

The Confessor's Tongue for February 8, 2009

Prodigal Son; Great Martyr Theodore Stratelates

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.

February 8: Great Martyr Theodore Stratelates

He came from the city Euchaita (in Asia Minor) and was a warrior (stratelates) in the city of Heraclea, near the Black Sea. By his pious life and his meek demeanor he attracted the hearts of the townspeople and many pagans to him, who seeing his good moral life accepted the Christian faith. When word of this reached Licinius, the co-ruler with Constantine, he came to Heraclea and tried to force Theodore to bow to idols. When St. Theodore stood firm, the angry governor ordered the confessor of Christ to submit to severe torture. St. Theodore was dragged on the ground, beaten by iron rods, had his body pierced with sharp iron spikes, was burnt with fire and, finally, was crucified on a cross and had his eyes plucked out. At night an angel appeared to the martyr, took him down from the cross and completely healed him. In the morning the servant of Licinius, who was sent to throw the body of St. Theodore into the sea and saw him completely whole believed in Christ. A lot of other pagans seeing the miracle of God also believed. Having found out about this, Licinius ordered St. Theodore to be beheaded. St. Theodore died in 319. The eyewitness, his servant the scribe Varus, described his sufferings.

Preparation for Great Lent

Zacchaeus Sunday each year marks the last Sunday counted from Pentecost before the Lenten Triodion is opened. Zacchaeus shows us that we need to see Jesus, and that to see Him as we need to see Him will take some effort, but that it will be well worth it.

Great Lent itself begins three weeks after the opening of the Triodion, halfway through the Vespers (at the Prokeimenon) of Forgiveness Sunday (Cheesefare). At that point, the vestments of the church and clergy are changed to the dark lenten colors, and the lenten melodies to the litanies are sung. Fasting begins in full force at midnight.

The three Sundays prior to Forgiveness Sunday are preparatory to Great Lent. The *Triodion*, the liturgical book that contains the services pertaining to the Fast, is opened for the first time on the Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee, the first of the three preparatory Sundays. The Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee begins the "Week of Proclamation" in the Church during which begin to ready ourselves for the contest.

The next is the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, and the last is the Sunday of the Last Judgment, also known as Meatfare, as it is the last day that meat is eaten until Pascha.

The Church does not ask us to change immediately from our normal routine to the intense ascetical effort of the fast; rather, She helps us make

the transition gradually. The week after the Publican and Pharisee is a fast-free week. The week after the Prodigal Son has the usual Wednesday and Friday fasts, and the week after Meatfare (Last Judgment) is observed with a special fast from meat only. Moreover, the services for Wednesday and Friday of that week are Lenten: no Divine Liturgy is permitted, the lenten tones are used, and lenten forms observed—a warm-up for what is to come.

To get the most spiritual benefit out of the Great Fast, we need to give some thoughtful prayer now to the matter of how we shall keep the Fast, particularly in the following areas: private prayer, corporate prayer and worship at the Church services, almsgiving, fasting, and spiritual reading. We should also consider how we can cut back on busy schedules and especially on elective parties, secular entertainment so that we can pray more with greater attention to God.

We cannot expect to keep the Fast with great benefit in most cases if we attend only the Sunday Liturgy. Plenty of opportunity will be given to pray with the Church in the Church in the spirit of the Fast's "bright sadness." All the faithful are strongly encouraged to take advantage of the weekday services.

Please consult your priest or father-confessor if you have any questions about the Fast.

Let us briefly consider each of the three preparatory Sundays.

Publican & Pharisee

Jesus tells a parable of two different men who went to the temple to pray with two different outcomes. One was a virtuous Pharisee, the sect of Jew given to the strictest observance of the Law. The other was a sinful Publican, a Jew not known for observance of the Law and despised by his fellows for serving the occupying Romans by collecting taxes. Both went to the right place for the right reason. But the quality of their prayer was strikingly different.

The Pharisee contentedly recounted his virtues and thanked God that he was not like other sinful men including the Publican standing nearby. The Publican, unable to lift his eyes to heaven for shame, could pray only "God, be merciful to me a sinner." Jesus relates that it was the Publican who went home justified in God's eyes, not the Pharisee.

