “testing” Jesus. Matthew, when reporting this incident simply says, “*One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question...*” (Mt 22:35). Mark, however, gives us the man’s motivation: “*Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked Him, ‘Of all the commandments, which is the most important?’*” (Mk 12:28)

Mark’s explanation suggests that the lawyer was not trying to trap Jesus, but to probe His view of the Law *because* He showed a good understanding of it. The man was testing Jesus, not in the sense of trying to trap Him but to learn His understanding of the Law’s deepest meaning. He sensed that Jesus had a more profound view of the Law than the Sadducees who were debating with Him (see Mk 12:18-27). And so his question was motivated by a sincere desire to deepen his own appreciation of the Scripture.

The Lord’s Answer

The Lord did not answer this inquirer with a new teaching. He simply repeated the commandments found in the Torah. Mark quoted the preceding verse as well, “*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength*” (Deut. 6:4, 5). Both Matthew and Mark give us variant readings of the commandment. The Hebrew text of Deuteronomy mentions only “heart, soul and strength.” Matthew replaces “strength” with “mind”, while Mark adds “mind.”

Since there were various texts of the Old Testament Scriptures in use at the time that the Gospels were written, the Evangelists may have been simply using the version known in their community.

The Lord's second commandment is also found in the Torah. In Leviticus 19:18 we read, "*Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.*" The Torah here identifies one's "neighbor" as another Jew ("anyone among your people"). The Lord Jesus would expand that definition in the parable of the Good Samaritan. There it is the Samaritan, reviled by Jews, who is portrayed as the model of the good neighbor. Clearly for the Lord, ethnicity is not the standard for judging who is my neighbor.

In the Torah these two commandments are found in different books, so why are they connected here? The answer found in the Greek Fathers is both simple and profound: man is God's image. The person who loves another as being in God's image is, in fact, loving God who created him. A true believer cannot look at another without seeing God in him or her.

The Lawyer's Response

The last thing the Lord says in Matthew is different from the text in Mark, but both mean the same thing. Matthew says, "*All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments*" (v. 40). Mark, however, simply notes: "*There is no commandment greater than these*" (v. 31). Commentators from the earliest centuries have thought that Matthew was writing for believers with a background in Judaism while Mark was writing in a Gentile community. It would make sense for Matthew and not Mark to cite the Hebrew Scriptures in making the same point.

In Mark the scene is concluded by citing the lawyer's reaction and Jesus' response. "*Well said, teacher,' the man replied. 'You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.'* When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, '*You are not far from the kingdom of God.'* And from then on no one dared ask Him any more questions" (vv.32-34).

The lawyer expresses what Jesus had been saying so often in other circumstances during His ministry: it is love, rather than religiosity, that expresses the will of God for us: "*Go and learn the meaning of the words, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' I did not come to call the righteous but sinners*" (Mt 9:13, also 12:7). The Lord's response is one we would all like to hear from His mouth.

The Lord's Turn to Ask a Question

As Matthew tells it, the Lord then turned to the Pharisees with a question of His own. "*What do you think about the Messiah?*" He asked. "*Whose son is he?*" "*The son of David,' they replied*" (vv.41, 42)

In Jewish belief of the day the Messiah was called “the son of David.” In part, this referred to the prophecy which Nathan pronounced to King David: “*When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom... And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever*” (2 Sm 7:12-13, 16). On one hand this prophecy referred to the physical line of David’s descendants, his own son Solomon and his sons after him. But David’s descendants did not rule forever. When the Greeks conquered the Holy Land in the third century BC, the royal house of David came to an end.

When the Greeks were defeated by the Maccabees, another line, the Hasmoneans, who had no connection to the house of David, began to rule. This prompted some Jewish thinkers to see “the throne of David” in a spiritual way, referring to the presence of the Messiah. In this sense many people in Jesus’ lifetime referred to the Messiah as “the Son of David.”

Jesus’ question helped nudge His followers towards a deeper understanding of His Messianic role. He quoted Psalm 110 which begins, “*The LORD said to my Lord, ‘Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool’*” (v. 1). The first “Lord” clearly referred to God, but who was the person David, the Psalmist, called “my Lord”? Jesus then posed His question, “*If David then calls Him ‘Lord,’ how is He his Son?*” (v. 45)

Jesus’ suggestion that the Messiah was greater than King David helped His followers to understand Him as more than just a prophet. If the Messiah was not just an ordinary man, could He be the Son of God in a unique way?

The reading concludes, “*And no one was able to answer Him a word, nor from that day on did anyone dare question Him anymore*” (v.46). To question Him might take them into unfamiliar territory – territory which even His closest disciples could not imagine until after His resurrection.

Sixteenth Sunday of St Matthew

Stories That Tell a Story (Mt 25:14-30; Lk 8:8)

THE CULTURE OF WESTERN EUROPE which we have inherited is based on the ideas and methods of Greek philosophy. We use abstractions, logic and the devices of classical thought to express ourselves. That sort of thinking was alien to the Semites of the ancient Middle East. Where a classic philosopher might speak of generosity, a Middle Easterner would tell a story about a generous person. The parables found in Scripture are examples of stories told to teach a truth.

The greatest number of parables in Scripture are found in the Gospels but the Lord Jesus was hardly the first to teach in parables. One of the most striking parables in the Old Testament is found in 2 Samuel 12:1-9. In it the prophet Nathan confronts King David who has arranged the death of Uriah the Hittite so that he could marry Uriah's wife. Nathan makes his point with a story:

“Then the LORD sent Nathan to David. And he came to him, and said to him: ‘There were two men in one city, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had exceedingly many flocks and herds. But the poor man had nothing, except one little ewe lamb which he had bought and nourished; and it grew up together with him and with his children. It ate of his own food and drank from his own cup and lay in his bosom; and it was like a daughter to him. And a traveler came to the rich man, who refused to take from his own flock and from his own herd to prepare a meal for the wayfaring man who had come to him; but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it

“So David's anger was greatly aroused against the man, and he said to Nathan, ‘As the LORD lives, the man who has done this shall surely die! And he shall restore fourfold for the lamb, because he did this thing and because he had no pity.’ Then Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man!’ ...” (vv. 1-7).

Parables such as this use concrete narratives to express abstract arguments. Here Nathan was reproaching David for his own actions under the figure of the rich man in the parable. Very likely, the parable was much more effective than a discourse on the Commandments would have been.

Parable of the Talents

The Lord Jesus teaches His followers about what we would call stewardship in the parable of the talents. In the Mediterranean world a talent (*talanton*) was a measure of weight. In the Palestine of Christ's day a talent would have equaled 130 pounds, as of a precious metal (silver or gold). Today a pound of gold might be worth \$15,000.00, so three talents (390 pounds) was a considerable sum.

The master expects his servants to be productive: to increase the value of what he was given. The first two servants in the parable did exactly that; the third fellow buried the money in the ground. He did not squander what he had received, but he did not increase its value either.

On his return the master commended the first two servants, but told the third: *“You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest”* (vv. 26, 27). Even that would have been productive but the servant did not even make the effort to do that.

The Lord points us to the parable's spiritual meaning in its first line: *“The kingdom of heaven is like...”* (v.14) this. There will be productive servants who will be rewarded and foolish ones who will be humiliated... and worse. As we read earlier in Matthew, *“Every tree that does not bear*

good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Mt 7:19). The basis for this judgement will be what the servants have done with the wealth entrusted to them.

When Will the Master Arrive?

There have been several answers to this question because the parable applies equally to all of them, human nature being what it is. Perhaps the original reference was to Christ’s coming to Jerusalem which exposed some servants as productive and others as wasteful. In this interpretation it is the Messiah Himself who is the pearl of great price. Some received Him to their profit; others wasted their chance of entering His joy.

Some have said that the Master entrusts Himself to us in any number of ways: in the Scriptures, the Eucharist, the Church, the poor. The way we respond to His presence shows whether we are bearing fruit or not.

The most common interpretation has been that at the Second Coming of Christ His servants will receive what their deeds deserve.

What Do the Talents Represent?

The Fathers offered varied answers to this question as well. St. John Chrysostom said that, “This parable is delivered against those who will not assist their neighbors with money, or words, or in any other way, but hide all that they have.” St. Jerome interpreted it to mean that, “In the five, two, and one talent, we recognize the diversity of gifts wherewith we have been entrusted.” St. Gregory of Nyssa expands on this thought, pointing to all the gifts believers receive in and for the sake of the Church: “Let him then who has understanding look that he hold not his peace; let him who has affluence not be dead to mercy; let him who has the art of guiding life communicate its use with his neighbor; and him who has the faculty of eloquence intercede with the rich for the poor.”

Each of us in the Church has received talents of various kinds and degrees. As St Paul taught, they are meant to be used for the benefit of the community: “*Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness*” (Rom 12: 6-8). If we use our gifts to benefit the Church they will increase and bear fruit; if we bury them we will incur the judgment of the Master.

Seventeenth Sunday of St Matthew – Sunday of the Canaanite

Unwavering Faith (Mt 15:21-28)

THE MIDDLE EAST TODAY IS an ethnic and religious jumble: Mediterranean and European Jews, Eastern and Western Christians, Sunni and Shiite Muslims and innumerable other variations on each of these themes. This is not merely a present-day phenomenon. This is the way it has been throughout the Christian era and even earlier. The Middle East and the entire Mediterranean region have always been home to a rich mix of peoples.

The Jews always lived surrounded by others. The coastal regions, including Caesarea, the regional capital, Haifa, Tyre and Sidon were at first controlled by the seafaring Phoenicians. Later it was the Greeks and Romans who dominated in these areas. By the time of Christ, archaeologists, affirm there were upwards of 30 Gentile towns in what we call the Holy Land. The area of Capernaum, where the Lord lived as an adult, was called “Galilee of the Gentiles” (Mt 4:15) since there was a great number of them there.

During their first years in the Holy Land strict Jews sought to minimize their dealings with the Gentiles. God’s people were too young in their faith to withstand the cultural pressure of their idolatrous neighbors. When Jezebel, daughter of the king of Sidon married Ahab, the Samaritan king of Israel in the ninth century BC, she promoted the worship of the Phoenician gods and many, including the king, followed her lead. He “*began to serve Baal and worship him. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab also made an Asherah pole [i.e. a shrine to the Phoenician fertility goddess] and did more to arouse the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than did all the kings of Israel before him*” (1 Kings 16:31-33). Ahab so decimated the prophets of the God of Israel that the Prophet Elijah complained, “*I am the only one of the LORD’S prophets left*” (1 Kings 17:23). Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal and convinced the people to destroy them and return to the LORD.

Centuries later, by the time of Christ, however, the Jews were much more secure in their conviction that the God of Israel was the only true God. They had been scattered throughout the Mediterranean world and retained their faith. Furthermore, as contacts with the Jews increased, Gentiles had been drawn to the faith of Israel. Even Roman military officers – such as the one who begged Jesus to heal his servant (Mt 8:4-14) or Cornelius, who invited Peter to share his message (Acts 10) – had accepted the God of the Jews as the only true God.

Still, strict Jews refrained as much as possible from contact with Gentiles. As Peter told Cornelius, “*You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation*” (Acts 10:28). Yet we find Jesus going to the region of Tyre and Sidon or across the Jordan without hesitation. He was about to bring salvation to the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

Christ’s encounter with the woman seeking His aid showed that true faith in God was not the exclusive property of the Jews, and that Gentiles could have even greater faith than any in Israel. He works miracles among the Gentiles as He did among the Jews. At one time it has been necessary for God’s people to be separate from the Gentiles. Now it was time for God’s people to lead the Gentiles to God.

Separation in the Church

As communities of Gentile believers sprouted up in the Mediterranean world we find their leaders, such as St. Paul, encouraging isolation from those around them. “*What agreement has the temple of God with idols?*” he writes, quoting Isaiah and Ezekiel, “*Therefore come out from among them and be separate,*” (2 Cor 6:16, 17). These early Gentile believers, like the Jews of Elijah’s day a thousand years earlier, were too young in their faith to withstand the influences of the pagan culture in which they lived.

As the years passed and many were martyred rather than deny their faith in Christ, the Christian community became stronger. Believers began to explain their faith to pagans on their own terms. Their “Apologies,” as they were called showed that their understanding of the Gospel was more mature and that their commitment to Christ was firm. Christians would ultimately go out into completely alien cultures for the Lord. The faith of the Canaanite woman would be sought and found among Slavs and Franks and Saxons.

Where Are We in Our Faith Journey?

Like the Jews in the time of Elijah, we live in a pluralistic society surrounded by people of many religions and of none. There is an atmosphere of mutual respect but not everyone is able to make some important distinctions in maintaining the purity of their traditions. As a result many people find particular traditions unimportant because “we’re all worshipping the same God.” For some this even extends to basic doctrines like the Trinity and the unique role of Christ in the redeeming of the world. Their faith – and in some cases their morals – have been watered down because they were not mature enough to live in a pluralistic society without losing their own identity.

Like the first Gentile believers we live in a non-believing culture, increasingly secular and even aggressively opposing any public expression of biblical faith or morals. We are free to worship inside our churches in what one bishop has called “our weekly Sabbath hobby.” But expressions of faith in the public sector are definitely discouraged. Woe to politicians or athletes who dare to speak about their faith, much less act in line with it. Is our faith today too immature to withstand these pressures?

Many feel, like the Jews and the first Christians, that we should isolate ourselves from outside influences to retain our traditional Christian identity. Many Eastern Christians have taken refuge in the foods, music, and dancing of their home country cultures to insulate their children from the wider society. If the church or ethnic community is sufficiently active, this may keep its children from dating “foreigners,” but will it keep them from aborting an unwanted pregnancy?

Our churches have, by and large, concentrated on building programs and social events rather than on faith building. In many parishes there are more parties and fundraisers than holy day services, much less instruction programs. What is there in our parish life to help us discern which

elements in our popular culture are compatible with the Gospel and which are not? Does our church life assist us to mature in our faith or does it insure that we remain children?

If we or our children readily accept secular values merely because everyone else is saying or doing them, it may be because Christ is on only the fringes of our lives. If so we need to ask ourselves whether we have truly encountered Christ. Without truly knowing Him, how can we be prepared to prove our faith despite any pressure to the contrary? The Canaanite woman was not discouraged when even the apostles wanted her to be sent away. She persisted in her faith and was rewarded. She is thus a model of perseverance for us seeking to uphold our faith and traditions in the world.

B – The Gospel Cycle of St Luke (From the Feast of the Holy Cross to the Beginning of the Triodion)

At the Divine Liturgy we continue reading the epistles of St. Paul which are still numbered “after Pentecost.” We read the Gospel Cycle of St. Luke which has its own numbering. The Gospel readings are not necessarily read in numerical order, but the cycle always ends with the Sunday of Zacchaeus.

THE FEAST OF THE EXALTATION OF THE CROSS is the occasion for us to begin the reading of St. Luke’s Gospel. As we have seen, Pascha begins the reading of John and with Pentecost we start to read Matthew. At the same time we continue the cycle of Epistle readings begun at Pentecost without interruption.

Luke, whom St Paul describes as “*the beloved physician*” (Col 4:14) is thought to have been a Greek-speaking native of Antioch, probably a Gentile, possibly a Jewish proselyte. Luke may have been one of the multitudes who came to Jerusalem that Passover, was attracted by the teaching of Jesus and then encountered the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:12-35).

Luke may have returned to Antioch as one of the first members of the Church there, as he recalls with pride that “*the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch*” (Acts 11:26). He later became the companion of St Paul, who was himself a missionary sent out by the Church of Antioch to preach Christ. In Acts Luke describes how he traveled with St. Paul on his journeys to Macedonia (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15), how he returned with him to Syria and went from there to Jerusalem to report to the Eleven.

Luke composed both the Gospel which bears his name and the Acts of the Apostles as a kind of diptych. While the Gospel sets forth God’s call to mankind in Christ, Acts shows the response of the first disciples, both Jews and Gentiles, to the message of salvation.

The Good News on the Move

Luke's Gospel is based largely on Mark, which commentators think was the first Gospel written in the form we know it. Luke made a significant change, however, to illustrate his theology. Luke rearranges several of the passages in Mark to depict Jesus' ministry as a purposeful journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, to the confrontation with the Jewish leaders, the cross and the tomb. He does this to say that Jesus' knowingly and freely embraced the passion. He "*steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem*" (Luke 9:51) i.e. to the offering of Himself for the sake of the human race.

The Gospel ends in Jerusalem and the Acts of the Apostles picks up there with the early activities of the disciples after the Lord's ascension. But Acts does not remain in Jerusalem – it leads us through Asia Minor to Rome, the capital of the empire, the heart of the Mediterranean world. The Christian community, Luke tells us, was not simply a local Jewish sect – it was the Body of Christ spread throughout the world.

First Saturday of St Luke

IN MOST OF OUR PARISHES the Divine Liturgy is served only on Sunday and some feast days. In some parishes the Liturgy is also served every Saturday. Is this because some people are available on Saturdays or is there another reason?

We know from the New Testament that the first believers in Christ were Jews and that they continued to observe the Sabbath (Saturday), the day of rest and worship according to the Ten Commandments: "*Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God*" (Ex 20:8-10). They also met on "*the first day of the week...to break bread*" (Acts 20:7).

As the Church developed, the custom of sanctifying both days, Saturday and Sunday, became common in Syria, Asia Minor, and Constantinople. The Eucharist (the breaking of the bread) was celebrated on both days. Sunday was most important because it was the day of Christ's resurrection – the day on which His tomb was found to be empty. But Saturday was observed as well: both as the memorial of the original creation (see Gen 2:2-3) and recalling the "rest" of Christ in the tomb, the "Great Sabbath." As St Gregory of Nyssa observed in the fourth century: "With what eyes can you behold Sunday if you desecrate the Sabbath? Don't you know that these days are brethren? He who elevates one disregards the other" (*On Reproof*).

We find two effects of this practice in our liturgy today. The first concerns our lectionary: the cycle of Scripture readings appointed for the year. Our readings chosen for Sunday follow one continuous cycle, the passages for Saturday often follow another and those for the rest of the week may follow a third. When the lectionary was compiled – by the eighth century – Saturdays as well as Sundays were clearly special days, set apart from the rest of the week.

The second effect concerns our practice of fasting. Saturdays, like Sundays, are not fast days (except for Great Saturday). Even during the Great Fast the Liturgy would be celebrated on Saturday, often for the departed. In the controversies between the Eastern and Western Churches of the first millennium it was often noted that Westerners fasted on Saturdays but Easterners did not. The Sabbath was for celebration because it was a Eucharistic day.

Speaking with Authority

After the Exaltation of the Holy Cross we begin to read the Gospel of St Luke at the Divine Liturgy. The first and second chapters of Luke relate the conception of John the Baptist, the annunciation and visitation of the Theotokos, and the birth and infancy of Christ. Chapter three begins by telling us of the ministry of John the Baptist. All these passages are read on the corresponding feast days. We begin the “cycle of St Luke” with Luke 3:19 – the imprisonment of John the Baptist.

On the First Saturday of St Luke we read Luke 4:31-36 which tells how Christ, at the beginning of His ministry, would go to Capernaum, a fishing village on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was there that He called and began to form His first followers, the fishermen Peter and Andrew, James and John. Luke says that He would teach in the synagogue on the Sabbath. “... *and they were astonished at His teaching, for His word was with authority*” (v. 32).

The Gospel passages read on Saturday often recount events that happened on the Sabbath. In this passage we see the Lord confronted by a man with an unclean spirit. As often happens in the Gospels, this spirit senses the holiness in Jesus and that His mission is to annul the power of Death: “*Did You come to destroy us? I know who You are — the Holy One of God!*” (v. 34) The Lord rebukes this spirit and expels it prompting the people to wonder, “*What a word this is! For with authority and power He commands the unclean spirits, and they come out*” (v. 36).

First Sunday of St Luke

Holy Ground (Lk 5:1-11)

THE READING OF LUKE’S GOSPEL began during the past week with chapters 3 and 4: the narrative of the Lord’s baptism (Monday), His genealogy (Tuesday), His temptation in the wilderness (Wednesday), the beginning of His ministry in Nazareth (Thursday and Friday) and in Capernaum (Saturday). On this, the first Sunday in the Cycle of St Luke, we read the story of the miraculous catch of fish.

Jesus is already known in Capernaum. He has taught in the synagogue on the Sabbaths and healed a man there. He had already attracted the attention of Simon and visited his house where he healed his mother-in-law of a raging fever. The next day everyone was back to work and Jesus appears at the lakeside where Simon and others are ending a fruitless night on the water. Meeting the disciples, the Lord Jesus encouraged them to throw their nets in again. “*Simon answered, ‘Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will*

let down the nets. When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. ... ’ (Lk 5:5, 6).

“Depart from me, Lord!”

St Luke’s Gospel gives us an interesting insight into the character of St Peter. Simon Peter could be described as a faithful observant Jew. He attended the synagogue, heard Jesus teaching there and invited him to his home. Yet, when he witnessed the miraculous catch of fish he says, *“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord”* (Luke 5:8).

