

The Confessor's Tongue for February 15, 2009

Prodigal Son; Apostle Onesimus; Ven. Euphrosyne of Alexandria

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 15: Apostle of the 70 Onesimus

He was the servant of St. Philemon. Saved from punishment for some kind of offense, Onesimus fled to Rome, where he was converted to Christ by Apostle Paul. Recognizing his guilt before the Lord and having been taught by the Apostle Paul to search for freedom in spirit and piety, Onesimus decided to return to Philemon and asked the Apostle Paul to take part in his reconciliation with his lord. The Apostle wrote a brief letter to Philemon, asking the latter to receive the fugitive slave as a beloved brother, as he received the Apostle. Philemon not only forgave Onesimus, but also granted him freedom. After the death of the Apostle Paul, St. Onesimus preached Christ in Spain, Greece and Asia Minor and in extreme old age became the Bishop of Ephesus, after Apostle John the Theologian and Timothy. He died as a martyr in Rome about the year 109. *Bulgakov Handbook, translated by Archpriest Eugene D. Tarris. Copyright © 1999-2008. All rights are reserved, especially for future publication.*

On the Jesus Prayer

Those who hunger to know God and experience His presence rather than just knowing about Him can have recourse to the Jesus Prayer, a tried and true, long-practised means of achieving intimate communion with God. Metropolitan Jonah spoke about this with the priests at last week's pastoral conference for the Diocese of the South.

The goal of the Jesus Prayer is communion with God, constant awareness or consciousness of God's presence, and union with Him. This experience of God brings is peace and great joy, for through it we come to know God and that He is with us and within us and not just somewhere 'out there.'

The Jesus Prayer invokes the name above all names, the only name by which we may be saved. It confesses Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God and calls upon Him to have mercy on us.

This request for mercy is not simply a request that we not be punished. It is that, but that is the smallest part of it. The request for mercy is really asking that God give to us all the good things of which sin has deprived us. It is to say, "Though I am unworthy of Thy riches, Thy grace, Thy favor, grant it to me anyway in Thy love and goodness." God is merciful in this way, constantly offering to us that which we do not deserve.

The Jesus Prayer is used by many Orthodox Christians throughout the day as they work to remember God. It also and even more importantly should be used for times of concentrated prayer.

Metropolitan Jonah recommends that newcomers to the Jesus Prayer begin with 300 Jesus Prayers in the morning and 300 at night. One counts them on a prayer rope, which allows one to fulfill the given amount without being distracted by counting. The

prayer rope also serves as a focal point and an aid to concentration.

We may stand or sit for the Jesus Prayer. It is good for beginners to pray it audibly, which helps reduce distracting thoughts. It may be prayed slowly, or quickly (praying it more quickly also gives less space in the mind for stray thoughts).

We pray aware that Christ is present; the Kingdom of God is within us, and each of us is a temple of the Holy Spirit. We have to enter the temple of our hearts and stand before the living God who meets us there. But many thoughts and our passions and sins hinder that meeting with God, as does any repressed, hidden spiritual junk in our lives. As we pray the prayer with attention and desire to know the living God, this junk will be exposed, loosened, and have to be flushed out of our system.

Hence, it is vitally important for us who embark on this path to realize that this will happen. We must be prepared to bring all thoughts, feelings, and sinful memories, all our anger and hurt, to Confession, no less than once a month; twice a month might even be more beneficial for us. We may have to confess old junk a number of times before it passes from us. We must never trust ourselves in this, as we can easily be deluded. Hence we make frequent use of Confession and do not rely on our own understanding. We especially need to be careful of any sort of 'experiences' we think we may be having and submit them to our confessor as well. This is for our protection so we do not fall into delusion.

We are created to know God, to experience Him, to be fully conscious of Him. This is not something just for a few saints, but is for all of us who desire it. As the process of purification progresses, we shall begin to taste of the sweetness of God's presence. When we enter into His presence, when our communion begins, we stop saying the prayer "Be still and know that I am God," say the Scriptures, and this we must do. As St. Seraphim puts it, "When the Holy Spirit comes, stop saying 'come, Holy Spirit.'" As we enter this place of quiet communion in God's presence, we may begin to discern His will and hear His voice, which is only possible when we are still and our thoughts are quiet. At this point, we leave saying prayers behind and enter into prayer.. A high level of this communion with God is called 'pure prayer.'

It is that we may be still and know Him to be God that we are encouraged to cut excess noise out of our lives during Great Lent. We can scarcely experience this state when our minds rush to and fro and are caught up and entangled in all manner of thoughts and images.

