

The Confessor's Tongue for July 17, A. D. 2016

4th Sunday after Pentecost, Fathers of the First Six Councils, Martyr Marina

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.

A Reflection on Psalm 95

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The Psalms have been the prayer book of God's people from time immemorial. They are a path into meditation and reflection upon God's works for the people of God and thus also a path into meditating upon God's present work in our lives.

St. Ambrose of Milan, in commenting on the Psalms, wrote: "History instructs us, the law teaches us, prophecy foretells, correction punishes, morality persuades; but the book of Psalms goes further than all these. It is medicine for our spiritual health. Whoever reads it will find in it a medicine to cure the wounds caused by his own particular passions. Whoever studies it deeply will find it a kind of gymnasium open for all souls to use, where the different psalms are like different exercises set out before him. In that gymnasium, in that stadium of virtue, he can choose the exercises that will train him best to win the victor's crown" (Explanations of the Psalms, CSEL 64, 4-7). The psalms, carefully and prayerfully meditated upon, can become for us a spiritual gymnasium in which we can train our hearts and minds to perfect praise and grow in virtue. They are not just relics of Israel's faith and temple worship. No, for Christians they are a fundamental tool for our life in Christ. It is with this attitude in mind that we turn to meditate on Psalm 95.

O come, let us sing unto the LORD: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. 2 Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms. 3 For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods. 4 In his hand are the deep places of the earth: the strength of the hills is his also. 5 The sea is his, and he made it: and his hands formed the dry land. 6 O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our maker. 7 For he is our God; and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. Today if ye will hear his voice, 8 Harden not your heart, as in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness: 9 When your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my work. 10 Forty years long was I grieved with this generation, and said, It is a people that do err in their heart, and they have not known my ways: 11 Unto whom I swear in my wrath that they should not enter into my rest.

Careful reading reveals to us that this psalm seems to have two distinct sections. Section

one being vs. 1-7a and the second section being 7b-11. Section one's genre is praise. It begins with a call to worship and then proceeds to call to mind God's role as creator and caretaker. He is extolled as being not only God but King above all other contending gods. Further, He is not a transcendent God for whom the earth is a distant place. Rather, David the psalmist speaks of God's hands as caring for and even creating the entire world. Not only is the

cosmos a product of His hands, but we, His sheep, are held within His hand. It is on these soaring notes of praise and celebratory remembrance of God's providence and creative love that David shifts tones. The shift in 7b, however, is not so abrupt if we consider the thematic resonances which hold the Psalm together. God being deemed the "rock of our salvation" is a direct allusion to the book of Deuteronomy (32:15) and therefore should call to mind the context of the Exodus from Egypt and the wilderness wandering done by the Israelites. The entire Psalm pivots on 7b and the importance of the word "Today."

"Today, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts" (Psalm 95:7b, Hebrews 4:7). After the initial call to worship and remembrance of God's acts, we are confronted with the reality of our life in the present. We are all, like the Israelites, in pilgrimage away from the fleshpots of Egypt and into the promised rest of God (vs. 11). And like the Israelites, while we may acknowledge that God is our awesome creator, we still look backwards to Egypt. Egypt, place in Scripture and therefore in the Fathers, symbolically representative of our former lives of sin and death. We often in our moments of discouragement in the wilderness of life's pilgrimage look backwards fondly on what we think that we have lost. Before God we had the ease of captivity. Yes! Captive! But, well taken care of and, further, far away from the desert! We did not have to leave the comforts of home and the flesh. Remember when our conscience was silent? Remember when our days were consumed with the idleness of pleasing whatever passing desire surged into our consciousness? We, who are not literally wandering in the desert for forty years, are quick to reforge the links of our enslavement to the way which brings forth the fruit of death (Romans 6).

We easily forget the providential and redemptive care of God and we turn upon God our creator and test him through grumbling, complaining, and lack of faith (Exodus 17). We do not remember God's generous act of creation and subsequent work of redemption, His working in our lives through our baptism and birth into new life, His vanquishing of the powers and principalities which held us captive in sin (Ephesians 1:15-21), or the constant gentle guidance by which He shepherds us. The force of the word "today" is that it places us in a moment of crisis. Will we harden our hearts? Will we listen to our Creator and Redeemer? The force of the word "today" means that every moment is a moment of decision. We do not make our decision just once or twice. In meditating upon this Psalm we are putting before us the script of repentance. While we know the facts of God's acts, we do not have faith in the acts of God.