Simon had encountered something he did not understand and judged – rightly, as it happened – that it must have been an experience of God’s power. His first reaction was to shrink away from this holy man, Jesus. He felt deeply inadequate before the holy; he didn’t belong in Jesus’ company and felt that he would be consumed by this contact for which he was so unprepared.

St Peter, like many of the first disciples of the Lord Jesus, was a sincerely observant Jew. He kept the Law as best he could, observed the Sabbath and the holydays and the rest; but Peter sensed the difference between these “icons of holiness” (if we can invent such a term) and the real thing (the Lord Jesus).

At first hearing Peter’s protest might sound like that of the Gergasenes who saw their swine plunge into the sea: “Leave us alone – don’t make trouble for us.” In fact, his response puts Peter in a long procession of biblical figures overwhelmed by the presence of God in their midst. When Isaiah experienced his vision of God in the temple, for example, he responded: *“Woe to me!’ I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty”* (Isaiah 6:5).

Peter and Isaiah were overcome by what they had seen. Each recognized that somehow he had been touched by the divine. Their response was to see themselves as unclean, as sinful. They may have been conscious of a particular sin from their past, but there is no evidence for that. Rather their reaction mirrored that of many godly people who unexpectedly came upon the presence of God. Even for those who are striving to live righteously, an experience of the power of the Lord entering into our world makes us confront the great gap between us and Him. We see instantaneously how attached we are to the things of the earth and, correspondingly, how far we are from the Holy One.

When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush He told him, *“Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.’ ... And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God”* (Exodus 3:4, 6). The only appropriate response of mortals to the holy is the recognition that we have wandered onto Mount Sinai, into a realm beyond our worth.

This reaction became something of a pattern for the ascetic Elders of the Christian East. As St. Clement of Rome counseled, “Even if an angel should indeed appear to you, do not receive him but humiliate yourself, saying, ‘I am not worthy to see an angel, for I am a sinner.’” To look upon the holy without repentance, they felt, was like putting oneself on the same plane as God or His saints.

The Fear of God

This sense of utter inadequacy before the Lord is what the Scriptures call “the fear of God.” The English author C.S. Lewis wrote that fear of God is not like fear of a wild animal. It is not terror that God is out to get us. Nor is it panic that we will be punished once God catches sight of us, like a schoolmaster looking for the culprit who is disturbing the class. The fear of God, which is praised as a virtue in both Old and New Testaments, is the sense of our inadequacy once we glimpse the truly holy that destroys any false sense of self-confidence or self-righteousness we may have.

“Fear of God” is a phrase we hear repeatedly in our Liturgy. In the Great Litany the deacon invites us: “For this holy house and for those who enter it with faith, reverence, and the fear of God, let us pray to the Lord.” The phrase is repeated when we are invited to receive Communion: “Approach in the fear of God with faith and with love.” Yet we know that we have been admitted to “this holy house” through baptism and are invited to the Lord’s Table. So with what kind of fear should we be filled when we take part in the Liturgy?

Many of us were raised in the Church and grew up amid its “icons of holiness.” We may have learned the “right answers” expounded in the catechism. We may have learned prayers, practices, principles of morality and the meaning of many elements of our Church’s life but never truly experienced the presence of God. If so, we may find it difficult to appreciate the concept of the “fear of God.” But we then run the risk of believing that we understand God because we know when and how we are to fast or what the Church teaches on this or that matter. But a relationship with God is more than a matter of ritual or doctrine or anything we may feel we possess. As we read in the Sermon on the Mount, “*Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’*” (Mt 7:22-23).

The Beginning of True Wisdom

“*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; knowledge of the Holy One brings understanding*” (Prov 9:10). Not only is fear of God described in Scripture as a virtue, it is praised as the key to true wisdom. In our culture wisdom is often considered the product of how much information we have acquired. In the spiritual life, however, information alone does not make one wise: particularly physical knowledge gained by the senses. As the twentieth-century

Serbian saint Nikolai of Zicha noted, “If someone were to know the number of stars in the heavens and the names of the fish in the sea, the amount of grass in the field and the habits of the beasts in the forest but would not have the fear of God, his knowledge is as water in a sieve. Before his death, his knowledge makes him a greater coward than the completely ignorant.” The depression and despair many in the intellectual elite feel at the approach of death confirms the saint’s teaching. True understanding comes from experiencing our inadequacy in the face of God’s greatness and learning to rely on His compassion.

The Two-fold Fear of God

As with everything in the spiritual life, fear of God is not static: it grows and develops as our experience matures. St Maximos the Confessor expressed it this way:

“Fear of God is of two kinds. The first is generated in us by the threat of punishment. It is through such fear that we develop, in due order, self-control, patience, hope in God and detachment; and it is from detachment that love comes.

“The second kind of fear is linked with love and constantly produces reverence in the soul, so that it does not grow indifferent to God because of the intimate communion of its love. The first kind of fear is expelled by perfect love when the soul has acquired this and is no longer afraid of punishment” (*First Century on Love*, 81-82).

Our fear of God, then, is like a child’s perception of its parent. At first an errant child fears what his parent will do to him when his disobedience is discovered. Later he grows to fear hurting his parent’s feelings, showing ingratitude or being separated from the parent. Fear of God is not meant to disappear as we grow to love God but to develop into that mature realization of the love of God despite our weaknesses, which we call true worship.

We Are on Holy Ground

In the Syriac Churches of India it is customary for everyone to remove their shoes before stepping inside the church. Every historic tradition has some act of reverence prescribed for setting foot on consecrated ground. In Byzantine Churches it is prescribed that the worshippers make metanies or prostrations and kiss the icons put forth for veneration. Repeating this action by force of habit we forget what they represent: that the church, the Eucharist, the cross we approach to kiss – all these are manifestations of God’s holiness and His love reaching out to us. We see, but we do not perceive.

In the same way we do not comprehend that we are always in the presence of God. The people we meet, the grass and trees, the animals and other creatures among whom we live – all these exist as God’s handiwork, as indications of His presence among us. May God grant us to see that every moment of our lives we are standing unworthily on holy ground and that our eyes see the signs of the presence of the Lord.

Fear of God and Humility

‘There is a humility that comes from the fear of God, and there is a humility that comes from the fervent love of God. One person is humbled because of his fear of God; another is humbled because of his joy.

“The person humbled from fear of God is possessed of modesty in his members, a right ordering of his senses, and a heart contrite at all times. But the man humbled because of joy is possessed of great exuberance and an open and insuppressible heart”

(The Ascetical Homilies of St. Isaac the Syrian)

Second Saturday of St Luke (Lk 5:17-26)

This Saturday we read Lk 5:17-26, which relates the story of the paralyzed man brought to Jesus. The Lord heals him but, before He does, announces, “*Your sins are forgiven*” (v. 20). This astounds the onlookers who reason, “*Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?*” (v. 21) The Lord then heals the man, showing that He does in fact have power on earth to forgive sins. “*And they were all amazed, and they glorified God and were filled with fear, saying, ‘We have seen strange things today!’*” (v. 26)

This event must have made an impact on those who witnessed it and on the first Christians who made it known. It appears in Mt 9 and Mk 2 as well, showing how widely circulated this story was. It proclaims Christ as powerful, not only in word but in deed as well: a graphic summons to hear Him in the depths of our souls.

Second Sunday of St Luke

Learning to Love (Lk 6:31-36)

“LOVE, LOVE, LOVE – all you need is love!” That’s what the songs and the tee shirts say. So why do 50% of American marriages end in divorce? And why do so many young people stumble their way through so many abortive relationships? Could it be because love has become a mere slogan, unrelated to the reality of the God who is love?

God’s love is described in Luke’s Gospel as being “*kind to the unthankful and the evil*” (Luke 6:35). An Athonite elder, commenting on this teaching, opined that God loves the devil as much as He does the Holy Virgin. That kind of love is incomprehensible to most of us. Yet this kind of

love is put forward as a model for us to imitate: “*be merciful just as your Father is merciful*” (v. 36)

Everyday Ideas of Love

Our ordinary ideas of love fall far short of this ideal. Perhaps you’ve heard the expression, “Show me your friends, and I will tell you who you are.” In other words, what we love displays the secrets of our hearts. Some people focus on sensual love, and everything they desire and fear, admire and loathe follows from this love. Likewise people who have given their heart to wealth, to drugs or drink become the slaves of that which they love. Their every action is directed towards the acquisition of what they worship. In the Lord’s words, “*Where your treasure is, there your heart shall also be*” (Mt 6:21).

Many good people, Church people included, focus on loving their spouses and children and, perhaps, their extended family. There is nothing wrong with that, surely. But the Lord says that we should not get stuck on family love from which we get great rewards in return: “*For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so?*” (Mt 5:46, 47). If you are seeking to live a godly life, you must do more than that.

Gospel Ideas of Love

When the Lord was asked which commandment was the greatest, He didn’t pick just one. He answered, “*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’*” (Mt 22:38-39). It would be easy to delude oneself into thinking that I love God, when in fact what I love is ceremonial, music, or the fellowship of my church friends. It is not so easy to delude oneself about loving another concrete individual with whom we may not have any particular affinity. As we read in the first epistle of John, “*If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?*” (1 Jn 4:20)

For the believer, then, godly love is directed toward God, but authenticated by our relationships with others.

Love in Action

How can a person show love for God while living an ordinary life in the world? Many suggest that we begin by getting out of ourselves as much as possible in our spiritual lives. We observe a Rule of Prayer without wavering. We don’t pray simply when we feel like it or when it is convenient but every day. Just as parents need to feed their child without fail or dog owners need to walk their pet regularly, we need to make that act of love which is prayer as consistently

as these other actions. Following a Rule of Prayer becomes as selfless an act because it is done for the Other, not to please oneself.

When we approach fasting in the same way it becomes a clear act of love. When people fast only when they feel like it or according to their own regimen instead of the Church's practice, they may well be doing it to please themselves. Fasting on the days appointed in the Tradition, without making excuses for oneself, is a way of leaving one's ego behind in an act of love for God.

If these practices are authentically directed toward God, they will invariably lead us to reach out to our neighbor whom God loves. Almsgiving, particularly in terms of sharing our precious free time with others, is for the Christian a concrete act of love for Christ in His Body or on His creation.

Setting up one's own plan of Godly practices can be little more than an ego trip. We try to show ourselves as truly spiritual by committing ourselves to unkeepable rules of prayer or fasting beyond what it required. We commit ourselves to serve others in ways that we cannot hope to sustain. Invariably we learn that these practices do not suit us and we give off all attempts at reaching out to God. The traditional remedy for excesses like these is that people striving to live for God obtain the blessing of their spiritual guide for each ascetical activity they attempt.

People in a free society become used to doing things their own way, to being independent. But a person who resolves to love God needs to move beyond his "rights" and look towards doing whatever is necessary to serve the Other. Following the directions of a knowledgeable spiritual guide in choosing acts of love appropriate to our spiritual maturity and state in life can help us avoid disappointing ourselves and those who we serve by being unable to complete the spiritual work we have begun.

Such a guide should be someone who knows the Church's Tradition of spirituality and who knows us as well. Having grown through their own practice of the spiritual Tradition, such a guide is helping us, not from books, but from personal experience. By the same token your guide should know you deeply – your strengths and weaknesses, your state in life and responsibilities – and be able to discern what is right for you at this stage in your life. Such a guide is usually a monastic or a priest-confessor, but not every priest or monastic is necessarily the best spiritual guide for you. If you do not now have such a guide, pray that the Lord lead you to such a person who can walk with you on your journey to Him.

Why Do We Love?

The Greek nun, Mother Gavriilia, served in India for many years doing the same sort of work as Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Her witness shows that she learned about love from her own experience.

“[Once she was asked] What does God want me to do?...The answer was: God is not interested in where you are or what you do...He is interested only in the quality and quantity of the love you give. Nothing else. Nothing else.”

“Love as taught by Christ is offered without expecting anything in return. This is the great, the vast difference [from earthly love]. In this love the ego no longer exists. Our own self ceases to be. We give our love to the other as we receive it from God, without any thought as to what he does with it.... All persons of God love in this way. They do not love because they expect something in return from the one they love. They love because if you cease loving you cease living.”

Third Saturday of St Luke (Lk 5:27-32)

This Saturday’s passage follows immediately on last week’s. “*After these things He went out and saw a tax collector...*” (v. 27). Besides its fishery, Capernaum was also the site of mills processing the grain and olives grown nearby. As the town was a good source of revenue, King Herod had an agent there to collect taxes.

Local rulers like Herod were responsible to the Romans – they had to deliver the taxes assessed for their region. Rulers would farm out the collecting of customs, tolls and some other taxes to so-called *publicans*, local residents who bought franchises to collect the taxes in a given area. They often formed societies and pooled their share of the taxes.

Mark and Luke name this tax collector “Levi, the son of Alphaeus” while in Mt 9:9 he is called Matthew. The three texts tell the same story and so Matthew/Levi is clearly the same person. Why is he given two different names?

There is a clue in the Greek text of Mt where the tax collector is called *Mattheion legomenon* (the one called Matthew – i.e. God’s gift). Perhaps Levi the tax collector came to be called God’s gift (“Matthew”) in the community of believers. St Jerome thought that Levi had changed his own name; some Eastern commentators had thought that the Lord had changed it.

Matthew/Levi is clearly a man of some means. When Christ calls him, Matthew throws a great feast to which other tax collectors were invited, much to the annoyance of the Pharisees. Tax collectors were often thought of as traitors by strict Jews because they had accepted to work for their Roman occupiers. They were often regarded as thieves because they often took more from their fellow-Jews than was their due. Thus, when some tax collectors had responded to the preaching of John the Baptist, he told them, “*Collect no more than what is appointed for you*” (Lk 3:8).

By going to Matthew/Levi’s home the Lord blessed His new disciple’s choice to follow Him and encouraged the other tax collectors to do the same. Many Pharisees resented Him for this; “*Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!*” they sneered (Lk 7:34). But

in this way the Lord reached people like Matthew/Levi, and even a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus, who became His followers and our guides leading us to Him.

Third Sunday of St Luke

Signs of the Future Resurrection (Lk 7:11-16)

IF YOU WERE TO WALK DOWN THE STREET of an older Middle Eastern town such as the old city of Jerusalem, do not be surprised if you were to come upon a funeral procession like the one described in St Luke's Gospel. Some people still walk from the home of the departed following the clergy and the bearers carrying the body, perhaps wrapped in a shroud, in an open coffin or on a bier. A Christian funeral procession might stop at the church before continuing on to the cemetery. The body might be placed in the ground simply wrapped in the shroud, particularly in Jewish or Muslim burials.

Christ encounters such a funeral at the Galilean village of Na'in, near Nazareth. *“And when He came near the gate of the city, behold, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother; and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the city was with her. When the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her and said to her, ‘Do not weep.’ Then He came and touched the open coffin, and those who carried him stood still. And He said, ‘Young man, I say to you: ‘arise.’ So he who was dead sat up and began to speak. And He presented him to his mother”* (Lk 7:11-15).

Resurrection or Resuscitation?

We commonly think of what Jesus did for this young man as “raising him from the dead.” Speaking in this way, it is easy to mistake this event as being the same as Christ's own resurrection. This is clearly not the case.

The Lord Jesus rose to the new and eternal life of victory over death. The ways in which He manifested Himself were clearly different from our normal earthly experience. He entered rooms when the doors were closed, appeared in other forms (to Mary Magdalene and the disciples on the road to Emmaus) and ascended to His Father with the promise of a future return.

We know of no such happenings in the life of the young man of Na'in. He resumed the earthly life he had before. As the Gospel says, the Lord gave the young man back to his mother. Speaking precisely we should say that he was resuscitated or revived, rather than resurrected.

Three Resuscitations

The Gospels contain three reports of resuscitations, each one being slightly different. Both Mark and Luke report the revival of Jairus' daughter. Her father, *“a ruler of the synagogue”* (Lk 8:40)

told Jesus that his daughter was dying. By the time they got to the man's house they were told that the girl had died. "Now all wept and mourned for her; but [Jesus] said, 'Do not weep; she is not dead, but sleeping.' And they ridiculed Him, knowing that she was dead. But He put them all outside, took her by the hand and called, saying, 'Little girl, arise.' Then her spirit returned, and she arose immediately. And He commanded that she be given something to eat" (Lk 8:52-55).

Unlike the girl, who had just died, the young man in Lk 7 had been dead for at least some hours. Customarily in the Middle East people would be buried on the day that they died. The third and even more amazing revival is, of course, that of Lazarus who had died four days before Jesus called him from the tomb (see Jn 11). While each of these people were returned to the same earthly life which they had before, the Fathers saw them as indications of the true resurrection to come. St Cyril of Alexandria, for example, teaches:

"Christ is the Destroyer of death and of corruption: He is the One 'in whom we live and move and are.' He it is who has restored the nature of man to that which it originally was; and has set free our death-fraught flesh from the bonds of death. ...

"We understand that those persons who were restored to life by the power of Christ are a pledge of the hope prepared for us of a resurrection of the dead: namely, this young man, Lazarus of Bethany, and the daughter of the chief of the synagogue. ...

"For it was by reason of Adam's transgression of the commandment that we, having our faces turned away from God, returned to our dust: for the sentence of God upon human nature was, 'Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return.' But at the time of the consummation of this world, the face of the earth shall be renewed: for God the Father by the Son in the Spirit will give life to all those who are laid within it." (*Sermon 36 on Luke*).

The Near-Death Experience

In 1975 physician and psychologist Raymond Moody authored *Life After Life*, recounting a number of cases where people were pronounced clinically dead after heart attacks, accidents or other traumas. They regained consciousness after a period of time, anywhere from 10 minutes to several hours, and told of being able to see their physicians working on them or viewing their death from outside their bodies. One accident victim only came to when he felt a pathologist begin to autopsy him!

Most spoke of beatific after death experiences such as a feeling of peace and happiness, meeting spiritual beings and/or dead loved ones and seeing a radiant light. Some – upwards of twenty percent in one study – spoke of frightening experiences: extreme fear, panic or anger, demonic creatures or embittered human-like voices that mock or taunt the subjects.

Many of our otherwise skeptical contemporaries have concluded that near-death experiences prove the existence of an afterlife. Some believing Christians have taken these recorded experiences in our own day as confirmation of the Church's faith.

In any case, the Lord did not promise to take away death; rather, He died with us and instead of us. He has transformed death into a bridge for us to cross over to paradise in order to await the great Day of the Lord. This is why St Augustine says, "It is more of a miracle that someone rises to live forever than that he rises to die again."

NDE's in the Tradition

Today's near-death experiences in some ways reinforce the experience of the saints.

St Bede the Venerable (673-735) reported in his *Ecclesiastical History*: "There was a certain householder in that district of the Northumbrians which is called Incuneningum, who led a godly life, with all his house. This man fell sick, and his sickness daily increasing, he was brought to extremity, and died in the beginning of the night; but at dawn he came to life again, and suddenly sat up, whereat all those that sat about the body weeping fled away in great terror; only his wife, who loved him better, though trembling and greatly afraid, remained with him. And he comforting her, said, 'Fear not, for I am now in very deed risen from the death which held me, and permitted again to live among men; nevertheless, hereafter I must not live as I was wont, but after a very different manner.'"

Likewise St Athanasius of the Kiev Caves (+1176) reported returning to this life after two days in the next world. He refused to discuss what he saw there, saying only, "Even if I were to tell you, you would not believe me or listen to me." When he was pressed to explain, he would only say "Repent and pray!"

Fourth Saturday of St Luke

Jesus and the Sabbath Rest (Lk 6:1-10)

MANY OF THE GOSPEL PASSAGES chosen for Saturday Liturgies recount the Lord Jesus' activity on the Sabbath. Often these narratives describe the conflict Jesus had, particularly with the Pharisees, over His behavior which they felt desecrated the Sabbath.

Observant Jews in every age have revered the Sabbath as one of most important signs of their relationship with God. Its observance is documented from the time of the exodus from Egypt, although the Torah describes it as instituted in Paradise: "*And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made*" (Gen 2:2, 3).

For Jews the Sabbath is the most important of the Jewish feasts; a foretaste of the world to come. The Sabbath is a day of rest "*holy to the Lord*" (Ex. 31:15), on which even slaves were released from their labors. The weekly day of rest has no parallel in any other ancient civilization. In ancient times, leisure was for the wealthy and the ruling classes only, never for the serving or laboring classes. In addition, the very idea of rest each week was unimaginable. The Greeks thought Jews were lazy because they insisted on having a "holiday" every seventh day.

The Sabbath is primarily a day of rest and spiritual enrichment in remembrance of the Lord's rest at the end of creation. For observant Jews, the Sabbath is a day of great joy eagerly awaited throughout the week, a time when people can set aside their everyday concerns and devote themselves to higher pursuits.

Observing the Sabbath has insured the identity of the Jewish people over the ages. In the words of the popular Jewish saying, "more than Israel has kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept Israel."