One more point is to be made: this meeting of God in the heart is dispassionate rather than emotional, and we have to learn to discern the difference. This is not an emotional or psychological experience, but a spiritual one at the fundamental

level of our being. It may take us time to reach it, as we are accustomed to living on the psychological and emotional level.

I strongly urge those who have a desire to know God more intimately to incorporate the Jesus Prayer into their daily prayers during the upcoming Fast. If you have questions, by all means ask your priest. There is much more that can be said about this, and there are good resources available to help you too.

Fr. Justin Frederick

By the Waters of Babylon Psalm 136 (137)

At Matins for the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, and then also for the Sundays of Meatfare and Cheesefare, after singing the Polielely of the Psalms: "Praise the name of the Lord" and "O give thanks unto the Lord", we sing also Psalm 136: "By the rivers of Babylon", "with the beautiful alleluia", i.e. in the known chant with special tenderness, with sweet singing. This psalm arouses in the sinners to understand their unfortunate condition in their captivity in sin and by the devil, similarly to the Jews in captivity in Babylon, who understood their bitter situation and repented, and represents the sorrowful soul nostalgic for the heavenly fatherland. The last verse of this psalm: "Blessed shall he be who shall seize and dash thine infants against the rock", in translation means: the one is blessed who has the courage and power to break on the rock of faith sin in its infancy—those things which give birth to evil thoughts, the depraved stirrings of the heart, and the shameful impulses of the will—before they take possession of one's soul. *Bulgakov Handbook*

Spiritual Reading for Lent

Spiritual reading, the reading of the Scriptures, lives of the Saints, patristic literature, and other Orthodox Christian literature that nourishes our faith and cleanses our minds, should be a normal part of our spiritual life. Just as we eat food each day to sustain our body, so we need spiritual food regularly to nourish our souls. This spiritual food includes not only spiritual reading but also Holy Communion.

Part of our ascetic effort during the Great Fast is to cut back on or cut out "spiritual junk food"—stuff we might consume that offers no nourishment to our souls or even does harm. What is spiritual junk food must be honestly discerned in the light of Christ by each one of us, but certainly it would include much of what the "entertainment industry" offers us: television, movies, magazines, novels, video games, secular music, internet, radio (yes, even talk shows!), etc. We cut back on this so that our attention is not so scattered and dispersed on so many things, so that we can focus on Christ with less distraction, and so we can grow in our relationship with Him, which will not grow unless we devote time to it, much like any other earthly relationship. We cut out what is harmful, we cut back on what is not nourishing and profitable, and we feed our souls on what will give them true nourishment.

If we are to have any success in this upcoming Fast, we must give this matter some thought. What will I cut out? What will I cut back on? How much? And what will I put in its place to nourish my soul?

The Scriptures should come first. They contain words inspired by the Holy Spirit for the nourishment and illumination of our souls. During Lent, the Church reads through Proverbs and Genesis (and the first part of Exodus and a little from Job). A chapter a day of each will get us through them in the course of the Fast. Genesis tells us where we come from, what God intended for us, how man messed things up, and what God did to begin to restore man. Proverbs shows us what virtue and wisdom look like so that we have a standard to which we can compare our lives and strive for virtue.

In addition to these Old Testament books, pick a Gospel or two and read through them: at a chapter a day, you can read Mark and Luke in 40 days. Pick a short epistle: James, I John, Philippians, Colossians, and read through it several times during the Fast. Really get to know it. Let its words sink into your soul. For those who are more ambitious, we have a reading plan that will take you through the whole New Testament in the forty days of the Fast.

Whenever we read Scripture, we must pray first, making the sign of the Cross and asking God to illumine and nourish us through the reading of His Word. The Scriptures will never be opened to us through reason and intellect alone; we must put the teaching into practice.

Besides Scripture, take an Orthodox book out of the library, purchase a book from the bookstore, take a book off your shelf you've always meant to read but haven't—whatever you do, pick a book and read it.

Go to oca.org and find the daily lives of the saints, and read those short lives for each day of the fast. Read the life of Sts. Seraphim of Sarov, Nektarios of Aegina, Silouan of Athos, Sergius of Radonezh, or any of the Optina Elders. Nourish your mind and soul on their good example. It will be just the opposite of the lives you find displayed before you in the grocery store checkout line.

You feed your body daily, even though you know it will die one day and rot. Your soul is immortal. Don't let it go into eternity starving. What we expend on the body is lost in the end, but what we give to the soul is ours forever. Starve your body and senses (relatively) and feed your soul this Lent!

Upcoming Events 2009

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

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!