We must moment by moment persevere in faithfulness.

St. Paul encourages us, "Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief... Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:11,14-16).

We have entered into the pilgrim people of God known as the Church and we are all sojourning to the heavenly rest. Will we harden our hearts in disbelief? In life's journey we are beset with the world and its woes and anxieties. We typically respond with grumbling and the hardening of our hearts. It is up to us to open our hearts and to receive the love of God which has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). He has proven himself faithful in that He has given us His Son as a faithful High Priest who has sojourned with us in the desert. "For the LORD shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places; and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody" (Isaiah 51:3). God is not ruling from afar as an absentee landlord expecting his rent and yet not caring for his property. Instead, in the same way in which He created all things with His hands He has crafted our salvation in the body of His Son (Ephesians 1:3-14). He has brought us "the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand" to the "throne of grace [so] that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need". Today, let us not harden our hearts as we have done before but rather let us have faith and come and "sing unto the LORD: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation".

Services for Needs

Beyond the daily cycle of public services, the Church possesses an array of services by which the faithful may direct their prayers to God in times of particular need.

First among these are the Mysteries, or Sacraments: Baptism, Chrismation, Marriage, Confession, Ordination, Unction. While the time and place for most of these is obvious, Unction is a service underutilized. When serious illness threatens to permanently undermine health or sanity or to bring and end to life, the priest will offer Unction to the one sick that he may be anointed in the name of the Lord for the healing of soul and body. This service is normally performed in the Church, but an abbreviated form may be served in the hospital if needed.

For lesser illnesses, there is a Molieben (prayer service) for the sick. Anointing with holy oil from the

relics of a saint often accompanies this. Again, this may be served at Church, in the hospital, or at home. There are other Moliebens available too: for the New Year, for Civil Feast Days (Holidays), for the Blessing of the Instruction of Children (we offer this prayer at the end of Liturgy at the start of each school year in the fall), for Students Having Difficulty Learning, to for Invoking the Help of the Holy Spirit before the Beginning of Every Good Work, and for Blessing a Journey. In addition, there is Molieben to the Theotokos "sung in every spiritual affliction and circumstance", known by some as the "Paraklesis", and also a General Molieben that can be adapted to any need. When we receive answers to our prayers from God, it is right for us to offer the Thanksgiving Molieben in gratitude.

In the *Book of Needs* (or *Trebnik*) are prayers for blessing new homes and homes at Theophany, for digging and blessing a well, for blessing automobiles and boats, for bees, for flocks and herds, for vineyards, for sowing seed, for founding a home, for wine, for salt, for fishnets, etc. There is a whole categories of prayers and services for those who are ill, who cannot sleep, who are afflicted by unclean spirits, for those at enmity with one another, for the increase of love and uprooting of hatred and all animosity, for those in prison. Another category treats general catastrophes: droughts, inclement weather, floods, epidemics, pestilence among livestock, famine, storms, earthquakes, along with civil problems of war and unrest.

Perhaps the most popular service from the *Book of Needs* is the Pannikhida, at which the faithful remember their loved one's who have departed in the Orthodox Faith.

Besides being a valuable resource the faithful should make greater use of, these services instruct Christians to bring everything to the Lord in prayer. Every action is to be initiated with prayer seeking God's grace, help, and blessing; every work is to be seasoned with prayer that it may be blessed of God and become a spiritual work pleasing to Him and bearing good fruit.

While a full Molieben can run 20 to 30 minutes, it is possible to request an abbreviated form which can be done in 5 minutes before or after a scheduled service or at another time. Normally, these services are served by a priest, but it is possible to pray the prayers requesting God's blessing on one's own, and there is a book of Moliebens designed for use at home without a priest.

The faithful are encouraged to make fuller use of these spiritual resources of the Church. *Fr. Justin*

Upcoming Events 2016
30-31 July, 15-Year Anniversary w/ Bishop Alexander
1-14 August Dormition Fast
12 August All-Night Vigil

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!