Defiling the Sabbath

From the beginning violating the Sabbath was considered a great offence against God. According to the Torah, "*Everyone who profanes [the Sabbath] shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people. Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh is the Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death*" (Ex 31:14, 15). When a man was found gathering wood on the Sabbath contrary to the Lord's command, he was stoned to death by the community (see Num. 15:32-36). Thus it was clear from the very beginning that this day of rest was not to be taken lightly.

By Jesus' time the death penalty for violating the Sabbath was no longer in force. The moral authority of the Sabbath had increased, however. The Pharisees and others observant Jews elaborated new precepts to insure a "pure" observance of the Sabbath. Thus some taught that on the Sabbath Jews were supposed to remain distant from their Gentile neighbors: "Do not remain near to the Gentiles on the Sabbath" – they would be defiled and thus defile the Sabbath.

Some Rabbis taught that, if even one Sabbath were rightly kept the Messiah would appear; if all Israel were to observe two successive Sabbaths as they should be observed, redemption would immediately occur. It should not surprise us, then, that, when Jesus "violated the Sabbath" by working (healing the sick), "*the Pharisees went out and immediately plotted with the Herodians against Him, how they might destroy Him*" (Mk 3:6).

Lord of the Sabbath

On the First Saturday in the Cycle of St Luke the Gospel passage read described how Jesus cured a man with an unclean spirit. In Luke 6:1-10 we read what happened on the "*second Sabbath after the first*," (v. 1), i.e. two weeks later.

The Lord is criticized for plucking ears of grain on the Sabbath. They considered this to be work, a violation of the day of rest. The Lord replies, not saying that plucking grain is allowed on the Sabbath, but with an example from the history of the Israelites: "*Have you not even read this, what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he went into the house of God, took and ate the showbread, and also gave some to those with him, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat?*" (vv.3, 4).

The showbread, called in Hebrew the bread of presence, consisted of twelve loaves placed on a table in the temple near the altar of incense, representing the constant self-offering of Israel

before God. Each Sabbath the bread was to be replaced with newly baked loaves. The older loaves were to be consumed by the priests.

The incident to which Jesus referred took place when the young David was on a secret mission for King Saul. He asked the priest for some food for himself and his escort: “*Give me five loaves of bread in my hand, or whatever can be found.*’ And the priest answered David and said, ‘*There is no common bread on hand; but there is holy bread, if the young men have at least kept themselves from women.*’ Then David answered the priest, and said to him, ‘*Truly, women have been kept from us about three days since I came out. And the vessels of the young men are holy, and the bread is in effect common, even though it was consecrated in the vessel this day.*’ So the priest gave him holy bread; for there was no bread there but the showbread which had been taken from before the LORD, in order to put hot bread in its place on the day when it was taken away” (1 Sm 21:3-6).

In contrast to the rigidity of the Pharisees, the priest in David’s time felt free to share the leftover showbread with the king’s servants. Also in Matthew’s longer narrative of the incident Jesus asks the Pharisees, “*Have you not read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless?*” (v. 5) Matthew’s audience of Jewish believers would have understood the reference; Luke’s community of Gentile believers probably would not, hence Luke omits it.

In his *Commentary on Matthew* St Jerome explains the passage this way: “You yourselves violate the Sabbath when sacrificing victims in the Temple: slaughtering bulls, and... circumcising little children on the Sabbath.” Every rule has its exceptions.

But the deeper significance of the incident is this: Jesus dispenses with the Sabbath rule as the priest Ahimelech had done. He is the priest with authority over the temple and the Sabbath; as He tells the Pharisees, “*Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple ...the Son of man is also Lord of the Sabbath*” (Mt 12:5; Lk 6:5). The Pharisees’ aim of perfect Sabbath observance in order to bring in the Messiah is futile: the Messiah has already come.

Fourth Sunday of St Luke

When the Seed Is Choked (Lk 8:5-15, 8)

ONE OF THE SAD MOMENTS in a pastor’s life is when beloved parishioners leave the parish. Some move away for work or family reasons and they go with a blessing for their new life. It is so much harder for a pastor to see those he shepherded lessen their parish involvement or fall away completely from the observance of a Christian life. Like a parent, the parish priest may ask himself: “what should I have done?”

As a rule, Jesus did not explain His parables in detail. He left His hearers to interpret their meaning for themselves. The parable of the sower (Lk 8:5-15) is an exception. The Lord assigns

a meaning to each item in it: the seed is the word of God, it germinates or not according to the hearers or the circumstances of their lives.

The sower scatters the seed, but how the seed is received and what happens to it is out of his hands. The nature of the ground and the circumstances of the surrounding world join to either foster or hinder the seed's taking root. Those who would have the seed (which is the word of God) mature within them should reflect on what causes the faith to wither in people today.

Some, we know, fall away from influences in the secular society around us. We are accustomed to see making money, shopping and entertainment as *the* life-enhancing experiences our world has to offer. People who have accepted this world view often don't see themselves as "getting anything out of" the Church. In our society standing in the presence of God has no meaning and its spiritual fruits are of no interest to it.

Others, however, are like the seed which takes root but is choked by controversies within the Church itself. In many communities there are a host of parish-dividing issues which drive people away. Some of them are critical issues which must be dealt with. The Ecumenical Councils were a response to divisive issues over the Church's understanding of God and Christ which could not be ignored. Today conflicting attitudes toward moral issues such as abortion or same-sex "marriages" have split many Protestant congregations and have no doubt affected many Catholic and Orthodox communities as well.

The need to confront challenges to faith and morals in the Church is underscored in our celebration of the Ecumenical Councils. Three Sundays of the year are devoted to these commemorations bringing us to recognize this need. At the same time, we acknowledge that the controversies which led to these gatherings were often affected by issues of language and culture which the participants could not overcome. Over time many of these difficulties have been swept away so that Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox and the Church of the East have been able to issue Agreed Statements affirming the one faith of the Apostolic Church.

Divisions in Our Parishes

More common causes for division in our local communities are centered on far less crucial concerns: issues which suggest that we have yet to become a Church at all! Many parishes are split over who "controls" the parish. Is it the sons and daughters of the original founders who saved to build and adorn the temple? Is it the wave of recent immigrants who have breathed new life into an older parish? Is it the different families competing for social prominence in the local community? In each of these circumstances the parish has become more of a club than a church, subject to worldly politics rather than the dynamics of faith.

Another parish-dividing issue is frequently the location of the parish facilities. An older congregation is divided over whether or where to relocate when the bulk of the parishioners live elsewhere or when the neighborhood of the church had deteriorated. A new parish is divided over

where and when to buy or build their own temple. Those who live further from a chosen site resent the families who live nearer and accuse them of trying to take over the church.

Another frequently divisive question is the liturgical language to be used. Some prefer the older liturgical language, such as Greek or Slavonic. Others want the spoken language of the old country to be used primarily, if not exclusively. Another element in the congregation sees no need for any other language than English.

Sometime the secular politics of the parish's countries of origin intrude themselves into parish life here. Even opinions on American politics – which often have moral overtones – can divert the attention of parishioners from the life of the Gospel and divide a congregation. “I won't go back there – they're Fascists, Communists, Democrats, Republicans, etc.”

Parish activities themselves can foster their own brand of political rivalries. Those who side with having a parish festival line up against those who do not. Whether stuffed cabbage for the feast day dinner is prepared “our way” or “their way” has prompted resentments and splits in many a community.

What to Do?

In these issues – most of which have little to do with the apostolic faith – the Liturgy offers a model. Before we presume to confess the Church's faith and to offer the holy gifts we are admonished, “Let us love one another so that with one mind we may confess...” Mutual love is the prerequisite for the Liturgy and for all our activity as Church.

How are we to act out our mutual love in practice? There are certainly no precise rubrics for this in the Scriptures but there are principles which are appropriately applied in the circumstances we have described. We would do well to reflect on them and consider how they may be relevant to our relationships in the Church.

Let everyone be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath, for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God (Jas 1:19-20).

Let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another (Rom 14: 19).

We who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification (Rom 15:1-2).

Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being (1 Cor 10:24).

Let all that you do be done in love (1 Cor 16:14).

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (Gal 6:2).

“The Seed Is the Word of God”

From its beginning the Church saw itself called to continue the mission of Christ the Sower to evangelize: to sow the seed of the Gospel throughout the world. *“The seed,”* the Lord says, *“is the word of God”* but just what is the core message that we are to proclaim? The New Testament suggests an answer: according to the apostolic writer it is *“That which was from the beginning, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and our hands have handled concerning the Word of life...that which we have seen and heard we declare to you that you also may have fellowship with us for truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ”* (1 Jn 1:1, 3).

“That which was from the beginning” – Human experience has never imagined the world without the presence of God, everywhere present and filling all things. He is the only truly existing One, from whom all creation has its being.

“That which we have seen with our eyes” – Jesus is that Word, the Messiah awaited by Israel and incarnate of the Virgin Mary, to whose death and resurrection the apostles testified.

“That which we have looked upon and our hands have handled” – Christians bear witness to continually experiencing Christ in their midst in concrete ways, as He said:

- *“For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them”* (Mt 18:20) – In the Church at worship – principally at the Eucharist but also in the fullness of the Church year with its feasts, fasts and observances – Christ is physically present to us.
- *“Inasmuch as you did it to the least of my brethren you did it to me”* (Mt 25:40) – By extending hospitality, especially to the poor, we look upon and handle Christ, truly present to us in flesh and blood.

“Fellowship with the Father and the Son” – Our life in the Church is meant to open us to have communion with God the Holy Trinity in this life and in the age to come.

A Parish that Sows the Word of God?

In the West evangelists have generally focused on the first two of these points: the existence of God and the mission of Christ in the world, while minimizing “that which we have handled,” the witness of the worshipping community to whom seekers might be brought. As Eastern Christians we have a unique way of proclaiming the message of Christ: through the life of a community energized by the Liturgy. In the West some have reduced the liturgy to bare bones to focus on a message disconnected from community life; still others have trivialized the liturgy into a kind of feel-good community meeting. Eastern communities living their liturgical life to the full are able to proclaim the message “which we have looked upon and our hands have handled” and might thereby speak to some who have outgrown the empty secularism of the day.

For this to happen our experience of a worshipping community must reflect the vision expressed in our Tradition. Fr. Thomas Hopko told the story of encouraging such a seeker to attend the Liturgy to experience the fullness of Orthodoxy. The man did so, and his response was, “Everything you told me was a lie.” The people were physically present, but not participating on any visible level. They ignored him and another visitor at the coffee hour, etc. This incident

makes us ask, What would an outsider learn about our parish and its faith on any given Sunday? A brief checklist might help:

Does our parish gathering communicate a sense of fellowship with God? Do people seem eager to stand before the Lord in His holy place, to light candles, venerate icons, etc. or drift in at the last moment and stand in the back?

Is the full observance of the Lord's Day and the feasts and fasts of the Church year central to parish life? Are our parishioners committed to worship and to growing in knowledge and practice of their faith? What does the parish do to encourage such commitment? How many parishioners could answer a visitor's inquiry about the Church and its faith?

Is our parish a welcoming community: do visitors feel that they are welcome guests or suspicious outsiders?

Many commentators have observed that for parishes to convincingly sow the seed they must be committed to a strong faith and practice of their tradition. They must also have a zeal for bringing others to the Lord and to His Church. Do your parishioners care that certain families or even a particular generation (young or old) are absent from the Sunday Liturgy? What have they done to concretely manifest their concern? Or do they rely on the priest alone to fill the pews? Nor every individual is a street preacher, but the parish as a whole should be committed to sowing seeds in one form or another.

Fortune-Cookie Evangelization

Whenever you order Chinese food you receive, unasked, a fortune cookie. A similar approach may help many of our parishioners begin to re-evangelize themselves and painlessly spread the word of God.

The events that draw outsiders to our parishes generally fall into two categories: sacraments and fundraisers. Guests at weddings or funerals who come for social reasons may be given a memento in the name of the parish which connects the word of God with what they have seen and heard, such as *What We Believe about Marriage* or *Is There an Afterlife?* Pamphlets on more general topics could be included with every purchase at bake sales, food festivals or Christmas bazaars. Those interested in learning more could be directed to the parish or eparchial web site. Parishioners, especially your college students and young adults, might suggest topics for these inserts. They could be encouraged to post them on their Facebook pages or on other social media sites.

As a prelude to distributing these messages, parishioners themselves could be walked through the leaflets helping them to answer some basic questions which might arise (and be evangelized themselves). A steady practice of "fortune-cookie evangelism" can raise everyone's awareness of our call to proclaim that which we have heard and seen.

Was the Sower Wasting the Seed?

In the parable the sower casts his seed about indiscriminately, at the risk of losing much of what he has planted. But where his seed takes root, it multiplies a hundredfold. It was, perhaps, like

contemporary advertising. Most ads are thrown out but a few people are drawn to what they offer.

Parishes seeking to share what they have seen and heard can expect a lack of interest on the part of many. This should not discourage them from continuing to sow the seed. If the seed takes root in one out of a hundred hearts, the effort is worthwhile.

Fifth Saturday of St Luke

Asking with Expectant Faith (Lk 7:1-10)

IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY the ruins of a Byzantine-era synagogue in Capernaum were identified by a British cartographer. Later exploration showed that this so-called “White Synagogue” was built on the ruins of a first-century synagogue. Could this have been the one build by the centurion?

Capernaum was not a major city. If Roman soldiers were stationed there, enforcing the collection of taxes may have been their chief duty. In the time of Caesar Augustus Roman soldiers were directed to build temples wherever they were stationed. The theory was that supporting the local religion would make the Roman presence more palatable.

Personal piety may have motivated this centurion, however, according to the testimony of the Jewish elders: “*he loves our nation, and has built us a synagogue*” (Lk 7:5). The centurion is certainly familiar with Jewish practice; as Jesus nears the house, the man’s friends bring Him this message: “*Lord, do not trouble Yourself, for I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof. Therefore I did not even think myself worthy to come to You. But say the word, and my servant will be healed*” (vv. 6, 7). To enter a non-Jewish home would have rendered Jesus ritually unclean according to Jewish practice.

The centurion’s reluctance has inspired believers for centuries, particularly as they prepare to receive the Eucharist. The second prayer in the Byzantine service of Preparation for Holy Communion, attributed to St John Chrysostom, begins: “O Lord my God, I know that I am not worthy or sufficient that you should come under the roof of the house of my soul.” Christ enters each believer in the mystery of the Eucharist just as He was prepared to enter the centurion’s home.

While the centurion may have been thinking about Jewish ritual impurity, the Christian using his expression has something else in mind. It is our brokenness, expressed in our sins and transgressions, which renders us unworthy of union with Christ. We are “held in the bonds of slavery to the world, sick with deadly passions” (St Ambrose of Milan, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 5.83).

It is Christ’s love for mankind which removes this obstacle for each of us. Thus the seventh pre-Communion prayer repeats the sentiment but adds: “Since you in your love for man willed to dwell in me, I take courage and approach. You commanded: I will open wide the doors which You alone created, that You may enter with love as is Your nature.”

The Centurion's Faith

This centurion may have been like the centurion in Acts 10 whom St Luke calls a God-Fearer: a Gentile who was nearly a convert to Judaism, keeping as much of the Law as possible, but not submitting to circumcision. A God-Fearer might keep the Sabbath and observe the dietary laws and be permitted to participate in Jewish worship to some degree.

In any case, the centurion clearly had faith in the Lord Jesus' ability to heal his servant. Jesus commends the centurion for his faith, which exceeds that of God's chosen people: "*I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!*" (v.7) Israel had received the Covenant, the Law and the Promised Land; yet this foreigner is extolled above them for the quality of his faith.

In Matthew's telling of the story the Lord Jesus adds, "*And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*" (Mt 8:11-12). The story becomes an indictment of the "sons of the kingdom" in addition to a praise of the centurion's faith.

What Do We Mean by Faith?

In ordinary speech "faith" is taken to mean "accepting the truth of a certain body of teaching." We believe in the God described in the Scriptures and expressed in the Creed. We recognize that their teachings are objectively true. This kind of faith is both good and essential for being a Christian. The priest asks the catechumen seeking baptism, "Do you believe in Christ as king and God?" The catechumen responds by reciting the Creed. This is not the only kind of faith, however. Accepting the truth of God does not make someone a God-Fearer. "*You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!*" (Jas 2:19)

There are deeper levels of faith frequently described in Scripture and the teachings of the Fathers. In the Epistle of St James quoted above, the Apostle teaches the need for what has been called "acted-on faith." A person's faith must result in works. Thus, if we believe in God, we must worship Him. If we believe that Christ is the Head of His Body, the Church, we must live our Christian life in it. If we believe that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, we must prove it by the way we act.

There is another level of faith which St Paul teaches is a specific gift of the Holy Spirit not given to everyone in the Church; rather it is given to specific persons for the sake of everyone. "*There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit... But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit...*" (1 Cor 12:4-9). On this level "faith" is a particular gift over and above the believing and "acted-on" faith proper to all believers.

Confident Faith

One level of this deeper faith has been called "confident faith." This is the assurance deep within a person that "*... the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps His covenant and*

mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments” (Dt 7:9). It is the confidence that He is compassionate and merciful, “who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4).

It is this certainty that God ever loves us which enables the Christian to say to the Father with a full and trusting heart, “Thy will be done.”

Expectant Faith

An even more intense form of faith has been called “expectant faith,” the confidence that God will act in a specific situation. This is the faith of the centurion – a faith which the Lord described in another context, “*Have faith in God. I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him*” (Mk 11:22-23). Expectant faith is the hope and simple innocence that every child knows at some point in its life.

This level of faith is often tied to the gift of knowledge, where God’s will has been revealed to the believer. The Russian Saint John Maximovich, a man of continual prayer, was called to give Communion to a dying man in a Shanghai hospital. On his arrival he spotted a gregarious young man in his twenties playing a harmonica, who was to be discharged the next day. St John said to him, “I want to give you Communion right now.” The young man immediately confessed his sins and received Communion. The saint’s companion asked why he did not go to the dying man, but prayed with this obviously healthy young man instead. The saint answered: “He will die tonight, and the other, who is seriously ill, will live many years.” And so it happened.

Fifth Sunday of St Luke

The Rich Man in Hades (Lk 16:19-31)

WOULD WE BE AFFECTED if someone rose from the dead? We would probably say “Yes,” but the Lord says “No.” What does He know that we don’t?

Throughout the centuries, and even today, many people have what might be called mystical experiences. They see visions and dream dreams, to quote the prophet Joel. Thus St. Paul experienced the risen Christ on the road to Damascus and it changed his life. Similarly St. Peter and the other disciples encountered Christ risen from the dead and proclaimed it throughout the world. These experiences energized their ministries and jump-started the spread of the Gospel throughout the ancient world.

Such experiences continued throughout Christian history right up to our own day. One well-known Christian thinker in the modern world, the Russian Orthodox bishop in London, Metropolitan Anthony Bloom (1914-2003) described his encounter with the Lord in these words:

“I met Christ as a Person at a moment when I needed Him in order to live, and at a moment when I was not in search of Him. I was found; I did not find Him.

“I was a teenager then. ... I could not accept aimless happiness. Hardships and suffering had to be overcome, there was something beyond them. Happiness seemed to be stale if it had no further meaning. ... I decided that I would give myself a year to see whether life had a meaning, and if I discovered it had none I would not live beyond the year. I had no use for Church. I did not believe in God.”

Under duress, young Anthony attended a religious lecture at the Russian youth organization. He was greatly disturbed by the lecture and asked his mother for a copy of the New Testament to check the truth of what the speaker had been saying. He describes what happened:

“I expected nothing good from my reading, so I counted the chapters of the four Gospels to be sure that I read the shortest, not to waste time unnecessarily. And thus it was the Gospel according to St Mark which I began to read.

“I do not know how to tell you of what happened. I will put it quite simply and those of you who have gone through a similar experience will know what came to pass. While I was reading the beginning of St Mark’s Gospel, before I reached the third chapter, I became aware of a Presence. I saw nothing. I heard nothing. It was no hallucination. It was a simple certainty that the Lord was standing there and that I was in the presence of Him whose life I had begun to read with such revulsion and such ill-will... This was my basic and essential meeting with the Lord. From then I knew that Christ did exist.”

PBS commentator Frederica Mathewes-Green tells of a similar experience. She was a vocal agnostic who had dabbled in Hinduism. In *Facing East – A Pilgrim’s Journey into the Mysteries of Orthodoxy* (San Francisco, 1997), she describes her husband Gary as “a political animal who just didn’t think much about God.” She then tells how that changed:

“Gary’s shell began to crack when a professor required his philosophy class to read a Gospel. As he read the words of Jesus, he became convinced that here was one who ‘speaks with authority.’ Since Jesus said there was a God, Gary began to doubt his doubting.”

Frederica’s turn came on their honeymoon trip to Europe where the following took place:

“One day in Dublin I looked at a statue of Jesus and was struck to my knees, hearing an interior voice say, ‘I am your life.’ I knew it was the One I had rejected and ridiculed, come at last to seize me forever.”

