

# The Confessor's Tongue for March 29, 2009

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent: St. John of the Ladder

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.

### March 29: Hieromartyr Mark et al.

Our Venerable Father Mark, Bishop of Arethusa, Deacon Cyril and others were martyred during the reign of the Emperor Julian, the torturer of victims. St. Mark was the bishop of the city of Arethusa and zealously spread the Christian faith. During the reign of Constantine the Great, who later attained the imperial authority, he destroyed many pagan temples. For this reason pagans in the reign of Julian also subjected the saint to terrible torture. St. Cyril, deacon of the city of Heliopolis in Phoenicia, suffered from the pagans for destruction of idolatrous temples during the reign of Constantine the Great. Many other Christians in Ascalon and Gaza have suffered at the same time.

### St. John of the Ladder

Venerable John appeared on Mount Sinai when he was 16 years old. His contemporary biographers did not even know the place of his birth. Some consider him to be the son of Ven. Xenophon (see Jan. 26). The young ascetic began the asceticism of his salvation, when he completely devoted himself to obedience, which for him was really "a grave for the will", "suspension of any judgment, from every temptation of judgment". When he was 20 years old, he was tonsured a monk. After the death of Elder Martyrius, under whose direction he practiced asceticism for 19 years, St. John departed to the desert of Thola and began to carry out a life in strict fasting, prayer, solitude and silence. He shunned all kinds of special ascetic effort.

He ate everything that was irreproachably permitted according to the monastic vow, but ate the smallest quantity; he only slept enough so that by vigilance he would not disturb the property of mind; he prayed for a long time before going to sleep he devoted much time reading salutary books. But in his external life St. John acted cautiously in everything, avoiding extreme measures dangerous for the soul, then in his internal spiritual life he, "burning with divine love", did not want to know limits. He was especially deeply penetrated by the feeling of repentance and shed abundant tears, being distressed about his sins. Generally all his life was continual prayer and unexampled love for God. After 40 years of asceticism he became the hegumen of the Mount Sinai monastery, but within four years he again left it for solitude and peacefully departed to the Lord about the year 563, at the age of 80 years. Greatest of the ascetics in piety, John not only reached height of spiritual perfection, but he also left for others a direction for their spiritual life, having written the salutary composition, the "Ladder", where he presented 30 steps of spiritual ascent from perfection to perfection. In the "Ladder" is described the struggle of the pious ascetic against such vices and passions (sins of gluttony, fornication, love of money,

pride, vanity, anger and so forth), which equally apply both to the monk and the layman. Together with these the "Ladder" directs the formation of virtues obligatory for all Christians (e.g. meekness, chastity, patience, humility, prayer and so forth). Representing a way of gradual ascent to moral perfection, the "Ladder" is a faithful and reliable direction for a spiritual life of zealotry in piety and the salvation of soul. [St. John's feast falls on March 30, but he is always commemorated on the fourth Sunday of the Great Fast.] *S. V. Bulgakov, **Handbook for Church Servers**, 2 ed., 1274 pp. (Kharkov, 1900) Translated by Archbishop Eugene D. Tarris © All rights reserved.*

### The Prayer of St. Ephrem

*Yea O Lord and King, grant unto me  
to perceive mine own offenses  
and not to judge my brother;  
for blessed art Thou unto ages of ages. Amen*

The final sentence of the Prayer of St. Ephraim is the culmination of what Great Lent is all about. "Grant me to perceive mine own offenses" or "mine own transgressions or debts"—let me see myself the way God sees me. He is the just Judge who knows and sees all. Our delusions, illusions, excuses, and blaming others will not stand up before Him and we shall be left naked before Him as we are. We ask that we may see us as we truly are, as He sees us, that we may deal with the reality of our condition and not delusion. Seeing our sins for what they are and not as we imagine them to be, we can humbly confess them before God in repentance. But how can we repent of and confess things that we do not see? This seeing ourselves is the healthy condition found in *metanoia*, repentance. We ask not just to see, but also to understand what our state of sinfulness means. We desire to fulfill what the ancient Greek philosophers advised: "know thyself." The Fathers of the Church say that to see ourselves as we really are is the greatest of all miracles, greater even than raising someone from the dead. They also say that the only moment we are ever infallible is when we confess our sins before God, for confession (*exomologesis*) means "to speak the same words," that is that we agree with God about what we are and how we are to be seen. So we pray for the ability to see ourselves as we truly are—as sinners. Only when we can honestly look at ourselves in our sin can we begin to achieve the mind of Christ and make ourselves receptive to the grace of God. Then He can show us where we are and how to get to where He wants us to be.

