

The Confessor's Tongue for August 29, 2010

14th Sunday After Pentecost: Beheading of St. John the Baptist

In honor of St. Maximus the Confessor, whose tongue and right hand were cut off in an attempt by compromising authorities to silence his uncompromising confession of Christ's full humanity & divinity.

August 29: Beheading of St. John the Baptist

St. John the Baptist underwent beheading in the 32nd year after the birth of Christ. Prior to this time St. John was imprisoned by Herod Antipas because he accused the latter of divorcing his lawful wife, the daughter of the Arabian King Arethas and for unlawful cohabitation (see Lev. 18:16; 20:21) with Herodias who was married to Herod's brother Phillip. A party was planned on Herod's birthday. The niece of Herod, the daughter of the impure Herodias, so pleased Herod through her dancing during the feast and lying with him that the king with an oath promised to give her anything she asked, even up to half of his kingdom. The dancer, instructed by her own mother, then asked that he give her the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Herod, having great respect for John, but mainly afraid of the people, honored St. John as a prophet (Mt. 14:5; Mk. 6:18-20), grieved for a while, but for the sake of an oath although wrong and for the sake of his guests did not want to renege on the lawless oath, sent guards to the prison who severed the head of John, gave it to the maiden and the maiden gave it to her mother (Mt. 14:6-12; Mk. 6:21-29). Wild joy seized Herodias when she saw the head of her hateful accuser brought to her. In an impulse of senseless delight, she hastened to take pleasure even over the dead righteous man in revenge as she pierced the accusatory and explanatory tongue of the Holy Forerunner with a needle and threw the holy head in a dishonorable place. (See January 7, February 24 and June 14). For his evil deeds Herod received his reward in the 38th year after the birth of Christ: His armies were defeated by Arethas, who acted against him for dishonoring his daughter who was cast aside for the sake of Herodias, and in the year 39 Herod was sent to prison by Caligula

On this day the Church established a fast in which it is not allowed to eat fish because of the abstinent life of the Saint and the impure murderous pouring out of his blood by Herod. Glorifying on this day the great faster and desert-dweller who lived in a waterless and grassless desert, the Church does not have other proper ways to adequately honor it except through fasting and prayer. And, recalling the circumstances of the beheading, the wrong promise given in the middle of the banquet because of the dancing, the Church by establishing this fast raises the issue of gluttony connected to the sacrifice and bloodshed of animals. *Bulgakov Handbook*, Fr. Eugene Tarris, translator.

And so, here's the first and only path to salvation—the fulfillment of the Lord's commandments. The Lord said concerning them that they're not grievous, but we can't fulfill them by our own strength. We must ask the Lord for help, and He will give it. It seems simple. Simple, but complicated as well. Let us pray to Him that He strengthen us in His love. *Elder Barsanuphius of Optina +1913*

Translations: On the Singing of Many Years

In the Church, we invoke this blessing of “many years” on people at significant times: at marriages, at ordinations, on namedays and birthdays, at the end of moliebens.

The priest or deacon intones the following: “Grant, O Lord, a prosperous and peaceful life; health, salvation, and furtherance in all good things, unto thy servant(s) N., and preserve him/her/them for many years.”

In Russian (Church Slavonic) the people's response echoes the end of what the priest has just intoned: “Many years, many years, many years.” To do this literally doesn't sing well in English to the Russian melody, which we use. “Many years” has all of three syllables; “mnogoye lyeto” in Russian has five. Thus to make it sing better, more of the words that are intoned by the priest or deacon are echoed in our English setting: “God grant him/her/them many years.”

Yet, in the most American common way of singing ‘many years’, in adding additional words to fit the music, we have distorted our echo of the priest. The priest intones the words addressed to God as a prayer: “Grant O Lord...unto Thy servant, and preserve him for many years.” For some reason, in the common English version, when the people, who should be echoing the priest, instead sing “God grant you many years.” This, however, is no longer an echo of the original prayer directed to God, but has been transformed into a wish directed to the person.

Moreover, a proper echoing of the priest's prayer in English “God grant him many years” can naturally be sung even when the person being honored or prayed for is not present. It does not work well to sing “God grant you many years” when the person being honored is not there.

Though we do not sing in the second person here at St. Maximus, many around the country do. This mistake, however, should be changed, no matter how popular it may be. Put the mistaken “God grant you many years” into permanent retirement where that crippled translation belongs. Another solution would be for our musicians to compose a pleasing setting for singing the words “many years” only without added words.

Fr. Justin Frederick

The Sayings of St. Anthony the Great

Abba Anthony also said, 'God does not allow the same warfare and temptations to this generation as He did formerly, for men are weaker now and cannot bear so much.'