The parable teaches important lessons to help us in the fast, and the hymnology appointed for the day develops these. We learn that we can be ever so virtuous, but pride will undo it all and render it useless to us before God. We learn that we must approach God with the humility of the Publican, for "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Yet the contrast between the two is not black and white. Both men had a measure of virtue,

and both had failings. The first troparion from Ode 5 of the Matins canon exhorts us:

Let us make haste to follow the Pharisee in his virtues and to emulate the Publican in his humility, and let us hate what is wrong in each of them: foolish pride and the defilement of transgressions.

Each of us should identify himself with each of these men, for each is to be found in each of us.

Prodigal Son

The theme of the Sunday of the Prodigal Son is that of squandering great riches and returning in repentance.

Each of us is to see himself in the Prodigal, as wasters of the Father's riches in a land far from the Father. How is this so?

First, man in falling was deprived of Paradise. Created in God's image, he had the potential to achieve the likeness of God, but he rejected this in order to try to become god in his own right and fulfill himself apart from his Creator. Each of us must repent of our own efforts to follow Adam in this rebellion. Man was made to attain to the likeness of God, to be conformed to the image of Christ, who is the very image of the Father. But when we live in sin, we do what is unworthy of our creation in God's image, and we squander the great benefit and potential that being made in God's image confers on us to live instead far from the Father as pigs in a pigpen!

Second, we who are baptized have been given a great deposit of grace from God, but to the degree that we sin, we squander that treasure. Our sin separates us from God and takes us to a "far land". Only the second Baptism of tears (repentance) allows us to recover that Baptismal grace and to renew it.

Lent helps us pursue both ends.

Last Judgment

Here the reality of judgment and hell is portrayed in vivid language. We generally live oblivious to death, judgment, and the fact that we shall live eternally. Though it may seem far off, the judgment is just outside the door for each of us, and we must live with this awareness: each will stand before God to account for how he has spent the life God gave him. What, indeed, shall we do on that day if we do not begin preparation for it now?

Preparation consists, first of all, in repenting from and confessing every evil deed, word, and thought. On that day, every secret will be revealed, every sin disclosed. We shall not escape this, and shall have no excuse to offer. Our choice is this: repent and confess our sins now, voluntarily making a full disclosure of our sins, or waiting for all to be disclosed at the Judgment. If we confess them now, our sins will not haunt us at the Judgment: they will already be forgiven and forgotten. What an incentive for repentance!

Preparation also consists in clothing our souls with the virtues and good works. The Gospel lesson (Mat 25:31-46), "The Sheep and the Goats," shows

that we shall be judged according to our deeds. Our deeds, after all, are the proof of our faith. They may condemn us: "Thy works will be there to accuse thee; thine actions will reproach thee and condemn thee" (Vespers, Aposticha). They may justify us: "Since God is the Judge, nothing can help thee there, no zeal, no skill, no glory, no friendship, but only the strength that thou gainest, my soul from thy works" (Matins Canon, ode 6).

These three Sundays show us our need for the Fast and urge us to cultivate repentance in humility while there is time before death and the Last Judgment.

Open to Me

From the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee through the fifth Sunday of the Great Fast at the Saturday night Vigil, after the Matins Gospel reading, we sing this hymn of repentance, "Open to me, the doors of repentance." Accompanying us during the Fast, this hymn expresses what should be the cry of our souls to God during Great Lent.

It is hard to imagine going through Great Lent without hearing this hymn regularly, for it helps set the tone for the Fast, but too many of us do not hear it. To hear this hymn sung, be at the Saturday evening Vigil by 6:00 p.m.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. Open to me the doors of repentance of Life-Giver, for my spirit riseth early to pray towards Thy holy temple, bearing the temple of my body all defiled; but, in Thy compassion, purify me by the lovingkindness of Thy mercy.

Now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen. Lead me on the paths of salvation, O Mother of God, for I have profaned my soul with shameful sins and have wasted my life in laziness; but, by thine intercessions, deliver me from all impurity.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to Thy great mercy, and according to the multitude of Thy compassions blot out my transgressions. When I think of the many evil things I have done, wretch that I am, I tremble at the fearful day of judgment. But, trusting in Thy loving-kindness, like David I cry to Thee: Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, O God, according to Thy great mercy.

Upcoming Events 2009

9-14 February Fast-Free Week of Proclamation
1 March, Forgiveness Vespers, 6:00 p.m. All parishioners should make every effort to attend this service, which marks the beginning of the Great Fast.
2-6 March, Clean Week
12-18 April, Holy Week
19 April, Pascha

Before God, a repentant sinner is more beloved than a conceited righteous person. And therefore beware of judging!
St. Anatoly of Optima

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!