

The Confessor's Tongue for July 24, A. D. 2016

5th Sunday after Pentecost, SS Boris & Gleb; Great Martyr Christina

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.

Reading Psalm 46 with Chrysostom

Seminarian Daniel Greeson

Last week we pondered the content of Psalm 95 keeping in mind the advice of St Ambrose of Milan. The advice was to approach different psalms like different exercises, each psalm providing us with a different set of exercises for the up building of our souls. This process of contemplating each individual psalm is especially beneficial as the psalms constitute the bulwark of our services. St John Chrysostom, commenting upon Psalm 135:3, recommends that we “pay attention so that your singing may be done with understanding.” Later St John, while commenting on Psalm 141, laments that “those singing it [psalms] daily and uttering the words by mouth but do not inquire about the force of the ideas underlying the words.” Hearing or reading psalms in Church or at home must not be an occasion of a series of unknown syllables and phrases running over our tongues. It is one thing to fulfill the reading of the psalms in order to simply fulfill a duty and it is another to fulfill the reading and to have done it with understanding which leads to further compunction and repentance. It is incumbent upon us Christians to peruse Scripture and to gain an understanding of the content of Holy Scripture. This aids us in our contemplation of God, understanding ourselves in relation to God and others, and to worship God with understanding.

This week we will follow St John Chrysostom in his commentary on Psalm 46 in order to begin to learn how to inquire after the “force of the ideas underlying the words” of this psalm. While we draw out St. John's insights we will also be commenting on the way in which St. John goes about drawing these insights. In this way we may imitate him in our own studies of Holy Scripture. First, the text of the psalm:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. 2 Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; 3 Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof. 4 There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High. 5 God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early. 6 The heathen raged, the kingdoms were moved: he uttered his voice, the earth melted. 7 The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. 8 Come, behold the works of the Lord, what desolations he hath made in the earth. 9 He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; he breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder; he burneth the chariot in the fire. 10 Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth. 11 The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

St John begins his commentary on Psalm 46 by diving into the main existential concern of the author

of the psalm by relating a common theme of how St. John reads Scripture. St John comments that the author, in customary fashion, “lead[s] the listeners away from worldly concerns and guid[es] them to a hope on high.” In the midst of the tumult of life when it seems that the earth has disappeared, the mountains have fallen into the sea, and the entire created order is dissipating there stands our God, our refuge. He comments further, “If...you wish to see an invincible power, insuperable refuge, unassailable fort, impregnable tower, take refuge in God, enlist that great might.” It is customary for St John to gather from the text not just facts but the “force of the ideas”. In other words, St John reads the text not as a historical document or a text from which we gather facts. Rather Holy Writ is a tool by which we gain perspective upon our situation vis-à-vis God and the world. In the midst of the tumult of life we turn to God, our refuge.

This turning to God as a refuge is then refracted into different ways in which one can turn to God as a refuge. St John means that sometimes turning to God as our refuge and strength means that we conquer by “flight [and] sometimes by standing and fighting.” The Psalm nowhere directs us to fight, but it does maintain the language of warfare. It is God who ultimately is in charge and who brings his judgment. St John reads these verses then to commend us in our spiritual warfare. He does this but referring to other examples in Scripture, citing Paul as someone who sometimes yielded and other times opposed those who stood against the word of truth. He also refers to Jesus Christ who taught us to pray to not enter in to temptation but to also be brave and not show cowardice when the time comes for us to stand and fight. This practice of stepping back from the specific text of the Psalm and reading it within the broader canon is key to St. John's way of reading. We learn to read Scripture by reading it sensitively and boldly. Sensitively by paying attention to genre, narrative arc, facts, and historical contexts. But also boldly, relating the text to those figures and texts which help us expand our understanding of a text. Sometimes this is through a key word which takes us to another book of Scripture or other times it is by coming to know the basic shape of righteousness and wisdom as displayed in God's people throughout time.

The last point I want to draw out from the way in which St John attends to Psalm 46 is his attention to the history of God's covenant and acts with and for Israel. In a way this is obvious, of course we should read the Psalms in the context of Israel because this is where it originates! However, many times in our rush to interpret a text for us in the here and now we forget the history of God with His people throughout time. It is to our shame to not be familiar with the Old Testament. St John spends most of the rest of his

commentary on Psalm 46 describing the various ways in which God had come to the rescue of Israel and worked magnificent wonders throughout the entire world, not just in Israel. Using the Psalms as a spring board for calling to mind God's wondrous acts of salvation throughout time and culminating in our true and final liberation in Jesus Christ requires us to be conversant with the entirety of Scripture. Elsewhere St John comments that "Sacred Scripture says nothing idly or to no purpose; every single sound and syllable has a treasure contained in it – all spiritual realities are like that."

