

The Confessor's Tongue for February 19, A. D. 2017

Sunday of the Last Judgment;

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.

Sunday of the Last Judgment

On this Sunday one week before the Great Fast begins, the Holy Church calls us to contemplate the Second Coming of Christ, the Resurrection of the Dead, and the standing of all before the judgment seat of Christ. The words and images are sobering, even frightening, as we realize that we must stand there in the penetrating glory of Christ to be revealed for what we have chosen to become in the course of our lives. We shall be able to hide nothing, forget nothing, excuse nothing. Everything will be revealed, everything made manifest. The Judgment is set before us to motivate us in the fast diligently to cultivate repentance, to deal with our sins now, in this life, which is given to us for repentance, so that all our sins may be removed from us "as far as the East is from the West" and will not remain to appear on that day. But if we are negligent regarding our sins in this life, we shall answer for them there. With such a fearful certainty before us, how can we be careless now?

The Fast

If thou fast from food, my soul, yet doest not cleanse thyself from the passions, thou dost rejoice in vain over thine abstinence. For if thy purpose is not turned towards amendment of life, as a liar thou art hateful in God's sight, and thou dost resemble the evil demons who never eat at all. Do not by sinning make the Fast worthless, but firmly resist all wicked impulses. Picture to thyself that thou art standing beside the crucified Savior, or rather, that thou art thyself crucified with Him who was crucified for thee; and cry out to Him: remember me, O Lord, when Thou comest in Thy kingdom.
Aposticha of Wednesday Matins of Cheese Week

Cheese Week, the week between Meatfare Sunday and Cheesefare/Forgiveness Sunday is a week of preparation for the Great Fast. The hymns look ahead to the ascetic labor we shall undertake during the forty days to cleanse ourselves and draw near to God.

The hymn above from Wednesday Matins sets forward the priority for the Fast. While we are to abstain from certain foods and generally to eat less so that we may increase our almsgiving, the deeper purpose the Fast is "amendment of life", being changed by turning away from our sins and putting on the virtues which are found in the keeping of Christ's commandments. The demons, indeed, do not eat at all; they keep a stricter fast than we do! We resemble them in our fasting when we are strict about food but freely indulge in sin. Such fasting hold not benefit for us.

The bodily fasting assists us in the task of amending our lives and putting of sinful habits by

humbling the body and soul and not unduly feeding the passions with rich or excessive food. But the focus is overcoming pride, greed, lust, sloth, anger, vainglory, gluttony, and despondency and their numerous offspring.

If we stumble during the Fast, let us not lose hope and give up, but get up and renew our efforts to humble ourselves in order to receive God's grace to change.

Commentary on the All-Night Vigil 7 Dogmaticon, Entrance, Gladsome Light

At the "Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit" of Lord, I have cried, the priest, having already vested himself in the phelonian, prepares for the entrance. The Royal Doors are opened as the lights are turned up. (Traditionally, the people offered unlit candles at the start of the service which were then lit by a candlelighter in preparation for the entrance and "Gladsome Light.") At "Now and ever..." the clergy and servers make the entrance. The Deacon carries the censer "on high" (upraised), the servers bear candles, and the Priest follows, quietly ["mystically"] praying the prayer of the entrance. The Deacon censers, and the Priest blesses the entrance and then they stand in their places waiting for the conclusion of the singing of the last sticheron.

The last hymn sung at "Lord, I have cried" is a special Theotokion (a hymn in honor of the Theotokos) called the Dogmaticon. The Dogmaticon expresses the Dogma of the Word of God's incarnation through the Theotokos, which is the heart of the Christian faith. The "theandric principle," that Christ is both God (*Theos*) and man (*anthropos*)—defined at the Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon in 451—is now expressed and proclaimed in a hymn. Each of the eight tones has its own Dogmaticon to hymn majestically the Mystery of the Incarnation of Christ and the role of the Ever-Virgin Mary as the Mother of God, or Theotokos. Many of the faithful know these Dogmatica by heart.

For example, the Dogmaticon for tone 8 reads: The King of Heaven, because of His love for man, appeared on earth and dwelt with men. He took flesh from the pure Virgin; and after assuming it, he came forth from her. The Son is one: in two natures, yet one person. Proclaiming Him as perfect God and perfect man, we confess Christ our God! Entreat Him, O unwedded mother, to have mercy on our souls.

