

The Confessor's Tongue for November 27, A. D. 2016

23rd Sunday after Pentecost, Greatmartyr James of Persia

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.

The Commandments of Christ

"If you love Me, you will keep my commandments."

Blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you. Matthew 5:11-12

Lest we should think the Christian life is about comfort and success in this life, Christ warns us not only to expect persecution (John 15:20), but commands us to rejoice in it. What a command! "Rejoice when you are persecuted for righteousness' sake!" This command certainly overturns the world's values, which hold persecution to be misfortune.

But what persecution do we undergo? We immediately think of the martyrs, both under the Romans and those of recent time under the Turks and the Communists. This is certainly persecution and from the Apostles on down to the present, true Christians have rejoice to suffer the loss of their lives for the sake of Christ, considering themselves fortunate to be counted worthy to share in Christ's sufferings.

Yet the persecution we experience need not mean the shedding of blood and loss of life. St. Paul tells St. Timothy, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." How many of us have been mocked or attacked by family members because we have become Orthodox? This is persecution for righteousness' sake, and Christ commands us to rejoice. How many of us have been teased at school because we dress modestly, because we won't allow our virginity to be violated, or because we won't cheat on tests? This is persecution for righteousness' sake, and Christ commands us to rejoice. How many times have we incurred the displeasure of others at work, lost favor with the boss, or even been fired because we refused to be party to dishonest business practices? This is persecution for righteousness' sake, and Christ commands us to rejoice. Every time we choose to tell the truth rather than resort to the convenient lie, every time we refuse to get drunk or do drugs with pressuring friends, every time we pray and make the sign of the cross in public, every time we seek to do what is right in God's eyes and are laughed at or threatened for our stand, we are being persecuted for righteousness' sake, and Christ commands us to rejoice.

Do we rejoice in these and other common circumstances of persecution? Or are we fearful and lament and complain to God? God sees those who are His, those who will stand up to do what is right despite the world's opposition, and He will bless them not only in this life but promises them a great reward in heaven. A great reward awaits those who endure

the 'momentary light affliction' living as a Christian in this world. The affliction, the persecution is real, and we must expect it. But Christ is with us in it, and the reward He promises us for enduring is cause for rejoicing.

Fr. Justin Frederick,

Abba Poemen was asked for whom this saying is suitable, 'Do not be anxious about tomorrow.' (Mt. 6:34) The old man said, 'It is said for the man who is tempted and has not much strength, so that he should not be worried, saying to himself, "How long just I suffer this temptation?" He should rather say to himself, "Today."'
Sayings of the Desert Fathers, Poemen 126

On the Lord's Prayer: A Short Interpretation 7

'Debts and Debtors'

St. Maximus the Confessor

When we have thus conformed ourselves to the sense of the prayer, we can proceed, in purity to the next petition, saying, 'And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors' (Matt. 6:12).

According to the first interpretation proposed for the preceding section of the prayer, the words 'this day' symbolize the present age; and the person who prays in this age for the incorruptible bread of wisdom, from which we were cutoff by the original transgression, delights in one thing only: the attainment of divine blessings. It is God who by nature bestows these blessings, but it is the recipient's free will that safeguards them. Similarly, such a person knows only one pain: the failure to attain these blessings. It is the devil who prompts this failure, but it is the person himself who makes it an actuality, because of his weakness of will with regard to the divine, and because he does not hold fast to the precious gift for which he has prayed. But if someone is not in the least concerned with anything in the visible world, and consequently is not overcome by any bodily affliction, then such a person truly and dispassionately forgives those who sin against him; for no one can rob him of the good to which he aspires and which by nature is unassailable.

A person of this land makes himself a pattern of virtue for God, if it may be put in this way; for by saying 'Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors', he exhorts God, who is beyond imitation, to come and imitate him; and he begs God to treat him as he himself has treated his neighbors. For he wishes to be forgiven by God as he himself has forgiven the debts of those who have sinned against him; hence, just as God dispassionately forgives His creatures, so such a person must himself remain dispassionate in the face of what happens to him and forgive those who offend him. He must not allow the memory of things that afflict him to be stamped on his intellect lest he inwardly sunders human nature by separating himself

from some other man, although he is a man himself. When a man's will is in union with; the principle of nature in this way, God and nature are naturally reconciled; but, failing such a union, our nature remains self-divided in its will and cannot receive God's gift of Himself.