As in the first two sentences of the Prayer, we are asking to be preserved from the mind of the Evil One and to be filled with the mind of Christ. So we pray to see ourselves as we truly are, "and not to judge my brother." Seeing ourselves as sinners leads naturally to not judging others. On what basis are we judging

another when we see ourselves, according to St. Paul, to be the worst among sinners? We're so quick to judge and to blame others; we blame others but are blind to our own actions, as Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent instead of their own presumption, gluttony, and disobedience. In Christ, with humility and patience and love, we always accept the blame and never judge another. How can we judge others whose lives we cannot fully see when our own sin and unworthiness is so plain before our eyes? And then with this perception, we can readily with heartfelt compunction pray "Lord, have mercy" both for ourselves but also for our brother.

To judge means to pass sentence on another, to declare the quality of his character, to declare him guilty. To say someone did something bad is not judging; to say someone is bad is. Of course, even to speak of the bad someone has done usually does not profit us. Not judging does not mean that we do not call sin 'sin.' But it does mean that we are most reserved in charging others with sin, that we do not presume to know their true character and actions.

Some words from the Optina Elders will help us understand these matters better.

Having received help or having improved for the better, beware of thoughts that praise you but condemn others. This is a trap of the enemy, beckoning you to arrogance and taking away all the fruits of virtue. *St. Macarius*

You should be attentive to your inner life so as not to notice what is happening around you. Then you will not judge. *St. Ambrose*

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

As soon as condemnation comes into your head, immediately say with attention: 'Lord, grant me to see my own sins and not condemn my brother.' *St. Nektary*

The beam in the eye is pride. The Pharisee had all the virtues, but he was proud; the Publican, however, had humility and was better. *St. Ambrose*

You must firmly remember this spiritual law of life: if you condemn someone for something or are disturbed by something in another person, you will experience the very same thing. You will do that which you condemned someone else for doing, or you will suffer from the same infirmity. *St. Nikon*

The main thing that is required of every person—do not judge anyone. It seems simple, but begin to fulfill it, and it seems difficult. The enemy violently attacks a person and suggests to him thoughts of judging. The Lord says, 'Forgive,' while the enemy suggests, 'Take vengeance on the offender. He's reviling you, you revile him.' You should not listen to the enemy, but must struggle against him.

Do not start examining the deeds of people, do not judge, do not say: 'Why is it this way? What is this for?' It is better to say to yourself, 'What does their work have to do with me? I will not answer for them at the Dread Judgment of God.' Divert every

thought of yours from judging the deeds of people, and pray fervently to the Lord that He help you in this, because without the help of God we can do nothing good, as the Lord Himself said: *without Me ye can do nothing* (John 15:5). *St. Ambrose*

Never condemn anyone. Greet everyone with a good disposition, whoever he may be, with the hope of finding in him only good, seeing before you the image of God. *St. Nikon*

Some people are prone to the sin of condemnation due to habit, others from remembering wrongs, others from envy and hatred, but for the most part, we are prone to this sin due to conceit and haughtiness. In spite of our incorrigibility and sinfulness, it still seems to us that we are better than many others. If we desire to be corrected of this sin of condemnation, we must in every way force ourselves to be humble before God and man and implore God for help in this. *St. Ambrose*

We cannot know ourselves other than through association with our neighbors, receiving from them reproaches and vexation as a cure for our spiritual wounds, while reproaching ourselves for impatience, but not them; instead, we must thank them, for through them we came to know our spiritual infirmity, by God's Providence. And having serenity, by God's grace, be careful not to be carried away with a high opinion of yourself, so that you again do not suffer: the enemies do not sleep, they only fear humility. *St. Macarius*

If we happen to be reproached or scorned by someone, we must instruct our heart to say, "We're worse than they are,"—not only with the tongue but with a heartfelt pledge. *St. Macarius*

When the devil points out to you the faults and weaknesses of others and urges you to judge them, then you say to yourself: 'I am worse than everyone else, I deserve eternal torments. Lord have mercy on me.' And even if you say this without feeling, you still need to say it. *St. Barsanuphius*

How do you reproach yourself? Very simply. The conscience immediately speaks out, it immediately censures us, and we have only to agree that we acted wrongly and humbly turn to God with a prayer for forgiveness. Even if only for a minute, you must absolutely reproach yourself in this way. Our job is to reproach ourselves, even if it is just for a brief time, and the rest is up to God. *St. Barsanuphius*

*Fr. Justin with credit to Rick Joines for initial research.*

#### Upcoming Events 2009

25 March, Holy Annunciation  
12-18 April, Holy Week  
11 April, Lazarus Saturday Work Day, 10:30 a.m.  
12 April, Palm Sunday  
19 April, Pascha! Paschal Picnic  
25 May, Memorial Day Picnic  
16-19 August, Proposed men's retreat at Holy Archangels Monastery. Let Father know if interested.  
7 September, Labor Day Picnic

**GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!**