What was different about these people compared to the brothers of the rich man in Christ’s parable?

Why “Few Are Chosen”

The apostles were religious people; they observed the precepts of Judaism as practiced in their day. Others were contemptuous of religion and had ridiculed it. Yet somewhere deep inside them was a search for meaning, a hidden disposition to faith, even if they were not practicing any

religion at the moment. Thus, when these momentous experiences took place, they received them wholeheartedly and changed their entire way of life.

People who have no interest in God or in any kind of an interior life, who are content pursuing a materialist way of life might easily shrug off a spiritual experience as some kind of delusion. They might blame it on a touch of the flu or having too much to drink.

Similarly the rich man's brothers in the parable may have paid lip service to the Scriptures but the focus of their lives was far from the things of God. They would not even have heard a voice from the dead.

Christ's Alternative

A parable is a story with a moral, not a detailed history of an event. In this case, as in most, the moral is found at the end of the story. When the rich man in the parable asks Abraham to send Lazarus to shake up his brothers, Abraham says, "*They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them*" (Luke 16:29). In other words, they have the Scriptures – what we call the Old Testament – as their means of discerning the mind of God for them.

This saying, of course, is directed at us – it is the moral of the story. We are meant to base our faith on the mystery of Christ as revealed in the Scriptures rather than on some fantasy that the holy Virgin or an angel might visit us. Just as our daily life must be based on something more practical than a hope of winning the lottery, so our Christian life must have the solid foundation of the word of God to us.

We have not only the Law and the prophets, but the Gospels and Epistles. We have the witness of Christ and the apostles, the testimony of the martyrs and the ascetics. We have the power of the holy mysteries, the voice of our liturgical texts and the unspoken voice of the holy icons. These are the voice of the Lord to us – let us hear them in faith.

A Missed Opportunity

When people think about violating God's law they think about sins of commission: doing something prohibited like stealing, harming another, or the like. We often forget that sins of omission – things that we neglect to do – are often even more damaging.

The rich man in Christ's parable is not accused of any sin of commission. He is not blamed for being rich any more than Lazarus is praised for being poor: in itself having money is not a sin. We are not told how he made his money. He is not accused of defrauding people as Zacchaeus claimed to have done. The only thing he is accused of is not giving alms.

The poor man, Christ says, lay at the rich man's gate, hoping for scraps. It may be easy to ignore a panhandler on the street; it is not so easy to ignore him when he is at your doorstep day after

day. Yet this is what the rich man did. He did not overlook abstract appeals from far-away charities; he passed by a flesh-and-blood person in need on his own doorstep, “the living creature,” as St John Chrysostom describes him, “for whom God cares” (*On Wealth and Poverty*).

The Purpose of Wealth

One of the ultimate questions behind this parable is, “What is money for?” In the ethics of the world the answer is clear: money is there for us to buy more and bigger and newer and better. According to the Scriptures, however, though we walk in the flesh, we do not live according to the flesh. We know that our money is the Lord’s, however we may have gathered it.

The purpose of money according to the vision of the kingdom of God depicted in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is set forth directly in St Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians. He writes, “*God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work*” (2 Cor 9:8). Our resources as meant to provide us with “*all sufficiency*,” meaning everything that we truly need, and “*an abundance*” – everything more than we need – for doing good. Does having multiple cars and homes or a TV in every room fall under the heading of “sufficiency”?

The rich man in Christ’s parable may have felt that he “needed” every scrap he had acquired but, as St. John Chrysostom affirmed, he did not know what he needed it for: “If a person enjoys luxury in moderation and distributes the rest to the stomachs of the poor, then his wealth does him good. But if he is going to give himself up to luxury and profligacy, not only does it not help him at all, but it even leads him down to the great pit. This is what happened to this rich man” (*On Wealth and Poverty*).

Where Do We Encounter God?

Devout believers are convinced that they encounter God in worship – in the words of the Bible, in the Eucharistic presence. The Lord taught the very thing: “*Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them*” (Mt 18:20). When the Body of Christ comes together in worship – particularly in the Divine Liturgy – the Head is surely there as well.

But Christ also indicates another instance of His presence in our midst. He affirms that He is present in the needy of this world. In His parable of the last judgment Christ rewards those who fed and clothed Him, who welcomed Him or visited Him when He was sick or in prison. “*Assuredly I say to you,*” He tells them, “*inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren you did it to Me*” (Mt 25:40).

In the Liturgy we truly encounter the glorious Christ: the candles, the singing, the incense and the icons all point to Him as He is now: at the right hand of the Father, praised by the saints and angels. But in the poor we encounter the Christ who put aside His glory and took on our broken

humanity that we might ultimately share in His divine sonship. The person in need is an icon of the humiliated Christ, the suffering Christ, the dying Christ – as much an icon of Christ in its way as is the Liturgy. Most of us find it easier to see the Lord of glory in the Liturgy. It seems to take a Dorothy Day, a Mother Teresa of Calcutta or a Father Damian of Molokai to see Christ incarnate in human weakness.

The late Catherine de Hueck Dougherty, daughter of a noble Russian family, tells of how her parents recognized the presence of Christ in the poor. “Early in my childhood, the truth that Christ is in my neighbor was shown to me by my parents’ example and words. No one was ever turned from our door, bum or beggar, woman of the streets or thief. The men were welcomed by my father. He gave them a bath himself, or mother would do it for the women; then they would be given clothing if they needed it. They would be served by Mother and Father and by us children – *if we had been good through the week* and thus worthy of serving Christ in the poor – on our best linen and from our best china in the main dining room” (*My Russian Yesterdays*).

The baron and baroness had clearly learned what the rich man in Christ’s parable had not: that the beggar at the gate is one whom God sends as a means for the salvation of the rich. As St John Chrysostom phrased it, “The Rich Man had in Lazarus an opportunity to learn virtue and to show forth love. Instead of accepting Lazarus’ help, he betrayed himself with heartless greed and an unwillingness to share his own wealth... for nothing can so make a man an imitator of Christ as caring for his neighbors.

Indeed, even though you fast, or sleep on hard ground, or even suffer unto death, but should take no thought of your neighbor, you have done nothing great; despite what you have done, you still stand far from this model of a perfect Christian” (*On Wealth and Poverty*).

Who is the Rich Man?

“If we are to tell the truth, the rich man is not the one who has collected many possessions but the one who needs few possessions; and the poor man is not the one who has no possessions but the one who has many desires. We ought to consider this the definition of poverty and wealth. So if you see someone greedy for many things, you should consider him the poorest of all, even if he has acquired everyone’s money. If, n the other hand, you see someone with few needs, you should count him the richest of all, even if he has acquired nothing.

“We are accustomed to judge poverty and affluence by the disposition of the mind, not by the measure of one’s substance. Just as we would not call a person healthy who was always thirsty, even if he enjoyed abundance, even if he lived by rivers and springs, (for what use is all that water when his thirst remains unquenchable). Let us do the same in the case of wealthy people: let us never consider those people healthy who are always yearning and thirsting after other people’s property; let us not think that they enjoy any abundance. For if one cannot control his own greed, even if he has appropriated everyone’s property, how can he ever be affluent? But those who are satisfied with what they have and pleased with their own possessions and do not have their eyes on the substance of others, even if they are the poorest of

all, should be considered the richest of all. For whoever has no need of others' property but is happy to be self-sufficient is the most affluent of all."

St John Chrysostom, *Second Sermon on Lazarus and the Rich Man*

Sixth Saturday of St Luke

What Was Hidden Is Revealed (Lk 8:16-21)

MOST OF THE LORD JESUS' public life was spent among farmers, fishermen, shepherds and tradespeople. Little wonder, then, that the imagery in His parables is drawn from their experience. The image in today's reading would have been familiar to all. Everyone was dependent on lamps to dispel the darkness.

In the first century – and for many centuries before and after – a household lamp was bowl-shaped and generally made of pottery. It had an opening in the center into which oil would be poured and another at one end for a wick. It was generally small enough to fit in the palm of one's hand. It might be placed on a shelf or on a lampstand in the center of a table. A larger room might have full-sized lampstands spaced around the room. The lampstand was generally shaped like a candlestick, except that the top was shaped like a flat saucer on which the lamp would be placed, instead of a candleholder. The higher the lampstand, the wider would be the circle of light.

The Lord reminds His hearers that, “*No one, when he has lit a lamp, covers it with a vessel or puts it under a bed, but sets it on a lampstand, that those who enter may see the light*” (Lk. 8:16). The illustration is obvious, but what is the meaning which the Lord attaches to it?

The imagery of light runs through the Gospels. The Lord uses the image to describe John the Baptist: “*He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light*” (Jn 5:35). John was a lamp in that he shone light on the salvation that was coming in Christ: “*Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*” (Jn 1:29).

Often, as in Jn 1:9 and throughout that Gospel, the light is Christ Himself, “*the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.*” The Lord Jesus described Himself in this way: “*I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life*” (Jn 8:12).

In our liturgy light is frequently depicted as representing Christ. Perhaps the earliest example is the hymn sung at vespers every evening. It glorifies Christ as the “Radiant light of the holy glory of the immortal Father.” It was recorded in the late third- century *Apostolic Constitutions*, meaning that it was already in use by then.

The Lamp in Luke's Gospel

The images of the lamp and lampstand are used in Luke to designate something else: the message announced by John the Baptist and proclaimed by Christ – that the Kingdom of God was at hand. God was going to act in a decisive way and the only possible response by His people had to be repentance. Christ’s preaching was the placing of the lamp on the lampstand. His word was to shed light on the house of Israel.

This is made clearer by what precedes and what follows the parable of the lamp in this chapter. The first fifteen verses of Luke 8 recount the parable of the sower. In it “*The seed is the word of God*” (v. 11) which is received in different ways by those who hear it. Some hear, but “*the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved.*” Others receive the word with joy, but “*in time of temptation fall away.*”

Others hear the word but “*are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life.*” Their fruit does not ripen. “*But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience.*”

By sowing the seed of the word the Lord Jesus was placing the lamp on the lampstand so that the whole house – the people of Israel – would be illumined.

What follows the parable of the lamp is the unsettling vignette in which Christ’s family comes to see Him. His response seems to dismiss them: “*My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it*” (v. 21). In fact, He is exalting those who respond to His message: those who accept the message that the Kingdom of God is at hand and who repent and follow Christ are His family.

What Has Been Hidden?

The next verse in the parable of the lamp is somewhat cryptic: “*For nothing is secret that will not be revealed, nor anything hidden that will not be known and come to light*” (v.17). What is hidden that the Lord Jesus’ teaching is to reveal?

For many Jews the “Kingdom of God” was to be an independent Israel, a restoration of the kingdom of David and Solomon. That was not God’s plan. The “Kingdom of God” was to be that all creation be renewed in Christ.

St Paul decades later would pick up on elements from the parables of the lamp and the sower in Luke to explain God’s purposes. He would speak of “what was hidden” as “*the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ... according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Eph 3:9-11).

Paul's whole ministry was built on his conviction that the Kingdom was open to Gentiles as well as Jews. Thus he would write to the Colossians that the Gospel "...has come to you, as it has also in all the world, and is bringing forth fruit" in that the Father "... has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light.

He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Col 1:6, 12-14).

The light of Christ enlightens all mankind.

What Was Hidden Is Revealed

"Here is that great and hidden mystery. Here is that blessed end for whose sake all things were created. This is the divine purpose foreknown before the beginning of creation... This is the mystery spanning all the ages, revealing the supremely infinite and infinitely inconceivable plan of God."

"The mystery of the incarnation of the Logos is the key to all the arcane symbolism and typology in the Scriptures, and in addition gives us knowledge of created things, both visible and intelligible." "The great mystery of the divine incarnation remains a mystery forever. How can the Word made flesh be essentially the same person that is wholly with the Father? How can he who is by nature God become by nature wholly man without lacking either nature, neither the divine by which he is God nor the human by which he became man? Faith alone grasps these mysteries. Faith alone is truly the substance and foundation of all that exceeds knowledge and understanding."

(St. Maximos the Confessor)

The mystery which was hidden from eternity and unknown to the angel has been revealed through you, O Theotokos, to those on earth; for God took flesh in a union without commixture and willingly took up the cross by which He elevated the first man and saved our souls from death. (Octoechos, Tone 4)

Sixth Sunday of St Luke

The Gadarene Demoniac (Lk 8:27-39)

THE GOSPELS RECORD SEVERAL INSTANCES when the Lord Jesus called people to be His followers. At times He called people to leave their homes and livelihoods and follow Him. He called Peter and Andrew, James and John as they were busy fishing “*and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him*” (Mt 4:22). Similarly Matthew walked away from his toll booth and followed Jesus (see Mt 9:9); the other disciples whose calls are not recorded in the Gospels did the same.

Sometimes the Lord called but was refused. The cost of following Jesus was more than some people could bear. To the rich young man who wanted to be perfect Jesus said, “*If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*’ *When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth*” (Mt 19:21-22).

In other instances the Lord raised objections Himself before the would-be follower could discover through failure and discouragement that following Christ meant enduring hardships. Thus “*a teacher of the law came to Him and said, ‘Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.’ Jesus replied, ‘Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head’*” (Mt 8:19-20). The Lord wanted this teacher of the law to know that following Christ would not provide the comfortable lifestyle he may have been anticipating.

To a procrastinator, however, He gave the opposite advice. “*Then another disciple said to him, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ But Jesus told him, ‘Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead’*” (Mt 8:21-22). The Lord surely wanted followers but He had a different approach based on the readiness of the person before Him.

This passage suggests the hurdles that people in any age will face when they consider following the Lord in a radical way: fear of the unknown, self-concern, pre-occupation and attachment to other things all can hinder us from following Christ.

The Vocation of the Gadarene

The Gadarene whom Jesus healed (Lk 8:27-39) wanted to follow Jesus as well; the Scripture says that he “*begged to go with Him,*” but the Lord had another plan for him. “*Jesus sent him away, saying, ‘Return home and tell how much God has done for you.’ So the man went away and told all over town how much Jesus had done for him*” (Lk 8:38-39).

The Gadarenes had made it clear that they wanted Jesus to go away. He would not force Himself on them. At the same time He wanted to leave them with a permanent reminder of His presence: their own fellow countryman whom He had delivered. This man had once been a burden to the townspeople; now he would be a blessing.

The apostles were told to go through the world preaching the Gospel; this man’s call was to go home and do the same in his village. Was his call by Christ less of a vocation than that of the apostles? It was different, surely, but it was a vocation nonetheless.

Some people in the Church tend to think that “vocation” refers exclusively to the calling of a cleric or monastic. The Lord does call some people in every age to serve the Church as priests,

deacons, chanters, etc. He does invite others to serve Him as a monk or nun, or as a member of a religious community. But these are not the only people whom He calls to serve Him.

Our Fundamental Vocation

Every person baptized into Christ has a vocation. The essence of that vocation is perhaps best expressed in the First Epistle of Peter: “*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light*” (1 Pt 2:9).

There are three important aspects of our universal vocation expressed in this passage. First, our vocation is to a **priesthood**: what the Scripture calls a “royal priesthood.” Christ is the true kingly priest and because we have been baptized into Him and sealed in His Holy Spirit we share in His priesthood. Secondly, we share in this priesthood as **members of a people**, the people of God. We are not individually priests, as are the ministers of the altar, but members of a priesthood because of our common union with Christ the High Priest.

This passage also tells us **the reason for this priesthood**: “*that you may declare the praises of*” God. Our vocation as members of the royal priesthood is to share in the Church’s call to proclaim the work of God in Christ. Some, like the apostles and evangelizers, are called to bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Others, like the Gadarene whom Jesus delivered in the Gospel or the Samaritan Woman, are called to show forth God’s love for mankind in their own corner of the world. Still others – most of us in fact – are called to share in the Church’s common vocation to proclaim Christ.

How Can We “Proclaim?”

When we think about “proclaiming God’s works” we invariably think about speaking or writing. There is a host of other ways by which the Church makes the Good News present in our world. At the Bridegroom Matins on Holy Tuesday we are reminded that the abilities we have received are often the way in which the Lord makes known to us our way of responding to this call:

“Come, O faithful, let us work eagerly for the Master, for He distributes wealth to His servants; and let us increase the talent of grace, each one according to his ability. Let one adorn his wisdom with good deeds. Let another beautify the celebration of the service. Let someone strong in faith communicate the word to the uninitiated, and another dispense his wealth to the poor. Thus, we shall increase what has been loaned to us and, like faithful stewards of grace, shall be worthy of the Master’s joy. O Christ God, make us worthy of that joy, for You are the Lover of Mankind.”

Through each of these ways and countless others believers can take their place in the royal priesthood, joining in the Church’s mission to declare through word or work “*the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.*”

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What Happened to the Gadarenes?

The Gospels record that the Lord Jesus sent the man He had healed back home to witness to his neighbors. They do not tell us whether he was successful: was this village converted or not?

We do know that by the third century AD the village was all but deserted. The crag which overlooked the Sea of Galilee, however, had become a place of pilgrimage for Christians seeking to commemorate the healing of the Gadarene. By the fifth century a large monastery serving the pilgrims had been established there. The monastery was expanded in the sixth century but abandoned after a catastrophic earthquake destroyed much of the area in 749. Ruins of the monastery were excavated in the 1970s by the Israeli department of antiquities and were later incorporated into a national park.

Seventh Saturday of St Luke

Laborers for the Harvest (Lk 9:1-6)

OVER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS we will hear a sequence of narratives that follow one after another in Luke, chapters 9 through 11. Christ gathers His first twelve followers and sends them forth “to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick” (Lk 9:1). In the next chapter the Lord sends seventy others in advance “*into every city and place where He Himself was about to go*” (Lk 10:1).

Most Christians know the Twelve as “apostles” and the Seventy as “disciples,” but the Gospel makes no such distinction here. Luke calls the first group simply “the Twelve” whom the Lord “sends forth” (in Greek, *apesteilen*). In Matthew’s Gospel they are called *dodeka mathetais* (twelve disciples) in one verse and *dodeka apostolon* (twelve apostles) in the next (Mt 10:1, 2).

Luke speaks of “seventy others” (Lk 10:1) whom He “sends forth” (in Greek, *apesteilen* – the same word used for the Twelve). They were evidence that the total number of Christ’s followers was growing to the extent that a second circle of more committed followers could be formed. Matthew does not mention the Seventy at all.

Luke’s Gospel does not identify the Seventy and the early Christians speculated on who they might be. Several early Christians are called apostles in other New Testament books, however, including Barnabas (Acts 14:14), Andronicus, Junia, Silas, and Timothy (St Paul’s Epistles). Paul considered himself an Apostle called by the risen Christ as were the apostles in the Gospels. The evangelists Mark and Luke, not numbered among the Twelve, were considered by many early Christians to be among the Seventy.

In the Byzantine Churches both the Twelve – with Paul – and the Seventy are called Apostles. Many of them are commemorated individually throughout the year. The Twelve are celebrated together on a common feast day (June 30) while the Seventy are remembered on January 4.

The Disciples’ Mission

Luke is very specific about the mission of these respective groups. The Twelve, who were the first and closest followers of the Lord, were given “power and authority over all demons, and to cure diseases” and were sent forth “to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick” (Lk 9:1, 2). On the other hand, Jesus sent the Seventy “*two by two before His face into every city and place where He Himself was about to go... heal the sick there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you’*” (Lk 10:1, 9).

The Twelve may have been well known as Jesus closest followers, while the Seventy were not. This may explain why the Seventy were specifically sent out in pairs. At least two people were required to confirm the truth in serious matters (see Dt 17:6).

The Seventy were given the role of advance men, preparing the way for Christ’s immanent visits. According to the first-century Jewish historian Josephus, there were over 200 villages in Galilee at the time. To spend a few days in each one would have taken the better part of a year.

Some early writers saw the mission of these disciples as foreshadowing the role of Church in proclaiming the Kingdom of God by its preaching and in healing the sick by its sacramental ministry. By the sixth century many had come to see the Twelve as prefiguring the Church’s bishops and the Seventy as images of the presbyters.

Others stressed the continuity between the ministry of Christ’s disciples and the Church of their own day. Thus St Cyril of Alexandria wrote, “...these are things we see ourselves possessing. Blessed are our eyes and the eyes of all who love Him, We have heard His wonderful teaching. He has given us the knowledge of God the Father, and He has shown Him to us in His own nature. The things done by Moses were only types and symbols. Christ has revealed the truth to us: that not by blood and smoke but by spiritual sacrifices we must honor Him who is spiritual, immaterial, and beyond all understanding” (Homily 76, On Luke).

Instructions for the Mission

In sending forth the Twelve, Christ gave them some specific instructions.” “*Take nothing for the journey, neither staffs nor bag nor bread nor money; and do not have two tunics apiece. Whatever house you enter, stay there, and from there depart*” Lk 9:3, 4). The Apostles from the larger towns along the Sea of Galilee were sent to the out-of-the-way villages in Galilee’s interior. The Lord insists that they first of all share their hearers’ way of life, dressing simply and eating what they eat. They were to accept whatever hospitality was offered, not to look around for better accommodations. As St Ephrem the Syrian commented, they were to be perceived as heralds and evangelists, not merchants or opportunists.