This surely is why God wishes us first to be reconciled with one another. He Himself has no need to learn from us how to be reconciled with sinners and to waive the penalty for a multitude of atrocious crimes; but He wishes to purify us of our passions and show us that the measure of grace conferred on those who are forgiven corresponds to their inward state. It is evident that when man's will is in union with the principle of nature, he is not in a state of rebellion against God. Since the principle of nature is a law both natural and divine, and there is nothing in it contrary to the Logos, when a man's will functions in accordance with this principle it accords with God in all things. Such a condition of the will is an inner state actively characterized by the grace of what is good by nature and hence productive of virtue.

This, then, is the inner state of the man who prays for Gnostic bread. After him comes the man who, constrained by nature, seeks ordinary bread, but sufficient for one day only. He will attain the same inner state as the first when he has forgiven his debtors their debts, as he knows that he is by nature mortal. Moreover, by accepting the uncertainty of the future and waiting each day for what is provided by nature, he anticipates nature, choosing to become dead to the world and to comply with the text, 'For Thy sake we are put to death all the day long; we are regarded as sheep for slaughtering' (Ps. 44:22; Rom. 8:36). He makes his peace with all in order to be free from all the depravities of this present age when he departs to eternal life, and to receive from the Judge and Savior of the universe a just recompense for what he has done in this life. Both these kinds of men, therefore, need to exhibit a pure disposition towards those who have offended them. This is true in general; but it has particular reference to the concluding words of the prayer: 'And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from what is evil' (Matt. 6:13). *to be continued*

From *The Hermitess Photini* (+1928)

Indeed, man has a high calling because he was created in the image and likeness of God. That is, he came from God and will go back to God again to partake of His divine glory and blessedness. Since God is the source of blessedness, he who communicates with God also becomes blessed. Eternal life, blessedness, the Kingdom of Heaven, joy, paradise, gladness, delight: this is what God is. 'I am the resurrection and the life,' said the Savior. Everyone who communicates with God has blessedness. Whereas hell, which the Savior calls outer darkness, gnashing of teeth, torture, fire, abyss, etc., is nothing but the deprivation of divine grace and a departure

from God—not spatially but morally. Wherever there is no light, there will definitely be darkness. What is darkness? Absence of light. This is also how it is with the blessedness of heaven. God is the Ultimate Good. The more man approaches God through the virtues, the more blessed and happy he becomes.

Sin, though, is the ultimate evil. The more a person distances himself from God—not physically, as we said, but spiritually through sin—the more unhappy he becomes. Who is gnashing his teeth? He who is unhappy, due to sin. Who is burning in the unquenchable fire of torture? He who perceives that he himself is the cause of his plight! So where is the seat of eternal fire? In the heart of the sinner. The Savior implies this in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. Thus hell is essentially the complete deprivation of divine grace. What is illness? Lack of health. What is sorrow? Lack of joy. The demons used to be bright, good angels, as the Holy Scriptures say. But by sinning, they lost divine grace and became dark, evil, miserable. Since they lost the divine illumination that enlightens and gladdens, they were darkened, and, so to speak, they got drunk with ignorance so that, just as a drunk person under the influence wants to drink even more, likewise those who are drunk with sin always desire evil. They think that by doing evil they will find rest, but this is in vain. They will always be unhappy, because the evil distance them even more from the light until it throws them into the utmost misery, which the Savior calls 'the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'

So distancing oneself from God is the most terrible punishment. That becomes clear from observing the workers of sin in the world, who are always in fear; they always have inner disturbance and anxiety. The purpose of man is to work at the virtues through which he partakes of divine glory and becomes like God, not by nature, but by grace.

ON SINFUL FALLS

Our falls into anger and other movements of the passions demonstrate to us our underlying spiritual pride, and they humble us against our will; if we strive to eradicate this root, the branches will fall off by themselves.

Much experience is needed before we truly realize our infirmity and are humbled, and this is acquired not quickly but with much time. Our falls themselves bridle our arrogance and humble us against our will. But before God it is better to be a sinner with repentance than a righteous man with pride.

Falling and rising, repenting and being humbled is better than not falling, not repenting, and not being humbled; from the battle we learn skill.

St. Macarius of Optina

Upcoming Events 2016

15 November – 24 December Nativity Fast
15 December Holy Unction, 7:00 p.m.
31 December Feast Day at Holy Nativity Monastery
31 December New Year's Eve Vigil 8:00 p.m.

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!