Saying 23 Sayings of the Desert Fathers

Commentary: Whether it is the declining age spans we find in Genesis or a comparison stretching from our grandparents and parents to ourselves and on to the generation of our children and grandchildren, it is a common idea that man is somehow in decline from

one generation to another. Almost every civilization has looked back to a long departed "golden age" in comparison with which contemporary times appear base. Compare the pioneers or your grandparents with yourselves and in many ways we come off worse by comparison: they were harder working, more honorable, less self-indulgent, more capable of doing things for themselves and enduring hardship. Compare the current generation of movie stars and celebrities with the previous generation, and you get the distinct impression that the present crop are but children in adult bodies in comparison. Whatever the reason for the impression of decline and decay, it is hard to shake it.

Anthony finds the same thing among the monks of the desert. Already over his long life (he lived to be more than 100, he perceives a lessening of the trials and warfare God permits His people to experience, for they are weaker and cannot bear what the previous generation bore, especially in direct assaults from the demons such as he experienced to great degree. Indeed, this is biblical, for we know that "God does not permit us to be tempted beyond what we are able to bear." Though we wrestle with the enemy, the enemy has been bound—he does not have free reign to assault us with all his power. By the power of Christ's victory and God's mercy, he is unable to attack more than God permits, and God permits only what we can bear. And whatever we face, we know that God makes a way of escape for us, if we will but find it and use it.

Thus if our trials seem great, we should take heart, for God has declared that we are able to bear them and that He is with us in them. If the enemy assaults us strongly, we remember he is bound; God uses him on a leash as a trainer to test and develop our faith, though he ever seeks to destroy us. A hymn from the *Octoechos (Friday Vespers, tone 4)* expresses this well:

Thou who art compassionate hast given me the enemy for my profit, as a gift to scourge and teach me; for his wickedness serveth as a test, which, without being good, leadeth me to the good: therefore it is now in thanksgiving that I cry: Save me, O Lord, before I perish utterly.

Indeed, we live in a generation weakened by pleasure and ease of life. Our fasting falls well short of the Church's common norm, let alone the feats of the great ascetics. We struggle to pray our prayer rule each day and to make it to church only once a week, but who among us delights in prayer, in staying up late or rising early to give ourselves to prayer as so many have done through the ages? We struggle to read the Scriptures: who of us has read them through once, let alone five, ten, fifteen, twenty times? Who among us can quote passages, recite Psalms and other treasures of Scripture that we have laid up in our hearts? We struggle to tithe and give alms, thinking we can't live on 90% of our income, where others such as St. Antony gave their all, or as Joachim and Anna, gave a third to the temple, a third in alms, and

lived on a third. The saints, their virtues, their exploits and accomplishments seem alien to us and impossible.

Yet despite the weakness of our times, God is merciful and does not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear. And He ever works to strengthen us and lift us higher. And in our time of moral and physical decay, our general weakness, and the mass of temptation that surrounds us, especially the most basic temptations to gluttony and sexual impurity and self-indulgence, which are probably greater than ever and unprecedented in scope, there is still the opportunity to win crowns, and glorious ones at that.

Let us hear what the desert fathers had to say about us in comparison with them, and take heart:

The holy Fathers were making predictions about the last generation. They said, 'What have we ourselves done? One of them, the great Abba Ischyrion replied, 'We ourselves have fulfilled the commandments of God.' The others replied, 'And those who come after us, what will they do?' He said, 'They will struggle to achieve half our works.' They said, 'And to those who come after them, what will happen?' He said, 'The men of that generation will not accomplish any works at all, and temptation will come upon them; and those who will be approved in that day will be greater than either us or our fathers.'

We live in a generation where sinning through gluttony, fornication and lust, and luxurious living and self-indulgence is easier than ever and harder than ever to resist. We should not expect to have dramatic contests with the demons as Anthony did, or accomplish great feats in prayer, fasting, or even almsgiving as did so many before us. We have to fight for our very spiritual lives, to keep the flame of faith burning in a time when the whole nexus of modern life blows vigorously upon it to extinguish it. It may be that the feat of keeping faith in God alive, seeking God through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving to the small degree our strength permits, and seeking to keep Christ's commandments and do His will in all things will be a greater accomplishment in our times than all the feats of the Saints in times of old.

So let us patiently endure the burden of our times with faith in God, clinging to Christ our Savior, keeping faith alive despite our weakness and the great temptations of our times. Crowns are to be won for keeping the warmth of faith burning in our cold-hearted age.

Fr. Justin Frederick

Upcoming Events 2010

- 5 September: Church School Begins
- 6 September: Labor Day Picnic, noon to five, Liturgy at 10:00 a.m.
- 8 September: Nativity of the Theotokos, Liturgy 7:00 a.m., Vigil September 7 at 7:00 p.m.
- 14 September: Elevation of the Cross
- 26 September: Annual Meeting, 11:30 a.m.

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!