Consider the teaching of this hymn. Christ is the King of Heaven, his proper place. Because of His love for man, he humbled himself to come earth and be Emmanuel, "God with us." He took on His humanity in the Virgin Mary's womb and was then born into the world as every other human child. He is one person, not two, but possesses two complete natures, one human, one divine (the teaching of the Fourth

Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon). As Christians, we confess Jesus Christ to be the God-man, perfect God and perfect man in one person. He is not a mere prophet or good teacher, but the eternal God made man for us. We ask His mother to pray to Him for us. Here is the essence of the Christian faith contained in one short hymn.

The Dogmaticon illustrates the general didactic character of Orthodox worship. Worship is not divorced from dogma or basic belief. True worship must be 'in spirit', but it also must be 'in truth.' The Church's hymns teach the faith, expressing it in vivid, poetical language set to music. Presented in this way, the Church's teaching is more easily accessible to the majority of the faithful than it would be in the form of a dry, academic lecture. The striking figures of speech give material for meditation on God and what He has done for our salvation and union with Him, and, as the hymns are sung, they are more easily remembered. Of course, to gain the benefit from the hymns, one has to attend the service to hear them.

At the conclusion of the Dogmaticon, the Deacon raises the censer yet higher and traces the sign of the cross with it directly before the Royal Doors as he intones, "Wisdom! Let us attend!" Then he and the Priest enter the sanctuary through the Royal Doors. Through the Virgin, the eternal Son of God took flesh. He is our High Priest, who opens the way for us into the once-closed Holy of Holies. The Entrance portrays this. Man, who stood earlier the closed royal doors as if before the gates of lost Paradise now sees those gates opened and Christ the Godman entering on our behalf. Meanwhile, the choir sings the evening hymn "Gladsome Light."

"Gladsome Light", or the lamplighting hymn, is mentioned as early as the third century in Christian documents, but it may be still older. The hymn proclaims Christ's coming as the Light of the world and introduces a third theme to Vespers. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann writes:

"Now comes the third theme of Vespers, that of Redemption. Into this world of sin and darkness, light has come: 'O Gladsome Light of the holy glory of the immortal Father, heavenly, holy, blessed Jesus Christ!' The world is at its evening because the One bringing the final meaning to the world has come; in the darkness of this world, the light of Christ reveals again the true nature of things. This is not the world it was before Christ came: His coming now belongs to the world. The decisive event of the cosmos has taken place. We know now that the event of Christ must transform everything to do with our lives. It was only because of Christ that we had the heart to glory in the creation at the beginning of Vespers, only because He gave us the eyes to "behold God's gracious hand in all His works."

Now in the time in which we can thank God for Christ, we begin to understand that everything is transformed in Christ into its true wonder. In the radiance of His light, the world is not commonplace.

The very floor we stand on is a miracle of atoms whizzing about in space. The darkness of sin is clarified, and its burden shouldered. Death is robbed of its finality, trampled down by Christ's death. In a world where everything that seems to be present is immediately past, all is in Christ able to participate in the eternal present of God. This very evening is the real time of our life.

It is difficult for us who live in a world artificially lighted around the clock to appreciate how precious light was to man in earlier times. Night was an effective cover for evil deeds, and no light available then to man could do much to dispel it. It was at this point in the service, after sunset, that the candles were lit and the connection is drawn between the light of the candles and the light of Christ coming into the world to dispel the night of sin and evil. This light is indeed cause for rejoicing!

Fr. Justin Frederick

From St. Moses of Optina (+1862)

"We must bear one another's spiritual infirmities cheerfully, without bitterness. After all, if someone is physically ill, not only are we not offended with him, but we even help him in any way we can. That is how we must treat spiritual illnesses also."

Abbot Moses counselled everyone to keep what he called St. Dorotheos's rule for being at peace: "Do not want things to turn out as you would like, but want whatever happens. That way you will be at peace with everyone.... One who does not have his own will always gets his way. Since he has no desire of his own, no matter what happens with him, he is content—and so it turns out that he always fulfills his desires, for he does not want things to turn out as he wishes, but as they do turn out."

From St. Thalassios, friend of St. Maximus

Think good thoughts about what is good by nature, and think well of every man.

On the day of judgment, we shall be asked by God to answer for our words, acts, and thoughts.

Inveterate wickedness requires long practice of the virtues; for an engrained habit is not easily uprooted.

Impel your intellect continually to prayer and you will destroy the passions hidden within us.

Upcoming Events 2017

26 February Forgiveness Vespers, 6:00 p.m.

16 April: Pascha

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!