Christ gives similar instructions to the Seventy when they are sent forth, adding “*greet no one along the road*” (Lk 10:4). They were on a spiritual mission, not going to socialize.

God’s Love for All

Christ sent His followers throughout Galilee to preach that the kingdom of God was at hand. The coming of the kingdom was an act of love on God’s part and everyone was welcome to respond to that love. Not everyone will be open to God, but everyone must have the chance to respond.

He tells the Seventy, “*But whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house.’ And if a son of peace is there, your peace will rest on it; if not, it will return to you*” (Lk 10:5, 6). As St Augustine of Hippo commented, it is not for us to decide in advance who should be invited into the Kingdom : “Since we do not know who is a son of peace, it is our part to leave no one out, to set no one aside, but to desire that all to whom we preach this peace be saved” (*Admonition and Grace* 15, 46).

For those who would not, the Lord’s response was uncompromising: “*Whoever will not receive you, when you go out of that city, shake off the very dust from your feet as a testimony against them*” (Lk 9:5). To the Seventy He added, “*I say to you that it will be more tolerable in that Day [when the kingdom comes to pass] for Sodom than for that city*” (Lk 10:12).

Reactions to the Mission

When the Lord’s followers returned from their mission they were overjoyed: “*Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name.*” But He said to them, “*Do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven*” (Lk 10:17, 20). It is too easy for the successful apostle (or pastor or teacher) to become overly proud of any seeming accomplishments they have achieved when it is God who has been working in them. If we have any cause for joy, it is that we have been called to be in the Kingdom.

Christ’s words to His companions remain true for us today: “***The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few; therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest***” (Lk 10:2). Pray for vocations.

Seventh Sunday of St Luke

The Hemorrhaging Woman (Lk 8:41-56)

WE LIVE IN A SPEED-DRIVEN AGE. We look for faster ways to accomplish every task: in the office, in the kitchen, in the classroom. In our economy, speed is a source of competitive advantage. In the workplace higher speed means greater efficiency. Today “to build a better mousetrap” means “to build a faster mousetrap.”

As a result we are increasingly intolerant of slowness. Waiting becomes more and more difficult. If we encounter a long line in a store, a bank or a post office our impulse is to leave and come back later. Our relationships with others may be scarred or shattered by our impatience with others. Our impatience with ourselves can make it impossible for us to rejoice in or even accept life in the present.

While people with chronic illnesses or handicaps have health services available to them as never before, their greatest suffering today may be psychological: knowing that they must live with their affliction day in and day out without hope of deliverance. Some advocate suicide or mercy

killing as a way out of this impasse. The Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland have decriminalized mercy killing in certain circumstances to give people a “way out” of their hopeless conditions.

In contrast we find the situation of the woman recorded in the Gospels whose hopeless condition exceeded anything prevalent in developed countries today. We are told that she had been hemorrhaging for twelve years. In the Torah any contact with vital fluids such as blood rendered a person ritually impure and called for the sufferer to be avoided. *“If a woman hemorrhages for many days not at the time of her period she shall be unclean as in the days of her period. Every bed that she lies on and every object that she sits on shall be unclean as in the time of her period. Anyone who touches her shall be unclean and shall wash his clothes and bathe in water and be unclean until the evening. When she is cleansed from her discharge, she must count off seven days, and after that she will be ceremonially clean.”* (Leviticus 15:25-28). Since this woman was still hemorrhaging, it meant that she could not have experienced any intimate contact for twelve years.

Christ Alone Brings Healing

In Mark 5:26 we read that her attempts at finding medical help had been as fruitless as they were financially draining. She had no hope until she heard of Jesus. She approached Him secretly to avoid defiling Him or being rejected by Him, but touching the All-Pure One cleansed and purified her. Contact with the Long-Suffering One ended her long suffering.

In the New Testament physical healings and other miracles generally point to spiritual healing. Here the woman’s illness and her healing contact with Christ direct our minds to reflect on our own spiritual condition.

Most Christians today look upon the idea of ritual impurity in the Old Testament manner as antiquated and not part of our spirituality. Yet, each of us is unfit for contact with the Holy One because we share a nature scarred by sin and subject to death. We need to touch the hem of Christ’s garment for our broken nature to be restored.

For us who live in the time after Christ’s resurrection the “hem of His garment,” the physical realities which convey His divine power to us, are the Holy Mysteries. In baptism we rise with Him from the death of our broken humanity. In the Eucharist we become more deeply one with Him in His Body, the Church. We come to Him in the various circumstances of our life – our need for physical or spiritual healing, our desire to experience His blessing on our families and our ministries – seeking to be transformed by His presence. And when we approach the water, chrism, oil, or crowns with the faith of this unnamed woman in the Gospels we are touched by the power going out from Him through them as well.

The Mysteries as “Works of the Law”

It is all too easy for us, particularly those raised in the Church, to approach the Holy Mysteries as if they were acts of ritual cleansing as described in the Torah. We can bring our children for baptism because that’s what we do with babies to “make them Christians.” We can approach the

mystery of confession legalistically, so that we can get a pass to receive the Eucharist. Approaching any of the mysteries as if they were rites of passage or ritual purifications – or as anything other than reaching out to touch the hem of Christ’s garment – turns them into “works of the Law.” And, as St Paul insists, “*by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified*” (Gal 2:16).

Our sacramental contacts with Christ are meant to affect our life. The Holy Mysteries are not simply “rites,” ceremonial moments that we perform then return to ordinary life without their affecting the way we live. On the one hand we live and worship as Christians only because we have “touched” Christ. He alone is holy, He alone is Lord.

On the other hand we know that our baptismal union with Christ does not guarantee that we will live the life we have received. As with the woman in the Gospels, our contacts with Christ are simply part of the story. The way we live determines how the story develops and will end.

The Woman in Eastern Christian Lore

The Scriptures do not mention this woman again. A later work, the *Acts of Pilate*, gave her a name, Berenice, but this does not shed any light on how her healing affected her life. In the West this name was transliterated as Veronica, whose connection with Christ’s passion was popularized in the Middle Ages.

The *Acts of Pilate*, parts of which date to the mid-second to third century, describe this woman as offering testimony at the trial of Jesus: “There was found there also a woman named Berenice, and she said: ‘Twelve years I was in an issue of blood, and I only touched the edge of his garment, and directly I was cured.’ The Jews say: ‘Our law does not admit the testimony of a woman’” (*Acts of Pilate*, 7).

According to one tradition, Berenice caused a statue of the Lord Jesus to be made in gratitude for her healing, before which she prayed to God. The fourth century Bishop of Caesarea, Eusebius, described it: “Since I have mentioned this city [Caesarea Philippi] I do not think it proper to omit an account which is worthy of record for posterity. For they say that the woman with an issue of blood, who, as we learn from the sacred Gospel, received from our Savior deliverance from her affliction, came from this place, and that her house is shown in the city, and that remarkable memorials of the kindness of the Savior to her remain there.

“For there stands upon an elevated stone, by the gates of her house, a brazen image of a woman kneeling, with her hands stretched out, as if she were praying. Opposite this is another upright image of a man, made of the same material, clothed decently in a double cloak, and extending his hand toward the woman. They say that this statue is an image of Jesus. It has remained to our day, so that we ourselves also saw it when we were staying in the city.”

This statue was preserved until the year 305 when it was demolished under the emperor Maximinus Daia. Julian the Apostate (), attempted to replace it with an image of his own, but (as the contemporary historian Sozomen asserts in his Church history, Hist. Ecd. V, 20) that “a flash from heaven smote the statue, hurling the head and neck to the ground, where it continues to this day looking black as if burned by lightning.”..

Touching the Fringe of His Garment

IT IS COMMON IN MANY EASTERN CHURCHES to see people touching or kissing the priest's vestment as he passes in procession. In this way, they express their veneration for Christ in the Gospel book, the Holy Gifts or other sacred object he is carrying. They are doing liturgically what people in Eastern cultures did regularly to express reverence for or dependence upon their religious or ethnic leaders – or even family elders – for centuries.

We read in the Gospels that people would reach out to touch the hem of Christ's garment in the hope that they would thereby come into contact with holiness and obtain a blessing. On His arrival at Gennesaret, for example, we are told that "*When the men of that place recognized Him, they sent out into all that surrounding region, brought to Him all who were sick, and begged Him that they might only touch the hem of His garment. And as many as touched it were made perfectly well*" (Mt 14:35, 36). The woman with the issue of blood in Lk 8 had the same hope.

The "Issue of Blood"

Modern commentators have debated whether this woman suffered from a genetic blood disease such as hemophilia or a menstrual disorder of some kind. This issue is not raised in the Scriptures, which focus on the results rather than the cause of her condition. In Mk 5 we read that she "*had suffered many things from many physicians. She had spent all that she had and was no better, but rather grew worse*" (v. 26). Not only had her condition worsened, but she had become impoverished in the process (she "*had spent all her livelihood on physicians*" – Lk 8:43).

The Gospels, written for Gentile converts, do not mention another effect of her illness which would have been extremely important to Jews. Whatever the origin of the hemorrhaging, it caused the woman to be ritually unclean according to the Torah. "*If a woman has a discharge of blood for many days, other than at the time of her [customary] impurity, or if it runs beyond her [usual time of] impurity, all the days of her unclean discharge shall be as the days of her [customary] impurity. She shall be unclean. Every bed on which she lies all the days of her discharge shall be to her as the bed of her impurity; and whatever she sits on shall be unclean, as the uncleanness of her impurity. Whoever [else] touches those things shall be unclean; he shall wash his clothes and bathe in water, and be unclean until evening*" (Lev 15:25-27).

Bodily discharges of any kind, being "of the earth," rendered a person or anything they touched unfit for the heavenly action of worship ("defiling the tabernacle" – Lev 15:31). Neither this woman nor anyone who had contact with her could observe the Holydays or offer even the daily sacrifices in the temple on any day she suffered this hemorrhage. Some have surmised that, if she had been married, her husband probably would have divorced her as she would have been unable to care for her children or for others without making them all unclean. She was, in effect, as much of an outcast as a leper as far as participation in the life of her people was concerned. Touching Jesus changed all that.

What Did She Touch?

In Lk 8:44 we are told that this woman “*came from behind and touched the border of His garment.*” The phrase translated here as “the border of His garment” is more properly rendered as “the fringe of His robe.” The ordinary dress of Jewish men in Christ’s day consisted of a tunic over which they wore a mantle large enough to cover them from head to foot. The Torah prescribed that this garment be fringed with tassels (*tzitzit*); “*Speak to the children of Israel: Tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a blue thread in the tassels of the corners. When you shall have the tassel, that you may look upon it and remember all the commandments of the LORD and do them*” (Num 15:38, 39).

Some rabbinic authorities considered blue as the “color of God’s glory”. Covers for the temple vessels were made in this color. Touching the blue-threaded tassel, then, is an attempt to connect with the glory of God.

This garment, reduced in size, is the prayer shawl worn by observant Jews today at worship. Some Orthodox Jewish men wear a kind of scapular under their street wear. Its tassels often may be seen hanging outside their shirts.

Who Was This Woman?

Although the story of this woman is recounted in Mt 9 and Mk 5, as well as in Lk, her name is never given and she is not mentioned again. Later writers tried to remedy the “defects” in the Gospels by recounting “life stories” of characters like this woman whom the Scriptures mention only in passing. Thus, in the fourth-century *Acts of Pilate* this woman, now given a name, is portrayed as trying to give evidence at Jesus’ trial: “And a certain woman named Bernice crying out from afar off said: ‘I had an issue of blood, and I touched the hem of his garment, and the issue of blood which I had had for twelve years was stopped.’ The Jews say: ‘we have a law, that a woman's evidence is not to be received.’”

Another fourth-century attempt to “bolster” the Gospel is found in Eusebius’ *Church History*. He notes that “They say that the woman with an issue of blood, who, as we learn from the sacred Gospel, received from our Savior deliverance from her affliction, came from this place [Caesarea Philippi], and that her house is shown in the city, and that remarkable memorials of the kindness of the Savior to her remain there.

“For there stands upon an elevated stone, by the gates of her house, a brazen image of a woman kneeling, with her hands stretched out, as if she were praying. Opposite this is another upright image of a man, made of the same material, clothed decently in a double cloak, and extending his hand toward the woman. At his feet, beside the statue itself, is a certain strange plant, which climbs up to the hem of the brazen cloak, and is a remedy for all kinds of diseases.” “They say that this statue is an image of Jesus. It has remained to our day, so that we ourselves also saw it when we were staying in the city” (Book 7.18).

Later Eastern chroniclers such as Sozomen and John Malalas were not as cautious about the story of this statue as was Eusebius. They accept the story as unqualified fact.

Modern historians suggest that the statue originally depicted the submission of Judea to the Emperor Hadrian but was later give a Christian meaning. The statue was destroyed during the reign of Julian the Apostate and a statue of that emperor erected in its place.

A much later legend based on the story of this woman is the legend of “Veronica’s veil”. In the medieval West, it was said that the woman with the issue of blood was called Veronica (the Latin form of Bernice). She was described as having wiped the face of Jesus on the way to His crucifixion. Although there is no mention of this incident in the Scriptures, it became part of the medieval devotion, the “Stations of the Cross.” In fact, the “veronica” (meaning true image) was not a person, but a relic – perhaps the image of Edessa – brought to Rome in the twelfth century.

Eighth Sunday of St Luke **The Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37)**

WHEN PEOPLE READ THE SCRIPTURES they can often easily grasp the basic meaning of the passage. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, for instance, Christ is clearly exalting the compassion of the Samaritan over the lack of concern on the part of the priest and the Levite. The enmity that existed between Jews and Samaritans is also generally known, so people easily comprehend Christ’s point that your enemy is your neighbor when he is compassionate. We can also easily – if grudgingly – realize that we are called to imitate the Samaritan, even in dealing with people not like ourselves.

When passages are not so easily explained, however, people turn to others for help. People may turn to their pastor or another clergyman or instructor. Many will surf the net to see what others say on the subject. As Eastern Christians we have another – and preferred – source for guidance in reading the Scriptures. We look to the tradition of the Church Fathers to explain the sacred texts.

Since the rise of academic, rather than pastoral, theology in its Middle Ages, the West has preferred contemporary scholarship to the Fathers’ insights on the Scriptures. Academic scholarship first stressed the context of the Scriptural texts and then sought proof of their historic origins to determine their original literal meaning.

One of the approaches favored by the Fathers but out of favor in scholarly circles has been *allegory*, which sees many passages as a kind of extended metaphor for the entire Gospel. Allegory was virtually universal throughout early Christianity, which inherited from Judaism. It seeks to draw our attention through many well-known Scripture passages to the universal condition of mankind and the all-embracing love of God. It was used in various ways by Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and John Chrysostom in the East, as well as Ambrose and Augustine in the West.

Chrysostom on the Good Samaritan

Using this method St John Chrysostom (feast: November 13) was able to help us see through this text God's constant and all-embracing love for us. This parable becomes a word-picture of the entire mystery of salvation:

A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho – Adam, by trusting in himself instead of God, descended from Paradise into this world. Jericho, at 825 feet below sea level is the lowest city on earth, as far down as you can get.

He fell among robbers – Mankind apart from God is beset by the band of demonic powers led by the ruler of this age.

They stripped him of his raiment – the robe of immortality.

They departed, leaving him half dead – he was reduced to the half-life of this earth, subject to sin and death.

It happened that a priest ...and a Levite came that way, but passed by on the other side – The people of Israel kept to themselves and did not aid mankind.

But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, and went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine – Christ, not from this world, who was accused of being a Samaritan (John 8:48), is that compassionate stranger. He doctors mankind by His teachings (the bandages), His anointing with the Holy Spirit (the oil), and the Eucharist (the wine) by which He begins our healing.

He set him on his own beast, brought him to an inn and took care of him - Christ joined mankind to His own human nature, brought him to the hospital which is His Church and continued to minister to him as the divine physician.

When he left on the next day he gave the innkeeper two dinars and said, ‘Take care of him’ – After His ascension Christ entrusted mankind to the Apostolic Synod personified by its great apostle to the Gentiles, St Paul, and “through Paul to the high priests and teachers and ministers of each church,” saying: “Take care of the Gentiles whom I have given to you in the Church. Since men are sick, wounded by sin, heal them, putting on them a stone plaster, that is, the prophetic sayings and the gospel teachings, making them whole through the admonitions and exhortations of the Old and New Testaments.” So according to St. John Chrysostom, Paul is the one who upholds the churches of God “and heals all men through spiritual admonitions, distributing the bread of offering to each one...”

‘And when I come again I will repay you’ – At my second coming I will reward you.

In his important work, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, the contemporary Greek Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos expresses the life of the Church in terms of this imagery. “So in the Church we are divided into the sick, those undergoing treatment, and those – the saints – who have already been healed. ... The Fathers do not categorize people as moral and immoral or good and bad on the basis of moral laws. This division is superficial. At depth humanity is differentiated into the sick in soul, those being healed, and those healed. All who are not in a state of illumination are sick in soul... It is not only good will, good resolve, moral practice and devotion to the Orthodox Tradition which make an Orthodox, but also purification, illumination and deification.” These stages of healing are the purpose of the Orthodox way of life.”

In another place St John Chrysostom taught that ministering to the spiritually ill in the hospital of the Church is for us all:

“Let us not overlook such a tragedy as that. Let us not hurry past so pitiable a sight without taking pity. Even if others do so, you must not. Do not say to yourself: ‘I am no priest or monk; I have a wife and children. This is a work for the priests; this is work for the monks.’ The Samaritan did not say: ‘Where are the priests now? Where are the Pharisees now? Where are the

teachers of the Jews?’ But the Samaritan is like a man who found some great store of booty and got the profit.

“Therefore, when you see someone in need of treatment for some ailment of the body or soul, do not say to yourself: ‘Why did so-and-so or so-and-so not take care of him?’ You free him from his sickness; do not demand an accounting from others for their negligence. Tell me this. If you find a gold coin lying on the ground, do you say to yourself: ‘Why didn’t so-and-so pick it up?’ Do you not rush to snatch it up before somebody else does?

“Think the same way about your fallen brothers; consider that tending his wounds is like finding a treasure. If you pour the word of instruction on his wounds like oil, if you bind them up with your mildness, and cure them with your patience, your wounded brother has made you a richer man than any treasure could. Jeremiah said: ‘He who has brought forth the precious from the vile will be as my mouth.’ What could we compare to that? No fasting, no sleeping on the ground, no watching and praying all night, nor anything else can do as much for you as saving your brother can accomplish.”

St John Chrysostom, *Eighth Homily against the Judaizers* 4: 1-3

Ninth Saturday of St Luke

Two Who Followed Him (Lk 9:57-62)

ON THE NINTH SATURDAY after the Holy Cross we read from the ninth chapter of St Luke’s Gospel. The Gospel portrays the Lord Jesus’ ministry as growing: He is more widely known and more people were seeking Him out.

“Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, ‘Lord, I will follow You wherever You go’” (Lk 9:57). Well, Jesus wanted to reach all of Israel and He frequently called people to follow Him. But here He was not very encouraging. *“And Jesus said to him, ‘Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head’”* (v. 58). Why would He say that?

The Gospel continues, *“Then He said to another, ‘Follow Me.’ But he said, ‘Lord, let me first go and bury my father.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God’”* (vv. 59, 60). At first that seems heartless and cruel until we realize that the man’s father was not dead – in the Middle Eastern climate the dead were buried immediately out of necessity. Mourning followed burial rather than preceded it as in many American funerals.

This passage shows Christ correctly discerning the motivations of the people whom He approached or who approached Him. Some were called but found excuses not to respond, like this procrastinator. Others, like the first man mentioned, wanted to follow Him but for the wrong reasons. The second-century African writer Tertullian suggested that following Christ “... was

not his object. How could it be? ... For his wish was not simply to follow Christ, as so many others of the Jewish multitude did, but rather to thrust himself into apostolic honors" (57th Homily). Some seek to "follow Christ" because of the prestige they think it brings.

Others seek the spiritual power or authority they see in Christian leaders. In the Acts of the Apostles we read of a certain Samaritan sorcerer named Simon who was converted and baptized by Philip the deacon. Later the apostles Peter and John came to invoke the Holy Spirit upon Philip's converts, "*And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, saying, 'Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit.' But Peter said to him, 'Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money!'*" (vv.18-20). Fortunately Simon repented and asked that the apostles pray for him, but his name is still associated with seeking to buy positions in the Church. It is called *simony*.

Two Who Responded

In the past 2000 years there have been countless Christians who have brought the Gospel to places where they would have nowhere to lay their heads. In the first millennium Church of the East missionaries traveled to India and China while Byzantines brought the Gospel north to the Slavs. In the second millennium Europeans brought the Gospel to the Americas and Africa. On November 26 the Russian Church honors one of its missionary bishops whose story illustrates what these evangelists suffered for the Gospel's sake.

