

The Confessor's Tongue for September 7, 2008

12th Sunday After Pentecost: Forefeast of the Nativity; Martyr Sozon

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.

September 7: Martyr Sozon

Born in Cilicia, he was a shepherd. But even the preoccupations of a shepherd did not prevent him from practicing spiritual efforts in prayer, fasting and reading the word of God. Being thus edified, he also enlightened his young friends in his occupation in the light of the knowledge of God. On a pagan feast in the city of Pompeiopolis, St. Sozon, burning with zeal for the true faith and "wishing to be stabbed in love for the sake of God", came at night to a pagan temple and here, "arming himself with a cross", took from a golden idol an arm, shattered it and distributed the pieces to the needy. The news about the missing arm of the idol rapidly spread among the city dwellers and everyone became unglued. St. Sozon, armed "with the sling of faith", went to the ruler and announced that he tore off the arm of the idol to learn about the power of pagan deities. For this the Holy Martyr Sozon was subjected to terrible tortures, and cast into the furnace and died amidst the torture in about the year 304.

September 8: The Nativity of the Theotokos

On the eighth day of the Church's new year, She celebrates the Great Feast of the Nativity of the Theotokos. The Feast has a pre-feast of one day and a post-feast of four days.

This feast marks the birth of Mary to her parents Joachim and Anna in their old age. The Church attributes great importance to the birth of Mary, the Mother of God, because it was through her and her acceptance of God's will that our Lord became man. This Feast occurs at the beginning of the Church year because Mary's birth marks the beginning of the process that led to our salvation. Without her cooperation and freely-given assent, the eternal Word of God would not have become man. The following hymn from Vespers of the Feast expresses much of the Feast's meaning:

Today is the beginning of joy for all the world; today the winds blow that bring tidings of salvation. The barrenness of our nature hath been loosed: for the barren woman is revealed as the mother of her, who, after bearing the Maker, still remained virgin. From her He who is God by nature taketh what is alien and maketh it His own; through her Christ worketh salvation for those gone astray in the flesh, He who loveth mankind and is the Deliverer of our souls.

The Feast marks the "beginning of joy," for through the godly inheritance of many generations, the way had been prepared for the birth of the woman who would be fitting to give birth to God in the flesh. God's plan awaited the coming of the suitable vessel who could bring His Son into the world, giving Him human flesh.

Man's nature, rendered barren by the curse, unable to fulfill his potential for achieving God's

likeness, enslaved to sin, death, and the devil, is ended; for Anna, long barren, gives birth to the perfect flowering and offering of the human race, her pure daughter Mary, and Mary, through her purity and willing submission to God, permits "He who is God by nature" to take "what is alien" (i.e. human nature) and to make that created human nature His own. Through her, Christ comes to work salvation for man whom He loves.

The Troparion of the Feast, which expresses the external meaning of the Feast, gives the reason for the claim that Mary's birth is "the beginning of joy for all the world" which "hath brought joy to all the inhabited earth." Through her, Christ is born who delivers us from the curse and from death and pours out upon us blessing and eternal life.

The Kontakion of the Feast, which expresses the internal, or hidden, meaning of the Feast, describes the cosmic effects of Mary's birth: Adam and Eve are set free from death and corruption, and God's people are delivered from sin. A barren woman, Anna, bears a woman, Mary, who sustains our lives, and she does this because of whom she bore: Christ our God.

As usual, we sing or say the troparion and kontakion of the feast at meals and as part of our daily prayers from the Vigil of the Feast through the Leavetaking on September 12th.

Troparion tone 4

Thy birth, O Theotokos, / hath brought joy to all the inhabited earth: / for from thee hath shone forth the Sun of Righteousness, Christ our God. / He hath loosed us from the curse and given the blessing; / He hath made death of no effect and bestowed on us eternal life.

Kontakion tone 4

O Undeiled, by thy holy nativity / Joachim and Anna were set free from the reproach of childlessness, / and Adam and Eve from the corruption of death. / Delivered from the guilt of sin, Thy people keep the feast as they sing unto thee: / The barren woman beareth the Theotokos who sustaineth our life.

September 14: Elevation of the Cross

This is the second Great Feast of the Church Year, the Universal Exaltation (or Elevation) of the Precious and Life-giving Cross. We venerate the Cross by prostrating ourselves before it and kissing it, and by so doing, we worship Him who was crucified on it for us and for our salvation.

In the Church, we pray what we believe, and we believe what we pray. This is why when we want to understand a Feast or a Mystery of the Church, we turn to the service for it and examine what it is we pray on that occasion. At the Feast of the Cross, the Church calls us all to celebrate and rejoice in the victory Christ won for us through His Cross, and to reflect on all the Cross accomplishes for us.