From St John's reading of Psalm 46 we discover three basic teachings regarding our reading of the Psalms, or for that matter any part of Scripture. First, let Scripture speak to your current situation and let it lift you to the heavenly perspective. Second, read Scripture canonically, sensitively, and boldly. Third and lastly, be especially vigilant in attending to the Old Testament as it shows forth God's covenant faithfulness in times past and helps us contemplate and contextualize our own battles and victories won by God.

On Reading the Old Testament

The Old Testament is an essential part of Scripture, and without it, it is impossible to understand fully Christ and His work on our behalf. A large part of early catechesis was instruction from the Old Testament showing how Christ fulfilled the words of the ancient prophets. In the early Church, the term "the Scriptures" was applied only to the Old Testament, and so it is used in the Creed when we confess Jesus to have risen on the third day "according to the Scriptures." This means that the death and resurrection of the Messiah was foretold by the prophets, contrary to the expectations of the Jews.

The Apostles, the Holy Fathers, and Christ Himself considered the words of the Old Testament Scriptures to be inspired of God and useful for our instruction, training, and edification, and we do well to read the Old Testament.

When Christians attempt to read the Old Testament, they usually start in Genesis, but then get bogged down in the second half of Exodus or in Leviticus with the Law and its prescriptions for the tabernacle and sacrifices. To avoid this problem, here are some suggestions for reading the OT profitably.

First, read the Psalter. We hear it regularly in church services. Add just one Psalm to your prayers daily, and you will read the entire Psalter twice in a year. Read one Psalm in the morning and one in the evening, and you'll read it four times. Read a stasis, and you'll read it six times. An ancient canon required candidates for the episcopacy to know the Psalter by heart, thus indicating that they were men of prayer. We cannot go wrong reading the Psalms regularly.

Second, read the rest of the wisdom literature (Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom of Sirach (aka Ecclesiasticus), the Wisdom

of Solomon, Job). Make it a habit to read the chapter from Proverbs corresponding to the day of the month. Or read repeatedly through all these works a chapter or two at a time. It will nourish your soul and give make you wise.

Third, get a sense of the historical narrative of the Old Testament. Below are the books and chapters containing historical narrative, not genealogies or detailed instructions on how to build the tabernacle or offer burnt offerings. One may read this sequence of material and come away with a good sense of the events of the OT and their chronology.

Genesis 1-50
Exodus 1-20, 24, 31-35, 40
Leviticus 9-10, 26
Numbers 1, 2:40-51; 8-14, 16-17, 20-25, 31-33;
Deuteronomy 1-34
Joshua 1-24
Judges 1-21
Ruth 1-4
I Samuel 1-31 (aka 1 Kings or Kingdoms)
II Samuel 1-24 (aka 2 Kings or Kingdoms)
I Kings 1-22 (aka 3 Kings or Kingdoms)
II Kings 1-14 (aka 4 Kings or Kingdoms)
Jonah 1-4
II Kings 15-25
I Chronicles 10-29
II Chronicles 1-32
Tobit 1-14
II Chronicles 33-36
Jeremiah 1-5, 19-25; 33-36, 39-52
Judith 1-16
Daniel 1-6
Esther 1-8
I Ezra 1-9
II Ezra 1-10
Nehemiah 1-13
I-II Maccabees

This outline gives a rough chronological reading of the narrative portions of the Old Testament. It may be eventually prepared in more polished form.

Fourth, read the prophets, especially Isaiah 1-6, 40-66, Ezekiel 1-20, 33-34, 36-39, 43-44, Amos, Hosea, Habakkuk, Malachi. They speak of God's judgment on His sinful people but also speak of the hope of repentance and restoration, God's deliverance, and the coming of Messiah.

Last, consider reading different genres of the Old Testament simultaneously: a chapter of the wisdom literature to go with historical and prophetic chapters will help keep you going if the going gets temporarily tough in one genre. *Fr. Justin Frederick*

Upcoming Events 2016
30-31 July, 15-Year Anniversary w/ Bishop Alexander
1-14 August Dormition Fast
12 August All-Night Vigil for St. Maximus

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!