Born in Ukraine in 1680 to a prominent family, John Kulchitsky became a monk (Fr. Innocent) and professor in Moscow. In 1721 he was chosen to be the bishop of the Russian spiritual mission in Peking. He traveled across Russia and Asia in the days before any modern means of transportation, only to wait for three years on the Chinese border near Irkutsk in eastern Siberia, and finally to be refused entry to that country. The Chinese did not want any foreign missionaries in their country.

Homeless, without a diocese or a steady income, Bishop Innocent labored as a missionary in the undeveloped region near the Chinese and Mongolian borders, some 2600 miles from Moscow. At that time Irkutsk was a small settlement. The first road from Moscow was not built until 1760; the Trans-Siberian Railway only in the 20th century. Today the trip by rail takes over three days; how long would it have taken in the 1720s?

Bishop Innocent worked among the settlers – mostly exiled Russian criminals – and Mongols, many of whom he brought to Christ. He established the first schools in the region and so improved conditions there that in 1727 the diocese of Irkutsk was created with Innocent as its bishop. He served there for another four years dying exhausted from his labors, at the age of 51, revered by his flock as the "Holy Man of Siberia."

Nowhere to Lay His Head

In 1823 Fr Ioann Veniaminov, a Siberian priest, was assigned to the Aleutian Islands, then owned by Russia. His parish included the island of Unalaska, and the Fox and Pribilof Islands off the

Alaskan coast, some 3400 miles from his home (it is only 2800 miles from New York to Los Angeles). The journey took one year over land and ocean.

There were no accommodations for Father Ioann and his family. They had to build an earthen hut and a church in which to serve. There were about 1000 people living in his “parish” – both natives and Russian traders –spread over 1000 square miles accessible only by dogsled or canoe.

Over the next few years this extraordinary missionary studied and mastered six local Aleut dialects, devising their first alphabet and translating portions of the Scriptures and liturgical books in order to bring the Aleuts into the Church.

After fifteen years he returned to Russia to report on his activities. While he was in Moscow, his wife died and he was tonsured a monk, taking the name Innocent, after the pioneering bishop of Irkutsk. In 1840 he was ordained bishop of the Aleutians and returned to his mission field. Bishop Innocent’s see was established at Sitka on the mainland and the bishop now added study of the local Tlingit language and culture to his missionary skills. When his diocese was expanded to include the Yakut area he did the same with the language and customs of the Yakut peoples.

In 1867 Bishop Innocent was chosen as Metropolitan of Moscow, where he served until his death in 1879. The diocese he left behind would become the cornerstone of the Eastern Orthodox presence in the United States which purchased Alaska from the Russians in 1867. One hundred year later Bishop Innocent was canonized by the Russian Church as “Enlightener of the Aleuts and Apostle to America.”

Nowhere to Lay His Head in Death

Bishop Innocent of Irkutsk died in 1731 and was buried in the Ascension Monastery at Irkutsk. During renovation of the monastery in 1764 his remains were found to be incorrupt and his grave became a site for many pilgrimages over the years. He was proclaimed a saint in 1804.

In 1921, the relics of St Innocent were taken from their shrine and placed in a Soviet anti-religious museum. They were moved to another museum in Yaroslavl in 1939, and were exhibited as “mummified remains of an unknown man.” In 1990, the relics were returned to the Church and placed in the Irkutsk cathedral, to the joy of all the faithful.

Ninth Sunday of St Luke The Rich Fool (Lk 12:16-21; 8:8)

WHAT DOES IT MEAN to be “rich toward God” (Lk 12:21)? Many of us may remember the concept of spiritual bouquets promoted by many Roman Catholic religious orders in schools and churches, particularly before Vatican II. A person accomplished so many Masses, so many

Communions, so many rosaries, etc. which were then offered for another person or a special intention. This practice, which urged many people to more frequent devotional practices than they would have observed otherwise, was a kind of piety of numbers: the more you do, the better.

Is this what the Lord Jesus meant by being “rich towards God”? Instead of amassing earthly treasures are we intended to accumulate spiritual “points” which we can bring with us when we stand before the Judge? Such an approach can bring us close to the Pharisee in Christ’s parable who lists his spiritual accomplishments in contrast to the repentant Publican. At best it reveals our faith as immature, incapable of digesting spiritual meat (see 1 Cor 3:2).

Our True Wealth Is God

The actual treasure which is ours as the adopted children of God is nothing less than “*to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge that you may be filled with all the fullness of God*” (Eph 3:19). We are, as St. Paul insists, a temple in which God dwells both individually and as Church. Our ability to know God begins with His indwelling presence within us.

We certainly know that God loves us in Christ, and may believe that He dwells in us but it often seems to be an abstraction: something we know is true but doesn’t touch us in any significant way. “God loves us... Michelangelo gave us great art... Bell gave us the telephone...” we may know all these things in the same way. But to know God’s love in a way “that passes knowledge” is to do so in a manner that goes beyond intellectual knowledge to a knowledge of the heart.

As St. Paul says here, this knowledge is not an end in itself but enables us to be filled with God’s fullness. Once our hearts are opened by a realization of how God loves us, they can experience God’s saving presence. This presence transforms us – deifies us – making us sharers of His divine nature, which the Greek Fathers call *theosis*.

Some people have achieved this “knowledge past understanding” through the direct intervention of God. God makes Himself known unexpectedly to people and energizes their lives dramatically. St Gregory of Nyssa, for example, testifies that “*One night there appeared to Basil an outpouring of light, and, by means of divine power, the entire dwelling was illuminated by an immaterial light, having no source in anything material*” (*Funeral Oration for His Brother, Basil the Great*).

Most of us, however, have not had such an experience. How do we begin to arrive at this knowledge? Our attentiveness to prayer, the sacraments and the Scriptures are certainly signs that we look to know God. Still, our contact with the Bible and the Church’s liturgy is intermittent. Even if we pray every day, these acts of openness to God are intermittent. Can ordinary people be in more constant communion with God than that?

Sitting in the Presence of God

St. Isaac the Syrian insists that we can and must commune with God continually to be on regular speaking terms with Him, as it were. *“Sit in the presence of the Lord every moment of your life, as you think of Him and recollect Him in your heart. Otherwise, when you only see Him after a period of time, you will lack the freedom to converse with Him, out of shame; for great freedom of conversation is born out of constant association with Him.”*

What St Isaac calls “sitting in the presence of God” others in both East and West have described as developing an awareness of the presence of God. We regularly pray that God is *“everywhere present and filling all things”* (“O heavenly King”), but are more frequently unaware of God’s presence as we go about our daily tasks. As the Divine Liturgy expresses it, “Christ is in our midst – He is and ever shall be.”

Even more compelling is the realization that the Spirit of God is not only with us but also within us through baptism, that we are members of the Body of Christ. If God “dwells within us,” then everything we do is in the presence of God although we regularly forget it. Developing an ***awareness of the presence of God***, then, simply means keeping the memory of God in our thoughts, and living like we really mean it.

Many people have learned to use an everyday event to trigger their awareness that God is present now. It may be an icon at one’s desk or kitchen counter, the ringing of a telephone or the sight of a child. Whenever they encounter their “trigger” they say a brief prayer.

Learning to Focus on God’s Presence

Setting aside time for silent reflection helps us refocus our attention on the presence of God in our midst. Spiritual writers of all ages recommend that we go apart – to our rooms, the outdoors, a church – where we can be undisturbed. There we can disengage from the activities of the day, close our eyes and begin to focus on the unceasing presence of God in which we stand. A time of silence may be enhanced by a simple breathing exercise to help us concentrate on the fact that we are in the holy presence of God.

St John Climacus, the 7th century abbot of Mount Sinai and author of *The Ladder*, suggests the next step. *“Become aware of God, in whose presence you are while you pray,”* he writes. *“Then take a formula of prayer and recite it with perfect attention both to the words you are saying and to the Person to whom you are saying them.”* In time the Jesus Prayer – *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner* – became the standard prayer in the Byzantine Churches for resting in the presence of God.

Sit quietly and repeat the prayer without hurrying for whatever length of time you have set apart for sitting in God’s presence. It is good to have a regular period of time for this activity – e.g. 15 minutes, for a start – which may be adjusted as circumstances dictate. Counseling 17th century nuns, the Bishop of Geneva, St Francis de Sales, suggests a different kind of adjustment than we would normally consider. *“Half an hour’s meditation is essential except when you are very busy,”* he teaches. *“Then a full hour is needed.”* The more harried we are by stress at home or work, the more we need to focus on the presence of God to bring us peace.

Brother Lawrence, the 17th century Carmelite monk, whose teachings are recorded in the book *The Practice of the Presence of God*, adds another dimension to our consideration of our true wealth as Christians. We are fulfilling our eternal calling as people devoted to the worship of God “*I am doing now what I will do for all eternity,*” he exclaimed. “*I am blessing God, praising Him, adoring Him, and loving Him with all my heart.*”

Enough vs. Abundance

DAY AFTER DAY Christians say the Lord’s Prayer, asking God to “give us this day our daily bread,” that is, to provide us with what we need for today. The rich man in Christ’s parable (Lk 12:16-22) clearly has a different perspective. He is not just concerned about today but about tomorrow, finding his security in the “grain and goods” he has stored up.

The man’s approach seems eminently practical – we do the same with our IRAs and annuities. Nobody wants to end their days on earth in a welfare hotel. But if we put absolute confidence in any earthly resource we will be as foolish as this rich man for “*a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions*” (Lk 12:15).

The parable raises a number of questions for Christians: what are possessions for? Should a Christian’s use of his or her wealth differ from that of a non-Christian? Where do we find God’s will in these matters?

Need vs. Abundance

The Scriptures frequently speak about money or other assets. It has been estimated that there are over 800 indications in the Bible about using our resources. Perhaps the greatest clarity on this question is found in St Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians. He tells his readers that “*God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work*” (2 Cor 9:8). St Paul’s principle is clear: God provides – that we have “**enough** of everything” and “**an abundance**” for doing good.

What is “Enough”? – this refers to what we actually need: the “basics” (food, clothing, shelter, etc.). What is actually necessary varies over time and place as well as circumstances of life. We need things in our culture which others societies either did not require or did not have. Today we need health insurance, for example – something which did not even exist before our own age.

Similarly “need” is different for a family than for a single person. A single person probably doesn’t require three cars while a suburban family with a son or daughter in college might require just that. Need is different for a couple raising children than for a couple caring for an older relative or for grandparents living alone. The circumstances of our lives and of our society will dictate what we actually need to live the lives which we have been given. St Paul’s principle applies in all circumstances, however. Anything more than what we truly need is given to us by God for the doing of good.

The Age of Conspicuous Consumption

Sociologists have long described the modern age as a time of “conspicuous consumption” when people spend money on expensive or unnecessary items, not to meet their real needs but to display wealth or status. People often are pushed to acquire bigger and better houses, cars, flat screen TVs, etc. – not because they need them but in order to outshine their neighbors or social rivals. Products are marketed with an eye towards making people believe they need something they can never even use (Does anyone really need 400 channels?) In the past products were made to last and to be repaired if necessary; today those same items are designed to break down and be replaced by newer and “better” ones. We are taught to keep upgrading our possessions and thus “better” our lives.

This dynamic is not limited to the upper classes of society. The poor are perhaps more susceptible to the tendency to prove one’s real worth by the number of their possessions. The spectacle of teenagers being knifed for their sneakers demonstrates how far the concept of conspicuous consumption has penetrated our society.

Two automobiles have become icons of contrasting economic strategies in the world today. The “solid gold Cadillac,” title of a 1950s Broadway play and film, represents the world of conspicuous consumption, of spending for show rather than for need. The second automobile, symbolizing the Scriptural principle of spending for need, is the Fiat compact sedan in which Pope Francis rode during his 2015 American visit. People who had never heard of conspicuous consumption instinctively realized that the pope’s Fiat was saying something important about the ways of God on earth. God’s blessings abound, but they are not meant to be wasted on empty display. As the British newspaper *The Guardian* quipped at the time, “A Fiat is worth a thousand words.”

The Purpose of Our Abundance

Many people feel that they are just getting by, they have no “abundance” to share with others. This is often because we have come to believe the admen who say you absolutely need the latest model, style or title, especially when promoted by a celebrity. If Alex Trebek says you need it, who am I to judge?!

Once we take a realistic look at our needs we find that we can do without things which may be pleasurable or desirable but are not necessary for our life. We may then find that we have an abundance after all.

Each person’s life presents a countless number of opportunities to do good with our abundance. We may support – or increase our support for – charitable causes both at home or in our Mother Church, contribute to educational or philanthropic organizations. We will have no difficulty finding ways to use our abundance for good once we have decided that God has actually provided us with an abundance.

Help from the Tradition

Throughout its history the Church has given us a valuable tool to help us recognize that our needs and our desires are not always the same. The weekly fast days of Wednesday and Friday –

practiced as early as the first century – and the four fast periods of the year are connected with liturgical observances, to be sure. They have another level of meaning as well. Our ascetic fasts are recurring reminders that “*a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.*” We put aside food and drink, leisure and entertainment periodically to remind ourselves of a lesson too easily forgotten: that we don’t need stuff, we need God.

Our tradition of fasting coupled with almsgiving may be especially important to us today since we live in an age when we can easily pamper ourselves every day and thereby weaken our resistance to evil. People who are addicted to luxuries are less likely to put them aside when forced to choose between keeping them or following the Gospel. As Pope St Leo the Great noted in the fifth century, “Against the threatened attacks of persecutors, against the terrifying shouts of the ungodly, they could not fight with bodily strength or pampered flesh since that which delights the outer does most harm to the inner man, and the more one’s fleshly substance is kept in subjection, the more purified is the reasoning soul” (Homily 70 On the Fast of Pentecost I).

Tenth Saturday of St Luke

Signs, Wonders and Wonderworkers (Lk 10:19-21)

A FEW WEEKS AGO our Saturday Gospel reading from Luke 10 told how the Lord Jesus sent out His disciples to proclaim that the Kingdom of God was at hand. On the tenth Saturday of the Cycle of St Luke we continue our reading of this chapter with the disciples’ return: “*Then the seventy returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name’*” (Lk 10:17).

The disciples are elated at the spiritual power accompanying the proclamation of God’s kingdom. The Lord acknowledges that power: “*Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you*” (v. 19).

The disciples do not attribute this power to themselves but to the name of the Lord. Nonetheless Jesus tempers their enthusiasm, because success in proclaiming the Gospel, like any achievement in life, can lead us down the road to feelings of pride and superiority. ‘After all, the demons are listening to Me!’ Instead, He tells them, “*Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven*” (v.20).

The image of the “book of life” is used in Scripture to describe the indescribable: that we are called to the eternal life of communion with God, a relationship with the Lord of Sabaoth, because of Jesus Christ. “*Those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life*” (Rev 21:27) achieve the ultimate fulfillment of their humanity: living forever as the image of God we were meant to be from the beginning. “*It has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is*” (1 Jn 3:2).

Whenever the Church receives a new catechumen into its fold, it prays, “Inscribe him/her in Your Book of Life, and unite him/her to the flock of Your inheritance.” Entering the Church is, thus,

an icon of entering the eternal kingdom.

What About “Signs and Wonders”?

The Lord promised that signs and wonders would accompany the proclamation of the Gospel. We read at the end of Mark’s Gospel, *“And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover”* (Mk 16:17, 18).

The Acts of the Apostles and the other New Testament books give us glimpses of these signs and wonders at work in the apostolic era beginning at Pentecost. Through the centuries that followed, the historic Churches have accepted the real possibility of signs and wonders as affirmations of God’s active presence in the world. At the same time, they are reluctant to put much emphasis upon specific events or claim they are “miraculous.” Some signs are real, but some are not what they claim to be. Some are fraudulent while others appear to be miraculous only because we do not understand the natural forces at work in them. Finally, some may have demonic origins. As the Lord said, *“false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect”* (Mt 24:24).

In any case, as the Lord said repeatedly, God has much more in store for His people than signs and wonders. When Jewish elders demanded a sign from Jesus like the manna at the exodus He responded, *“Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world”* (Jn 6:49-51). We rely on Christ, who offered Himself for the life of the world, rather than on real or apparent wonders.

Wonders Celebrated in Our Church

When people think of wonders they often focus on physical healings. These have been many, but there are also remarkable historic events which are celebrated in the life of the Church: extraordinary phenomena that the human mind could not comprehend or explain which deserve our attention. Perhaps the best known is the dream or vision of Constantine the Great as he fought for control of the Roman Empire. As reported even by pagan writers of the age, Constantine was led to inscribe the monogram of Christ on the shields of his soldiers; an act to which he attributed his victory. Over the next decade he would begin to remake the Empire as a Christian commonwealth as a result of this experience. As we pray on his feast, “You gave a most mighty weapon to our emperor: Your precious Cross, by which he governed all the earth in righteousness, shining forth in piety, and has been granted the kingdom of heaven in Your loving-kindness. With him we glorify Your loving dispensation, Almighty Jesus, the Savior of our souls.”

The cross is the focus of another event celebrated on our calendar which took place on the morning of May 7, 351. A **cross formed by stars** and visible in daylight was seen above Jerusalem, stretching about two miles, from Golgotha to the Mount of Olives. It remained visible

for several hours. St Cyril of Jerusalem described it in a letter to the Emperor Constantius: “This was not, as may be thought, a momentary passing phenomenon: for it continued several hours visible to our eyes, and brighter than the sun, the light of which would have eclipsed it, had not this been stronger. The whole city, struck with a reverential fear tempered with joy, ran immediately to the church, young and old, Christians and heathens, citizens and strangers, all with one voice giving praise to our Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, the worker of miracles; finding by experience the truth of the Christian doctrine, to which Heaven bears witness.” This event is commemorated in our liturgy on May 7 every year.

Wonderworking Saints

Christ’s promise of extraordinary signs has been fulfilled in the saints throughout the ages. These wonders have included healings, gifts of knowledge (where the saints have described people and places they had never known in their ordinary life), and mystic appearances while alive or after death.

The Byzantine Churches revere a number of saints as “Wonderworkers,” the most prominent among them being the unmercenary physicians Cosmas and Damian, Nicholas of Myra and Spyridon of Cyprus.

Within the past century a number of wonderworkers have been recognized in the various historic Churches such as Pope St Cyril VI (Coptic), St Sharbel (Maronite), Sts Paisios and Porphyrios (Greek) and St Pius of Pietrelcina (Padre Pio, Roman). One recent example concerns this latter saint, Padre Pio. During World War II, when the Allies were preparing to bomb the town of San Giovanni Rotondo, a brown-robed friar appeared in the sky and kept the planes from dropping their bombs. One of the pilots later visited the friary and identified Padre Pio as the one he had seen in the sky.

Signs and wonders have been recorded in connection with icons or relics of saints. Others claim to have seen apparitions of Christ, the Theotokos or the saints. Some of these claims are spurious, but others have the ring of authenticity. In any case, signs and wonders may support our faith but they are never the basis for our belief: that is Christ, who alone is the Lover of Mankind.

Tenth Sunday of St Luke

The Challenge of the Sabbath (Lk 13:10-17)

MODERN MEDICINE HAS FOUND treatments for a number of diseases that had plagued mankind for centuries. Some have even been eradicated, at least in the developed world. This is not the case with scoliosis (curvature of the spine), such as afflicted the woman in St Luke’s Gospel. To this day no one knows the cause of this affliction in most cases.

The Gospel says she had been afflicted with this condition for eighteen years, but since scoliosis is often manifested at puberty, she was probably not old by our standards. Treatments available in our day such as wearing braces, surgery, physical therapy and pain medication, were unknown in the first century AD. They must have been eighteen long years indeed.

The Gospel tells us that the ruler of the synagogue was indignant *“because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath; and he said to the crowd, ‘There are six days on which men ought to work; therefore come and be healed on them, and not on the Sabbath day’”* (Lk 13:15).

The Sabbath in Judaism

One of the hallmark Jewish practices for millennia has been the observance of the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week, as a day set apart for God. We read in the Book of Exodus, *“And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak also to the children of Israel, saying: “Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you. You shall keep the Sabbath, therefore, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people”* (Ex 31:14).

According to Exodus, a person profanes the Sabbath by doing any work on it. In traditional Jewish practice, maintained by observant Orthodox Jews in our own day, work is defined as “constructive labor” – whatever is done to benefit our life in this world. The Talmud – the traditional compendium of Jewish interpretation – lists 39 activities prohibited on the Sabbath, including all kinds of farm or household labor including lighting or extinguishing a fire and moving things about from one place to another. The only exception to these rules would be activity which helps save a life, which is why Jewish health care workers may be employed on the Sabbath.

Later commentators have understood these 39 prohibitions as categories, thereby expanding the list of prohibitions. Thus some rabbis teach that, since chaff cannot be picked from wheat on the Sabbath, it follows that one cannot pick the bones from fish as well. Gefilte fish (pre-ground boned fish) became a popular Sabbath food as a result.