Come, all ye peoples, and let us venerate the blessed Wood, through which the eternal justice hath been brought to pass. For he who by a tree deceived our forefather Adam, is by the Cross himself deceived; and he who by tyranny gained possession of the creature endowed by God with royal dignity, is overthrown in headlong fall. By the blood of God the poison of the serpent is washed away; and the curse of a just condemnation is loosed by the unjust punishment inflicted on the Just. For it was fitting that wood should be healed by wood, and that all the sufferings of him who was condemned because of wood should be remitted through the Passion of One who knew not passion. But glory be to Thee, O Christ our King, for Thy dread dispensation towards us, whereby Thou hast saved us all, for Thou art good and lovest mankind. *Vespers, Lord, I Have Cried...*

The Liturgical poetry celebrating the Feast of the Cross is full of vivid images and rich paradoxes: man who fell through the wood of the Tree in the garden is raised up through the wood of the Cross; God's blood washes away the Serpent's poison; the Deceiver is deceived; He who knew no passion (or suffering) endures the Passion.

Through the Cross, man is delivered from the curse and the enemy, and thus the Cross brings us joy, deliverance, and comfort.

Rejoice! Cross of the Lord: through thee mankind hath been delivered from the curse. Shattering the enemy by thine Exaltation, O Cross all-venerable, thou art a sign of true joy. Thou art our help, thou art the strength of kings, the power of righteous men, the majesty of priests. All who sign themselves with thee are freed from peril. Thou rod of strength under which we like sheep are tended, thou art a weapon of peace round which the angels stand in fear. Thou art the divine glory of Christ, who granteth the world great mercy. *Vespers, Aposticha*

Though the cross was used by the Romans as the instrument of execution for criminals, for Christians it has become a sign of hope, a haven, a healer, a helper.

O Cross of Christ, hope of Christians, guide of the lost, haven of the tempest tossed, victory amid battles, confirmation of the whole world, physician of the ill, resurrection of the dead: have mercy on us! *Matins, post Gospel verse.*

The hymns for the Feast also reflect on the One who was crucified. This man Jesus was no mere man, but the Creator of all who became man to suffer and die. The cross of anyone other than the God-man cannot have the power of Christ's Cross—for the power of the Cross comes from the One crucified unjustly upon it. The poetry of the festal hymns again revels in the many glorious paradoxes contained in the crucifixion of the God-man Jesus Christ:

Today the Master of the creation and the Lord of Glory is nailed to the Cross and His side is pierced; and He who is the sweetness of the Church tasteth gall and vinegar. A crown of thorns is put upon Him who covereth the heaven with clouds. He is clothed in cloak of mockery, and He who formed man with His hands is struck by a hand of clay. He who wrappeth the heaven in clouds is smitten upon His back. He accepteth spitting and scourging, reproach and buffeting; and all these things my Deliverer and God endureth for me that am

condemned, that in His compassion He may save the world from error. *Matins, during the Veneration of the Cross*

Let us all celebrate this Feast of our Lord with joy and awe for all that He has done by attending the Feast's cycle of services!

We celebrate the Feast through its Leave-taking, September 21. We replace our usual prayers at meals with the Troparion (before) and the Kontakion (after), and use them in our daily prayers as well.

Troparion tone 1

O Lord, save Thy people / and bless Thine inheritance. / Grant victory to Orthodox Christians / over the enemy; / and by Thy Cross / preserve Thine estate.

Kontakion, tone 4

As Thou wast voluntarily crucified for our sake, / so grant mercy to those who are called by Thy name; / make all Orthodox Christians glad by Thy power, / granting the invincible trophy, Thy weapon of peace.

Prayer of the Heart (continued from last week)

Dumitru Staniloae

This encounter in love, and at the same time this sense of the infinite difference between God and myself, this need I feel for the mercy of God, all this is expressed in the Jesus Prayer. The heart is the source of feeling and therefore of love; and love means meeting the other. And because love is impelled by a movement of infinite desire it can only be fully satisfied in encounter with God, the Infinite.

But the heart is also the source of sorrow and the place where sorrow is felt. Before the face of God the heart knows sorrow for sin and for the offense caused by sin. In his heart man weeps and asks for forgiveness. Tears well up from the heart, tears of penitence, but also tears of joy. There man lets go of his settled habits of mind. If, however, the heart sinks to a lower level, it becomes the place of the passions, that is, of an infinite attachment to the world and to oneself—to persons and things that are finite. So just as the heart can radiate infinite love, it can also radiate infinite hatred when it meets with an obstacle to those sinful attachments. Good thoughts and good words come from the heart, but also thoughts of greed, hatred, and murder. Even evil thoughts and words receive some quality of infinity from the heart, although they have to do with things that are finite. But this infinite attachment to finite things cannot satisfy the truly infinite thirst of the heart. Only the meeting of the heart with God can satisfy that thirst. And therefore the heart must be freed from the passions, from attachment to finite things, by its capacity for the infinite. *To be continued...*

Upcoming Events 2008

- 8 September, Monday, 6:00 a.m. Liturgy of the Great Feast of the Nativity of the Theotokos; Vigil September 7 at 6:00 p.m.
- 14 September, Sunday, 9:00 a.m. Liturgy of the Great Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross; Vigil September 13 at 5:00 p.m.
- 5 October, Sunday: Parish Annual Meeting
- 1 November, Saturday, 9:00 a.m. Consecration of Bishop-elect Archimandrite Jonah, 9:00 a.m., St. Seraphim Cathedral, Dallas.

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!