

The Confessor's Tongue for February 21, A. D. 2016

Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee; Ven. Timothy; St. Eustathius of Antioch
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 Publican and Pharisee

This first Sunday of the pre-lenten period, 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 and oppressing the Jews. 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.

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.

Preparation for Lent

The Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee begins the "Week of Proclamation" in the Church. The liturgical book of services for the Fast, the *Triodion*, is opened, and we begin to ready ourselves for the ascetical contest of the Great Fast.

To get the most spiritual benefit out of the Great Fast, we need to give some thoughtful prayer 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, spiritual reading, and works of mercy. We should also consider how we can cut back on busy schedules and especially on elective parties, secular entertainments, and the like, so that we have time to cultivate repentance and offer ourselves wholeheartedly to God without being hindered by needless distractions.

We cannot expect to keep the Fast with great benefit in most cases if we only attend 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 encouraged to take advantage of the weekday services.

Plan now: everyone if at all possible must attend Forgiveness Vespers (March 9); everyone should attend at least one or two of the four evenings of the Great Canon of St. Andrew (a different part each night) the first week of the Fast (March 14-18) to get the Fast started in the right key. Everyone is urged to attend Saturday evening Vigils (or at least the Matins portion, 5:45-7:00 p.m.) where the hymns expounding the meaning of day are sung. Everyone is encouraged to attend at least a couple weekday Presanctified Liturgies during the course of the Fast as well as a weekday Matins or Vespers now and again.

Holy Week (April 25-30) calls for a special focus. It goes without saying that we should set aside as much of Holy Week as possible to attend in the incomparably beautiful services before Pascha. We should treat this week as a time for retreat from the

world and its cares to contemplate what Christ has done for us and be renewed in faith.

Besides the Scriptures (which we should always be reading), choose a spiritual (Orthodox) book that will nourish your soul, aid you in the spiritual struggle, and move you to seek God during the Fast. Your priest will recommend one to you if you do not know what to read. He will also make a plan for reading the Scriptures during the Fast available.

Consider how and when you will pray: what prayers? what psalms? what time of day? with how many prostrations?

Consider your almsgiving. The logic of the Fast is to eat less and more cheaply so that what you save may be given to the poor. How may we approximate this? How shall we give, and where? The parish does maintain an in-house food bank, and traditionally we have supported a local charity during the Fast.

Consider your participation in the Sacraments. Holy Confession is a necessity for all during the Fast. Moreover, all of us should strive to prepare ourselves to partake regularly of Holy Communion.

It is time for us now to consider the specifics of how we shall keep the Fast. As they say, "If you fail to plan, you plan to fail." The Church gives us the next three weeks to plan and prepare.

Remember the goal of all this: to know Christ, to see Him as He is, and to be filled with a greater measure of His Spirit, to become God's children by character and not only in name.

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

On The Gift of the Enemy

A striking hymn is found in the Octoechos, the "Book of the Eight Tones", from which the Church takes material for her services throughout the year outside of the Great Fast and Paschal Season. The following text is sung at "Lord, I Have Cried" at Friday Vespers in tone 4:

Thou who art compassionate
hast given me the enemy for my profit,
as a gift to scourge and teach me;
for his wickedness serveth as a test,
which, without being good, leadeth me to the good:
therefore it is now in thanksgiving that I cry:
Save me, O Lord, before I perish utterly.

Does anyone think of Satan as a gift given by God for our profit? The Church does. Though his desire is only "to kill, to steal, and to destroy", Christ has bound him, and he now rages at us—but as a pit bull on a leash. God uses his destructive desire to test us, to scourge and correct us when needed, and as a foe for us to wrestle with so that the strength of our faith may be developed in battle.

The Lord as a good, wise father, chastens those whom he loves that they may become legitimate, disciplined, virtuous sons worthy of their father. Chastening is an unpleasant correction given in response to sins we have committed. It is designed to

humble us, to impress an important lesson on our souls, and to discourage us from sinning again. Sin separates us from God, darkens our soul, dulls our spiritual perceptivity, cools our zeal, hardens our heart, and kills the life in us. We cannot want it to have any place in us if we understand our true interests, but, in our weakness, we are easily seduced by it. God in his love uses the devil's desire to do us harm to provide chastening, but, rather than giving him free reign to do what he likes, God limits him. The pit bull is not let off the leash, but he may be allowed close enough to bark in our ear and to bite us. If we don't like this, we will stay away from the sin that gives him access to us.

God also uses the enemy to teach us. By fighting against this foe, we learn, often through many failures, how to resist his lies, identify the provocative thoughts he insinuates in our minds and reject them, and stand firmly against him. Untested faith has no value, but a faith that has been tested and ultimately prevails is of great worth. Thus God uses the devil as a sort of trainer or sparring partner who has limited power to hurt us while training us to use our free will and our spiritual weapons to choose God and what is good and to reject evil.

None of this makes the devil good, though God uses him for good. He remains evil, full of hatred for God and for man made in God's image. Ironically, through Christ's victory over the devil through His death, descent into Hades, and resurrection, the devil has against his will become a means of bringing us into the good things of God.

Hence the Church cries out in thanksgiving, while calling on the Lord to save us before we perish. For ultimately the battle is real and is a matter of life and death. Though the devil is bound, he still can do harm if we give him power in our lives by believing his lies. If we do not repent when we fall, the fruit of those lies is death. So every Christian must recognize his dependence on Christ for victory against the foe.

During Lent, we consciously enter the arena to do battle against the enemy in the areas of our life in which we have given him influence and access. May God grant us a profitable fast, a good contest, and victory in battle.
Fr. Justin Frederick

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.

Upcoming Events 2015-16

22-26 February: Fr. Justin gone, continuing education.
14-19 March: Clean Week: Plan now to set aside as much of this week as possible for prayer.

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!