In their zeal to preserve the Sabbath some rabbis have gone to what even many Jews perceive as extremes. Thus in some Jewish communities it is forbidden to ride a bicycle on the Sabbath because, if the chain breaks, you might be tempted to fix it. In a similar case a man was forbidden to drive his handicapped mother to the synagogue as it violated the Sabbath; the rabbi suggested that she move within walking distance. Then she would be welcome. The ruler of the synagogue in Lk seems to have been of like mind.

Christ on the Sabbath

Christ was frequently in conflict with more observant Jews over Sabbath-related issues. He was not opposed to the Sabbath itself – He is depicted in the Gospel as a regular worshipper in the synagogue on the Sabbath (see Lk 4:16). Rather He was opposed to the elaboration of prohibitions favored by the Pharisees. Instead, He favored expanding the traditional exemption.

In addition to work involved with saving a life, Christ saw doing good as an appropriate Sabbath activity: “*There was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked [Jesus], saying, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?’—that they might accuse Him. Then He said to them, ‘What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath’*” (Mt 12:10-12).

The Gospels record several incidents of healings which caused controversy because they were done on the Sabbath. St Luke tells how Christ asked some lawyers and Pharisees if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath. When they would not answer, He proceeded to heal a man with dropsy (see Lk 14:1-6). And it was a Sabbath when the Lord Jesus healed the man born blind (see Jn 9:1-41).

We also read in John how Christ healed a paralyzed man at the Pool of Bethesda saying, “*Take up your bed and walk*” (Jn 5:8). The Pharisees did not challenge Jesus; rather they confronted the ex-paralytic: “*It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your bed*” (v.10). The man replied that his healer had told him to do so and, we might add, that was enough for him.

Legalism Is Dangerous

The Sabbath prohibitions were intended to free the Jews from a life which knew nothing but toil. Since they were in the form of bans, some Jews came to feel that extending these exclusions enhanced or honored the Sabbath. The Lord Jesus put forth a different approach, insisting that the Sabbath is honored when we do good on it.

The lawyers and Pharisees whom Jesus challenged were not the first or the last to turn positive precepts into restrictive commands. They turned the joy which should have accompanied the Sabbath into fear of transgressing a prohibition as a particular school of rabbis understood it.

Something similar happens in the Church when we lose sight of the presence of Christ which alone gives meaning to any precept or rubric. When this happens our traditions may become as fruitlessly restrictive as those Christ confronted. Conversely, when we cast them off we may be left, not with renewal but with license.

The Sabbath Today

“*Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made*” (Gen 2:3). This verse is read at the start of Jewish Sabbath eve services to remind worshippers that the Sabbath is a remembrance of God’s rest after the work of creation.

In the Church the Sabbath has given way to Sunday with its memory of the Lord’s resurrection and the resulting new creation. Nevertheless, the Sabbath still has a place on Eastern Church calendars. In some parishes the Liturgy is offered on Saturday as well as on Sunday.

In our Church remembering the original creation is still a focus for our Saturday prayers. The kondakion sung on most Saturdays reflects the connection of the Sabbath with creation: “*To You, O Lord, Ordainer and Creator of the world, the universe offers the God-bearing martyrs as the*

first fruits of nature. Wherefore through their prayers and through the intercession of the Theotokos preserve Your Church and our country in safety and peace: You who alone are most merciful.”

The Sabbath as a day of rest is expressed on Holy Saturday in recalling the great Sabbath rest of Christ in the tomb. Throughout the year, and especially on the Saturdays of the Dead, the peaceful repose of those who die in Christ is highlighted.

Eleventh Sunday of St Luke – Second Sunday before the Nativity of Christ

See Menaion, p.

Twelfth Sunday of St Luke

The Leprous Nature of Man (Lk 17:12-19)

ONE OF THE MOST FEARED DISEASES in the world for centuries was leprosy. Those infected might develop inflammations of the nerves, the respiratory tract, skin, and eyes. Ulcerating sores and numbness would result. When sufferers could no longer feel pain, then repeated injuries or infection due to unnoticed wounds could result in loss of fingers, toes or even noses. People with other skin ailments, such as psoriasis, were often tarred with the same brush as actual victims of leprosy.

The Scriptures record how the Israelites handled the problem: *“When a man has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a spot, and it turns into a leprous disease on the skin of his body, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests, and the priest shall examine the diseased spot on the skin of his body; and if the hair in the diseased spot has turned white and the disease appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is a leprous disease; when the priest has examined him he shall pronounce him unclean. But if the eruption spreads in the skin, after he has shown himself to the priest for his cleansing, he shall appear again before the priest; and the priest shall make an examination, and if the eruption has spread in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is leprosy”* (Lv 13:2-8).

Even in the ancient world people believed that this long-term infection was contagious: that it was passed somehow from person to person. As a result those infected were often banished from contact with their family and community until proved infection free or until their death. As we read in Leviticus, *“The leper who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp”* (Lv 13:45, 46).

The ten lepers whom Jesus healed as recorded in St. Luke’s Gospel had at some point been declared “unclean” and isolated from others. This is why, as Luke records, they *“stood at a*

distance” (Lk 17:12) and called out to the Lord for mercy. There was no medical treatment for this disease which could allow patients to remain in their community until the 1980s!

Leprosy a Type of Sin

In the Old Testament contact with what we might call the ultimate examples of our physical nature (childbirth, menstruation, or contact with the dead) rendered Israelites “ritually unclean.” Before they could worship in the temple they would need purification. To be “unclean,” then, was a sign of ritual impurity. This, in turn, would become a *symbol* for sin. Thus the Prophet Isaiah spoke of the entire nation as unclean: “*We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment*” (Is 64:6).

Many commentators through the ages have seen the progressive spread of leprosy as the Scriptures’ most vivid type of sin. Leprosy starts as an invisible infection which slowly dominates the victim’s life. Leprosy defiles and deforms the sufferers, isolating them from others. Ultimately the body becomes numb to further injury as leprosy destroys the ability to feel pain. It is an image of sin which, untreated, makes people its captive, contaminating and destroying them from within. Then, insensitive to wrongdoing, the victim becomes less able to see the effects of sin in the world. Lest this spreads, the sinner must be isolated from God’s People.

Often during history, however, people have come to believe that leprosy was an actual *punishment* for sin, particularly sins against chastity. Some saw this as a mercy from God: the sinner was punished in this life to spare a worse fate in the next.

How the Lord Treated Lepers

The ten lepers of Lk 17 were not the only ones the Lord Jesus encountered according to the Gospels. Cleansing lepers, along with healing the blind, the lame and the deaf were considered signs that Jesus was the Messiah. In Mt 8:1-4 and Mk 1:40-44 we read of a healing accomplished by physical contact: Jesus “*stretched out His hand and touched him*” (Mt 8:3). In contrast, He healed the ten lepers in Luke at a distance, sending them off to the priests apparently unhealed. The ten did not doubt Jesus; they went their way as He directed them and along the road their healing was manifested.

In both cases the lepers were sent to the priests to verify their healing. Leviticus 14 gives detailed instructions on what was to be done if a leper was now clean, including bathing, shaving and sacrificing three lambs as well as being anointed with oil. Only then would the leper be considered ritually clean.

The Samaritan, however, returns directly to Jesus,. He would never be deemed ritually pure by a Jewish priest. This freed him to recognize the One who made him clean.

Giving Thanks Like the Samaritan

The grateful Samaritan has always been seen as an example to believers, calling us to be thankful for God’s blessings to us. Many of us, however, are only thankful when we receive special

blessings from God. We forget that in every circumstance of our life, every person we encounter is an opportunity for furthering us on the path to salvation. As St Paul noted, “*We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose* (Rom 8:28). Gratitude should be our daily attitude.

The fifth-century Syriac Father St John the Solitary offers this plan to develop an attitude of daily thanksgiving within us: “When evening comes, collect your thoughts and ponder over the entire course of the day: observe God's providential care for you; consider the grace He has wrought in you throughout the whole span of the day; consider the rising of the moon, the joy of daylight, all the hours and moments, the divisions of time, the sight of different colors, the beautiful adornment of creation, the course of the sun, the growth of your own stature, how your own person has been protected, consider the blowing of the winds, the ripe and varied fruits, how the elements minister to your comfort, how you have been preserved from accidents, and all the other activities of grace. When you have pondered on all this, wonder of God’s love toward you will well up within you, and gratitude for His acts of grace will bubble up inside you.”

From the *Prologue of Ochrid* for July 23

Does anyone envy the leper? No one envies him. Why then do some envy the evil man when evil is a greater sickness than leprosy? Leprosy is a disease of the flesh but evil is a disease of the soul. A leper can be healthy within while he is unhealthy on the outside. However, the evil man can be healthy on the outside but his interior is ill, his heart is sick. Greater value has a tree that is sick on the outside but has a healthy core than a tree that is healthy on the outside but has a rotten core. Thus, leprosy is a lesser evil than evil i.e., than sin. ...

Does the physician envy the sick person? He does not envy him. Neither does the righteous one envy the sinner. If you do not know whether you are righteous examine your heart: do you envy the sinner? If you envy the sinner then you are not righteous; if you do not envy the sinner, then rejoice, O righteous one of God. ... The righteous one recognizes the sickness of sin, horrifying and deadly, and does not envy the sinner but pities him.

CHRIST’S ENCOUNTER WITH THE TEN LEPERS offers several points on which we can reflect. We see that Christ heals, that He heals foreigners as well as Israelites, and that the only one who glorifies God is that foreigner, a Samaritan. Christ’s response to the Samaritan, however, is a bit more complicated and merits our attention.

According to St Luke, when the Samaritan returns glorifying God, Christ responds, “*Arise, go your way; your faith has made you well*” (Lk 17:19 New King James Version). Is Christ referring to the original healing in which all ten lepers were cleansed or does the Samaritan receive something else because he came back glorifying God?

Some popular English versions offer interesting alternative translations which suggest an answer. “*Thy faith hath made thee whole*” says the original King James Version. The New American Bible and the Jerusalem Bible translate this phrase “*Your faith has saved you.*”

The Greek verb in this sentence is *sesoken*, a form of the word *soson* which we regularly translate in our prayers as “save.” It may be translated as “heal,” “make whole” or “save” depending on the context. In such a case it is wise to consult the Tradition for the best interpretation. Early Church commentators on this passage suggest that the Samaritan received more than the physical healing of his disease: he found salvation. As St Athanasius wrote, “This one was given much more than the rest. Besides being healed of his leprosy, he was told by the Lord, ‘Stand up and go on your way. Your faith has saved you.’” (Festal Letter 6).

In his *Explanation of the Gospel of St. Luke* Blessed Theophylact, Archbishop of Ochrid and Bulgaria writes that “This miracle also signifies the common salvation that came to the whole human race. For the ten lepers represent all of human nature – it was leprous with wickedness, carrying about with it the ugliness of sin, passing its life outside the heavenly city on account of its uncleanness, and standing afar off from God.” The complete healing of mankind is, in fact, what we refer to as “salvation.”

It is not uncommon for people to be asked by some Christians (usually Evangelicals or Pentecostals), “Are you saved?” By this they generally mean something like, “Have you personally appropriated the salvation that comes through Jesus Christ?” Their point is similar to that made by Blessed Theophylact. The ten lepers all were cleansed but only one personally appropriated what Christ had done by returning and glorifying God.

What Does It Mean to Be Saved?

When Western Christians talk about salvation they often think of it as described in the fourth-fifth centuries by St Augustine and in the eleventh century by Anselm of Canterbury. In their view all mankind was unrighteous and unclean through the original sin of Adam. It was necessary that mankind make atonement through a well-pleasing sacrifice. That sacrifice was made on the cross, by which Christ offered Himself for the sins of Adam and of the entire human race.

As this view was developed, the West focused increasingly on the cross. Christ’s death was the sacrifice offered to atone for sin and ransom mankind. Some saw the cross as an instrument of the Father’s wrath originally meant for us, now taken out on His Son! Others thought of Christ’s death as a ransom paid to the devil in whose power mankind had fallen. These views took Western Christians further and further from the thinking of the early Church.

The Eastern Fathers had a different view of sin and salvation. Instead of atonement and sacrifice they stressed the loss and restoration of relationship with God as the heart of the question of sin and redemption. The original sin, the sin of Adam, was a break in relationship with God. Adam declines to heed God’s warning and eats of the tree, determining for himself what is good rather than heeding God. Going it alone, Adam no longer “walked with God” but hid from Him (Gen 2).

In Christ God enters the world to become one with mankind once more and, through this complete and eternal union with Him, to deliver it from eternal death. The Son of God becomes like us in all things except sin and in Him God and man are perfectly united. Once again God is fully in communion with a Man, the Lord Jesus, and through Him with all mankind

Since being human means to endure suffering and death, Christ shared in those things as well. What was unique about Christ is that He did not remain in death but, once He had experienced it, He triumphed over it.

And so Christ's death on the cross is not emphasized in the Christian East as a sacrifice to atone for original sin; rather it is as the inevitable consequence of His desire to become one of us. Christ's death on the cross is an unavoidable result of His being fully human because all humans die.

The Lepers: an Icon of Salvation

As Blessed Theophilact observed, the lepers represent all humanity, scarred by their common affliction but still dear to Christ. "He healed the whole leprous nature of man, when, for every man's sake, He took flesh and tasted of death."

Without a doubt all ten welcomed their cleansing from leprosy; they accepted the gift but ignored the Giver. Only one returned to Christ, glorifying God. He not only received the blessing of health, he also enjoyed a relationship with the Healer. He welcomed, not only the cleansing from leprosy, but also the presence of the One who brings wholeness and salvation to all who accept Him in their lives. His physical healing is the prelude to his communion with Christ, in which is his – and our –salvation.

To Whom Was the "Ransom" Paid?

St Gregory the Theologian asks this question to demolish what he felt were false ideas about our salvation.

"To whom and why is this blood poured out for us and shed – the great and most precious blood of God, the High Priest and Victim? We were in the power of the Evil One, sold to sin, and had brought this harm on themselves by sensuality. ... If the price of ransom is given to none other than him in whose power we are held, then I ask, to whom and for what reason is such a price paid?"

"If it is to the Evil One, then how insulting is this! The thief received the price of ransom; he not only receives it from God, but even receives God Himself. He receives so large a price for his tyranny that it was only right to have mercy on us."

“If to the Father, then, first, in what way? Were we in captivity under Him?... And secondly, for what reason? For what reason was the blood of the Only Begotten pleasing to the Father, who did not accept even Isaac, when offered by his father, but exchanged the offering, giving a lamb instead of the reasonable victim?”

45th Oration on Holy Pascha

Thirteenth Sunday of St Luke

“Sell All You Have” (Lk 18:18-27)

“WHAT MUST I DO TO INHERIT ETERNAL LIFE?” This question is posed by a young Jewish leader whom Jesus meets on His way to Jerusalem. At first glance it seems a reasonable inquiry, one that many people would still ask today. “Tell me what prayer to say, what shrine to visit, what project I can take on which will guarantee that I’ll get to heaven.”

Church Fathers, however, saw this as a trick question, seeking to trap Jesus into setting some new requirement not in the Law. The Lord does not give him another thing to do, adding to the list of precepts which devotees of the Torah felt set forth God’s will for them. Rather Jesus says that to be perfect you must “sell all you have” and commit yourself completely to Him. Perfection does not come from performing this or that isolated action, however good it may be. Perfection comes from entrusting one’s whole life to Christ.

In the Pastoral Epistles we see some consequences of this life in Christ as it was perceived in the apostolic Church. The “elect of God” (Col 3:12) have died to the world, been buried in Baptism and are now alive in Christ. Their way of life is to be Christ’s, embodying the compassion and forgiveness of Christ Himself. They are to bear with one another (after all, others are putting up with them). They are to build up one another’s faith “with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Col 3:16), thankful for the grace filling their hearts. This is certainly in stark contrast to the way of the world, where self-love, resentments, grudges, and slanderously tearing others down is the norm for many.

One of the first qualities of someone dead to the world mentioned in Colossians is humility, a virtue most associate with monasticism rather than life in the world. In fact, as the Church grew, perfection came to be associated increasingly with some kind of ascetic life. At first people like the “sons and daughters of the covenant” in the Syriac Church lived in the world, but somewhat apart from others, devoting themselves to prayer and good works. By the third century ascetics like St Antony and the Desert Fathers lived as hermits in the wilderness, completely apart from others. Monasticism brought like-minded people together to live in a community, where they could commend themselves *and one another* and their whole life to Christ God while being apart from the world at large.

But the Gospel is not addressed simply to monks and nuns; it is meant for all believers. How does a Christian in the world “sell all” and follow Christ? Is there a way for a believer to live in the world but not be of the world, as Christ enjoins? It is not wearing some distinctive dress that says “I am different.” It is rather living by a different set of principles, given by Christ.

The popular book, *Way of the Ascetics* by Tito Colliander, affirms that our “wealth” is nothing less than our self-centeredness. *“Take a look at yourself and see how bound you are by your desire to humor yourself and only yourself. Your freedom is curbed by the restraining bonds of self-love, and thus you wander, a captive corpse, from morning till eve. ‘Now I will drink,’ ‘now I will get up,’ ‘now I will read the paper.’ Thus you are led from moment to moment in your halter of preoccupation with self, and kindled instantly to displeasure, impatience or anger if an obstacle intervenes”* (p. 5).

Colliander stresses that asceticism is the only path to victory over our self-centeredness. He gives some practical suggestions for living an ascetic life in the world. Like St Paul, Colliander begins with meekness and humility. He contrasts true humility with the desire to be perceived as humble:

“We notice the person who is forever bowing and fussily servile, and perhaps say, ‘How humble he is!’ But the truly humble person escapes notice: the world does not know him (1 John 3:1); for the world he is mostly a ‘zero’” (p. 26).

Humility is rather a matter of not always putting forth one’s own will. Colliander teaches that following the Church’s tradition for fasting is the most basic school for obedience. We fast when the Church says to, we do not fast when the Church says not to. We fast not to be “righteous,” but to be obedient.

Ordinary life provides countless other occasions for us to develop a humble spirit through obedience. Colliander notes, *“Your wife wants you to take your raincoat with you: do as she wishes, to practice obedience. Your fellow-worker asks you to walk with her a little way: go with her to practice obedience. A novice in a cloister could not find more opportunity for obedience than you in your own home. And likewise at your job and in your dealings with your neighbour”* (p.44).

To “sell all one has,” then, ultimately means to give up one’s own will to follow Christ. Along with a certain simplicity of life and chastity appropriate to one’s marital state, we attain what St Tikhon of Zadonsk called “interior monasticism.” We put aside the values and pursuits of the world to follow Christ along the way of perfection in whatever state of life we find ourselves.

The One Thing You Need

“WHO, ME?” – We can easily imagine the consternation of the rich young man when he heard the Lord tell him: *“You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me”* (Lk 18:22). This incident is related in the three synoptic Gospels (Mt, Mk and Lk); each of them describes this young man slightly

differently. In Mt and Mk he is described as rich and “young” (the Greek word refers to someone in his late twenties or early thirties); In Mk his youth is emphasized: he is described as “running” up to Jesus who “... *looking at him, loved him*” (Mk 10:21), perhaps as one would love an eager adolescent.

In Lk he is described as a “ruler,” (Greek, *archon*). This could mean that he was a member of the elite ruling class or that he was an archon of the local synagogue. Since he is described as a person of great wealth, he was most likely from a socially important family.

In Mk he is portrayed as eager and seriously curious. In Lk, as many Fathers read it, he was trying to trick Jesus with his question. St Cyril of Alexandria, for example, described him in this way: “He fancied himself as having learned the Law and supposed that he had been accurately taught it. He imagined that he could show that Christ was introducing laws of His own and of dishonoring the commandments given by the most wise Moses.... Observe how he mixes flattery with fraud and deceit, like someone who mingles vinegar and honey. He supposed that he could deceive Him in this way” (Homily 122 on Luke).

These two contrasting depictions of the rich young man illustrate how narrative details in the Gospels are not necessarily meant to be of historical importance. Rather, they are to illustrate the point of a teaching. In the case of Mk’s eager learner, the point is that Christ’s invitation is an act of love. Gaining treasure in heaven excels by far the amassing of earthly riches. In the case of Lk’s trickster, the teaching is that Christ does not annul the Law but He fulfills it.

An apocryphal gospel from the late second century, known to some of the Fathers but now lost, adds an interesting thought in the same line. When the young man shows his reluctance to follow the Lord’s counsel, “*The Lord said to him 'How can you say 'I have kept the Law and the prophets'? seeing that it is written in the Law 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' and look, many of your brothers, sons of Abraham, are clad with dung, dying for hunger, and your house is full of many good things, and nothing at all goes out from it to them.*”

If you claim to love your neighbor, you must be ready to do so in deed as well as in word.

“Sell...Give... Follow...”

The heart of the passage is not the character of the inquirer but the counsel which the Lord gave him: “*You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me*” (Lk 18:22). This advice involves a sequence of three separate acts, one following upon another. First the young man is told to “Sell all you have,” to divest yourself of everything which people in the world value. Attachment to these things is what keeps people from attaching themselves to God. Preoccupation with them distracts us from focusing on the union with God which we have been given. As the Lord said elsewhere, “*No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon*” (Lk 16:13).

People who have comfortable lives, as well as people who are just getting by, can be equally “attached” to the things they have, or what they would like to have. If our inner life is focused on acquiring things, or on the things we already have, then these things are our masters. Our

preoccupation with them prevents us from being concerned with the divine. The first step for the rich young man – and for any of us – is to evaluate how much “all you have” matters to you. Could you live without the internet or your favorite TV channels? Would you willingly give them up to devote yourself to God’s service?

The second step in Christ’s plan for us is to “distribute to the poor.” If we wish to serve God, we begin by using our material wealth for the benefit of those who truly need it. The spiritual realm may be beyond us, particularly if we are beginners in the spiritual life. We may find the nitty-gritty world of ministering to the poor to be a more accessible and less threatening way to begin following Christ.

In our comfortable society, we may have gotten used to overeating, to drinking too much, to demanding continuous leisure, entertainment or information. We may consider them essential to our way of life. If so, we might do well to reflect on these words of St Basil the Great:

“Why are you wealthy while that other man is poor? Is it, perhaps, in order that you may be repaid for your kindheartedness and faithful stewardship, and in order that he may be honored with great prizes for his endurance?

“But, as for you, when you hoard all these things in the insatiable bosom of greed, do you suppose you do no wrong in cheating so many people? Who is a greedy person? Someone who does not rest content with what is sufficient. Who is a cheater? Someone who takes away what belongs to others. And are you not a man of greed...

“The bread which you hold back belongs to the hungry; the coat, which you guard in your locked storage-chests, belongs to the naked; the footwear moldering in your closet belongs to those without shoes. The silver that you keep hidden in a safe place belongs to the one in need. Thus, however many are those whom you could have provided for, so many are those whom you wrong” (Homily on Greed, 7).

Once a person has dealt with his reliance on earthly things and is firmly set on serving God, he or she is ready to follow Christ. This may mean physically relocating to a different city or even country. It may mean becoming involved with a mission in another part of town. It always means uprooting ourselves in some way from a life with which we have become comfortable, at least for a while, and going where we may be needed.

Is This for Everyone?

In Matthew’s rendering of this scene, the Lord’s instruction is prefaced by the words: “*If you want to be perfect...*” (Mt 19:8). This has led people over the ages to assume that His teaching here is for monks and nuns – those whose lifestyle is directed to spiritual perfection. The rest of us just hope to get by.

Actually, Christ’s intention is clear: striving for perfection – the opposite of legalism – is essential to true religion. Thus the Sermon on the Mount was concluded with this invitation to a godlike life, “*Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect*” (Mt 5:48).

Striving for perfection with repentance and humility became the hallmark of early Christians. This teaching eventually led to the rise of ascetics and monastics, but did not originate with them. From the first, Christians saw their task as to strive for purity of heart, lessening our vulnerability to and dependency on what St Paul calls, “*the desires of the flesh and the mind*” (Eph 2:3).

People with responsibilities in the world cannot literally sell and distribute all their goods. They can and should avoid slavery to them: the psychological need to possess or to prefer possessions to people.

Fourteenth Sunday of St Luke – Luke 18:35-43

A Voice for All Mankind

AT THE DIVINE LITURGY ON ANY ORDINARY DAY the phrase *Lord, have mercy* will be repeated over fifty times. At other services we might hear this prayer repeated forty or even one hundred times in response to a single petition. It is not unusual to hear people question this repetition. “Why so many times?” they may ask. “Are we so miserable that we must keep begging for mercy?”

This prayer is easily understood coming from the mouth of the blind man in the Gospel. A blind beggar at the side of the road near the city gate was a person alone, without family to take care of him, dependent on strangers hurrying past, intent on their own affairs, for a few coins to buy bread. Such a person would cry out for mercy, but why should we do so, especially as often as we do in our prayers?

Lord, have mercy comes easily to our lips if we are used to praying in the Byzantine tradition; it may not spring from our hearts, especially in this country, where people are raised to believe that our intelligence and determination can find a solution to any problem. We may need more resources, more time, or more ingenuity to solve our problems, but solve them we will.

Participants in the many Twelve-Step Programs for overcoming addictions which have arisen in the past 75 years are the people in our society who have realized that they cannot solve their own problems. They need “mercy.”

Although they are couched in secular terms, the first steps in these programs express in contemporary terms the impulse which prompted the blind man to cry out for mercy:

1. “We admitted we were powerless over our addiction —that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. “We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. “We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him.*”

Those of us who are not dependent on alcohol, drugs, gambling or any other addictive behavior may not feel that we need either these principles or the blind man’s plea for mercy. We do,

however, share fallen human nature trapped by sin, selfishness and the passions which beset everyone in the world. Whereas the recovering addict realizes his problem and makes the decision to turn to God, most of us remain blissfully unaware or unconcerned.

Mental health therapists often ask clients whether anything they do is truly selfless. Most people are not able to come up with anything. Whatever we do, even prayer or charitable work, we do for our own pleasure or self-satisfaction, at least in part. We understand the perils of alcoholism; we do not see the even more pervasive danger of egoism, the mother of the passions..

The believer who comes to know the brokenness of our human nature and our inclination to sin will know that the each of us is as powerless over our passions as the addict is over his or her addictions and will readily embrace the cry of the blind man, “Have mercy on me!”

The Jesus Prayer

The cry of the blind man is also the heart of the Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!” In this prayer we first of all confess Christ as the Son of God, as the blind man confessed Him to be the Messiah, the “Son of David.” Then we admit that we are broken, sinners, in need of God’s mercy.

This prayer summarizes the Christian’s entire spiritual life. Little wonder, then, that it has for centuries been the One-Step Program for countless Eastern Christians seeking to express their connection to God.

“As one, therefore, who already believed that the Word, being God, had of His Own Will submitted to be born in the flesh of the holy Virgin, he drew near to Him as unto God, and said, ‘Have mercy upon me, Son of David (v.38). For Christ bears witness that this was his state of mind in offering his supplication, by saying unto him, ‘Your faith has saved you’ (v.42).”

St Cyril of Alexandria

Fifteenth Sunday of St Luke (Sunday of Zacchaeus)

Zacchaeus and His Treasure (Luke 19:1-10)

ONE OF THE SAYING OF THE LORD JESUS which puzzled His hearers and still puzzles people today is, “*How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God*” (Lk 18:24). It flies in the face of the “prosperity gospel” preached in many mega-churches as it did in Israel. Wealth is a blessing, it is said, and so the wealthy have been blessed by God. This must be a sign of God’s favor to them. The Lord’s words make no sense in the face of this ‘logic.’ When questioned how this could be, Jesus replied, “*The things which are impossible with men are possible with God*” (v.27).

A few verses later in Luke we read the story of Zacchaeus’ encounter with Christ in which a rich man enters the kingdom of God. This happens when Zacchaeus, a leading tax collector – and, therefore, a man in whose position greed and extortion would be a way of life – is so drawn to

the Lord Jesus that his riches cease to matter. He gives half his wealth to the poor and restored fourfold anything gained by fraud. Zacchaeus is therefore the opposite of the rich young man in Luke 18 who chose keeping his wealth over following Jesus.

The Gospel story of Zacchaeus' conversion (Lk 19:1-10) offers some valuable insights into repentance. His spiritual journey begins with an encounter with Christ. At first Zacchaeus is moved by a kind of curiosity to climb the tree and see who this Jesus is. Then Christ calls him personally and they go off to Zacchaeus' house. True repentance always involves both our work and the Lord's. If He calls and we are not even curious, nothing will happen. If we seek Him in an inappropriate way – such as only coming to Him when we want something – He may remain silent.

Zacchaeus' repentance is not mere sentiment; it has concrete exterior manifestations. One is the desire to repair any wrongs he may have done to others. "...*if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore it fourfold*" (v. 8). We cannot move ahead unless we correct what we can of our past sins. When material things are at the heart of our sin it is relatively easy to make restitution. But how does anyone restore a broken relationship, heal a damaged childhood or re-establish another's reputation which we have smeared? The one we have harmed may demand something from us or our spiritual guide may offer alternative acts of reparation. But something concrete must be done.

Zacchaeus does not only look back, he also looks ahead. "*I give half of my goods to the poor...*" (v.8) Zacchaeus actually does something to fulfill the Lord's precept to love in a concrete way. This dynamic was explained most clearly by St Diadochos, the fifth-century Bishop of Photiki in northern Greece: "When a man begins to perceive the love of God in all its richness, he begins also to love his neighbor with spiritual perception. This is the love of which all the scriptures speak." (*On Spiritual Knowledge and Discernment*, 15).

Zacchaeus' life-changing decision is clearly spelled out, but the dynamics of his encounter with Christ are not. What brought Zacchaeus to such a decision? What did he see in Jesus? We are not told because it is Zacchaeus' decision rather than how he experienced Christ which is of importance to us.

Later events in the life of the Church have shown that there are two principal ways to experience God. The first way is more dramatic, but less common. Here ***God reveals himself to a person directly***, as he did to St. Paul, or perhaps through reading the Scriptures or through an icon. When such an encounter takes place the person meeting the Lord reacts much as did Zacchaeus. He puts aside his "wealth" to follow Christ.

While a person's riches might be monetary like Zacchaeus, it may be other things as well. Paul – Saul as he was then – was not a wealthy man monetarily speaking but he had riches, which he described in Philippians 3:5-8. Paul's "wealth" was his status as "*a Hebrew of the Hebrews,*" one whose credentials as a practitioner of Judaism were unmatched. He was an observant Pharisee, blameless in his observance of the Law. But after encountering Christ he says, "*What things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ*" (v.7).

Throughout the centuries people have put aside their “wealth” for Christ. They gave up lands and possessions like St. Anthony the Great, but also high rank like St. Arsenius the Great, scholarly reputes like Evagrius, or political convictions like Dorothy Day. They chose to give up their “wealth” for something greater.

The second way of experiencing God in the Tradition is through *asceticism: struggling to change* the focus of our life.

Most people today follow the lead of our secular culture in pursuing whatever gives us pleasure or material security while ignoring the continual presence of God on whom we all depend. Like teenagers focused on their iPhones or MP3 players, they are oblivious to the real world around them, in this case the presence of God.

When people embrace the ascetic life they work to refocus their lives away from the values of this age. They strive to break away from the compulsions or fixations that enslave so many, from a full-time pursuit of the attractions of the world.

They cease relying on their own minds to determine what is good for them and begin looking to God. In their innermost being they hear the Lord’s words, “*Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you*” (Mt 6:33). In this way they prepare themselves to recognize God “everywhere present and filling all things.”

The Lord Jesus described the choice they and countless others have faced like this:

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it” (Mt 13:44-46).

The “treasure hidden in a field” is the unique relationship with God in Christ which Zaccaeus, Paul and all the saints had found and which St Paul described as “*Christ in you, the hope of glory*” (Col 1:27).

Each of us can attain this treasure because:

- While all creation reflects something of God, the Source of its being, we were created with something more of God in us: made “*in our image, after our likeness*” (Gen 1:26)
- The Word of God has become one of us in Jesus Christ, completely sharing our humanity so that we might share in His divine life: “*God became man so that man might become godlike*” (St Athanasius the Great)
- Christ has lived His human life in perfect communion with His Father: “*I am not alone, but I am with the Father who sent me*” (Jn 8:16)
- Christ has promised to dwell in those who keep His word: “*If anyone loves me, he will keep my word; and my Father will love him and we will come to him and make our home with him*” (Jn 14:23)

- When we maintain this communion with God by keeping His word we come to share by grace in His divine nature: *“His divine power has given us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of Him ...that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature”* (2 Pt 1:3-4).

What are you willing to put aside or to take up to attain this treasure?

In the Church calendar the story of Zacchaeus is read as the herald of the Triodion, the last Sunday before we open that guide to repentance and the Great Fast. As we recall the movements of Zacchaeus’ repentance we should be led to ask ourselves about the quality of our love for God. To what concrete action are we being led to perform during the coming Fast? What tangible form will love take in our lives as we look to the celebration of Pascha? And what past offenses to others which have yet to be righted hang over us and taint our intentions for this season? Like Zacchaeus we are called to begin our spiritual exercise with the “warm-up” of repentance in deed as well as in thought.

“Zacchaeus, Come Down”

PHYSICAL FITNESS IS BIG BUSINESS today. People run to gyms and exercise programs, or they just run. St. Paul sees the value of keeping one’s body in shape, but puts it in a perspective of his own. *“Bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise for the life that now is and of that which is to come”* (1 Tim 4:8).

We may readily grasp that spiritual exercise may bear fruit in the life to come, but what promise does it have “for the life that now is”?

A great part of spiritual training is concerned with *the control of the passions*. We strive to free ourselves from the compulsion to pursue pleasure so that we can pursue a relationship with the living God. If we follow this training, the result in our life now is that we are no longer driven to acquire or possess. We are content.

When a person is beset by greed he is never satisfied with what he has. There is always more, there is always something better to be acquired. While he seems content with his latest acquisition it is only for a moment, because nothing he has truly satisfies. The same is true of people governed by gluttony, lust, popular acclaim or pride. They never have enough.

A person who has learned to control the passions, on the other hand, is content knowing that all he is and all he has is the gift of God. He has learned that material wealth, physical pleasure, or the good opinion of others are all passing and insignificant when compared with the possibility of knowing and serving God. He is happy to devote energy and resources to others as much as possible because he controls them; they do not control him. Controlling the passions makes us free here and now.

Someone who undertakes spiritual discipline devotes himself to developing spiritual strengths or virtues just as an athlete strengthens physical muscles. These strengths, or virtues, enable

spiritual athletes to remain faithful in the face of persecution or hardship. How could the martyrs and confessors have endured the torments they suffered without the fortitude spiritual discipline produces? How could people like Father Damien in a leper colony, Mother Teresa on the streets of Calcutta, or Dorothy Day in the tenements of New York have served day after day in such atrocious conditions without the patience and dedication of a spiritual athlete? Without the endurance which spiritual discipline produces believers would quickly fall away from their commitment and collapse on the sidelines. Spiritual discipline develops the endurance to live for God in the here and now.

Another aspect of spiritual discipline is concerned with *fidelity to prayer*. Many people pray – or say prayers – from a sense of duty. Praying, they feel, is something we “ought to do.” A person of prayer is rather one who senses an authentic relationship with God and who prays out of love rather than a sense of obligation. Such a person reaps the fruits of a commitment to prayer in this life, becoming someone who experiences the presence of God in his life on earth.

The presence of God may be experienced in many ways. There are saints who have experienced God directly in visions or in charismatic gifts. But the presence of God may also be experienced in consolations or in the assurance of blessing from God without any exterior manifestation. In either case to experience the presence of God in one’s “life that now is” is clear evidence of the truth of St. Paul’s statement: godliness profits a person in this life as well as in the life to come.

Repentance: Warm-up to the Spiritual Life

We have all seen runners stretching their leg muscles before beginning a run. Their stretches are a warm-up in anticipation of the effort ahead. Similarly there is a warm up necessary at the start of a spiritual effort. Repentance is the necessary prerequisite to any effective spiritual effort, whether it is the encounter with Christ in the Liturgy or any of the mysteries, the Great Fast, or any spiritual work which we pray may be fruitful. Ignoring our personal spiritual state before undertaking any of these practices borders on presumption. Even world-class athletes, whether physical or spiritual, always begin each contest at the beginning, with a warm-up.

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On this day, the Sunday before the beginning of the Lenten Triodion, we commemorate the repentance of the tax-collector, the Holy Apostle Zacchaeus, who desired to behold Christ.

The Holy Fathers placed today's commemoration here to prepare us, little by little, for dawning season of the Great Fast. Knowing that we are basically slow to exhibit a desire for repentance, the Holy Fathers, by Zacchaeus' example, teach us in these preliminary weeks the need to recognize our sins and our need to turn away from them.

From the Synxarion

Sixteenth Monday of St Luke

The Things That Are Caesar’s (Mark 12:13-17)

THE YEAR 1938 SAW AN ESCALATION of warlike activities in Nazi Germany. In March, Hitler invaded Austria and began to move against Czechoslovakia. Attacks on synagogues and Jewish businesses increased and thousands of German Jews were arrested.

The response of one Russian-American, Irving Berlin, was to compose the song “God Bless America” which would become like a second National Anthem during World War II and the years that followed. From the first, however, there was opposition to the song by some. They felt that it seemed to be a statement that everything in American life was positive, despite obvious examples of racial, ethnic and religious prejudices that were rife in many places. They interpreted “God Bless America” to mean “God reward America.”

Praying for the Nation

Christians have always prayed for their country, even when its leadership was persecuting them. The Lord Jesus was displayed on the cross as an anti-Roman revolutionary (the “King of the Jews”), yet He never advocated revolt as many Jewish zealots did. His approach was rather, “*Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s*” (Mk 12:17).

The apostolic writings, composed when Roman officials began repressing Christians, still insisted, “*Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities*” (Rom 13:1). St Paul here offered his most elaborated statement on supporting the civil authority by prayer “*For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience’s sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God’s ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor*” (Rom 13:1-7).

The main points in this passage would be repeated frequently in the apostolic writings and by the early Christian defenders of Christianity. The ultimate source of civil power is God and therefore it is God who has placed rulers in authority.

The power of earthly rulers is legitimate, if limited to the temporal order. As St Justin the Philosopher (100-165) explained, “Whence to God alone we render worship, but in other things we gladly serve you, acknowledging you as kings and rulers of men, and praying that with your kingly power you be found to possess also sound judgment... as Christ intimated when He said, ‘To whom God has given more, of him shall more be required’” (Justin, *First Apology*).

From the start, the Church rejected the Empire’s idolatry and emperor-worship. It condemned many of its cultural values as well and as a result it suffered greatly at the hands of the Empire’s leaders, but in principle it respected the God-given place of the Empire and its Emperor.

In St Paul’s view, civil authorities have a place in God’s purposes: to insure “*that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence*” (1 Tm 2:2). When the state is at peace then believers are free to live godly lives, raising up their praises to God without hindrance. This passage is the inspiration for our prayer for civil authorities to this day. In the anaphora of the Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom the priest prays, “...for our civil authorities, for the government and the armed forces. O Lord, grant them peaceful rule that we too in their tranquility may lead a calm and quiet life in all virtue and honor.”

In the Liturgy of St Basil our prayer is similar, but with an added note. “Remember, Lord, this country and all those in public service whom You have allowed to govern on earth. Grant them

profound and lasting peace. Speak to their hearts good things concerning Your Church and all Your people that through the faithful conduct of their duties we may live peaceful and serene lives in all piety and holiness. Sustain the good in their goodness; make the wicked good through Your goodness.” We recognize that, while rulers may be legitimate, they may not always be godly.

The “Christian State”

In AD 313 the Edict of Milan decreed religious toleration in the Roman Empire. This was followed in a few years by the proclamation of Christianity as the state religion in the Empire. The state came to be seen as a servant of God. At the height of this development the Emperor was seen as a kind of secular deacon, wearing a sticharion and orarion as part of his imperial regalia and receiving Communion at the holy table.

There were also Christians who felt that God did not desire a “Christian state.” The North African philosopher Lactantius viewed history this way in his synopsis of Christian thought, the *Divine Institutes*: “God might have bestowed upon His people both riches and kingdoms, as He had given previously to the Jews, whose successors and posterity we are. However, He would have Christians live under the power and government of others, lest they should become corrupted by the happiness and prosperity, slide into luxury and eventually despise the commandments of God. For this is what our ancestors did” (V, 23). When Constantine became Emperor, he appointed Lactantius as tutor to his son Crispus. We do not know whether the philosopher’s attitude to a Christian state changed after that.

In any case, while civic tranquility may free believers to pursue union with God, times of persecution or civil strife often bring out the strengths of some, adorning the Church with holy martyrs, confessors and passion-bearers. Each era and condition of life may become the arena for following Christ.

The Battle-Hymn of the Empire

One of our most frequently-heard prayers, the troparion of the holy cross, was originally a battle-hymn for the Christian Empire. The literal translation of the original Greek text is: “O Lord save Your people and bless Your inheritance. Grant victory to our emperor over the barbarians and preserve Your dwelling-place by the power of Your cross.” It is with this meaning that the hymn features into Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture*, where the troparion of the cross represents the Russian army successfully battling Napoleon and his troops.

With the fall of the Eastern Christian Empires (Byzantium, Russia) the hymn has been adapted in various ways to remove the references to the emperor and the barbarians. One popular version says, “grant victory to our country over its enemies.”

In some churches, however, the following is sung: “grant victory to Your people over their enemy (i.e. the devil).” This version stresses that the Christian people as a whole, rather than any earthly realm, is the dwelling-place of God and that our real enemy is not the nation next door but our spiritual foes, the powers of evil.

