

The Confessor's Tongue for February 12, A. D. 2017

Sunday of the Prodigal Son; St. Meletius of Antioch, St. Aleksei of Moscow

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.

Le Sunday of the Prodigal Son

On this day we commemorate the parable of the Prodigal Son, which occurs in the Holy Gospel according to Luke.

The theme of the Sunday of the Prodigal Son is that of squandering great riches and returning in repentance.

Each of us is to see himself in the Prodigal, as wasters of the Father's riches in a land far from the Father. How is this so?

First, man in falling was deprived of Paradise. Created in God's image, he had the potential to achieve the likeness of God, but he rejected this in order to try to become god in his own right and fulfill himself apart from his Creator. Each of us must repent of our own efforts to follow Adam in this rebellion. Man was made to attain to the likeness of God, to be conformed to the image of Christ, who is the very image of the Father. But when we live in sin, we do what is unworthy of our creation in God's image, and we squander the great benefit and potential that being made in God's image confers on us to live instead far from the Father as pigs in a pigpen.

Second, we who are baptized have been given a great deposit of grace from God, but to the degree that we sin, we squander that treasure. Our sin separates us from God and takes us to a "far land". Only the second Baptism of tears (repentance) allows us to recover that Baptismal grace and to renew it.

Great Lent helps us pursue both ends.

Commentary on the All-Night Vigil 6 Lord, I Have Cried

Following the Little Litany and its exclamation, the vespéral Psalms (140, 141, 130, 117) are sung, which are best known by the opening line, "Lord, I have cried unto Thee, hear me!" Here, the second great theme of Vespers is announced. The Vigil began with the theme of creation and its glory, which was emphasized by the open Royal Doors, the lights, and the Priest wearing his phelonion. Now the service turns to the theme of repentance. The lighting has been decreased since the opening Psalm, the Royal Doors have been closed, and the Priest has removed his phelonion further to depict for us the darkness of our fallen state in the fallen world. And in our fallen state, our only hope is cry out to the Lord.

The first two verses of the set of Psalms are sung in the appointed tone, then the reader takes over, chanting the rest. Towards the end, stichera, or composed verses from the Octoechos (or Triodion or Pentecostarion) and the Menaion are inserted between verses of Psalms and sung. These stichera express the meaning of that particular day in the Church calendar. The greater the feast, the more

stichera are sung. The tone of the first stichera sung determines the tone in which the first verses of "Lord I have cried" are sung. At the Resurrectional Vigil, ten stichera are sung. Usually seven are from the Octoechos (the book of the 8 tones) on the theme of the resurrection, and the remaining three are from the Menaion (the book containing all the daily services for the saints) for the saint of the day.

As the opening Psalm verses are sung, the Deacon (or Priest if he serves alone) takes the censer and performs a great censuring of the temple. The meaning of this censuring is expressed by the words "Let my prayer arise as incense before Thee." The true prayers of believers are likened to incense in God's nostrils (Revelation 8:3-4). In our darkened state, we cry out to God, and He hears us, and our prayers are pleasing to Him. Father Alexander Schmemmann expresses the contrast between the opening theme of Creation and the second theme of Repentance at the Vigil:

'Because we have first seen the beauty of the world, we can now see the ugliness, realize what we have lost, understand how our whole life (and not only some trespasses) has become sin, and can repent for it. The lights are now extinguished. The Royal Doors are closed. The celebrant has put off his vestments. It is the naked and suffering man outside of Paradise, who, in full awareness of his exile, of his betrayal, of his darkness, says to God: "Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord." In the face of the glory of creation, there must be a tremendous sadness. God has give us another day; and we can just see how we have destroyed this gift of His.'

Fr. Justin Frederick

The Commandments of Christ

"If ye love Me, keep My commandments." (John 14:15)

Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.

Matthew 5:23-24

Our relationships with others is the proving ground that demonstrates our faith. As St. John says in his first epistle, "If anyone says he loves God but hates his brother, he is a liar." The proof of our love for God and our faith in Him is found in how we treat others. In today's commandment, Christ makes being reconciled with our brother to be of greater importance even than our worship of God!

What is the gift we bring to the altar? We bring ourselves as living sacrifices, as well as our tithes and offerings, our sacrifice of praise, and our giving of thanks.

Who is our brother here? Any relative, friend, or acquaintance.

What is the 'aught' our brother has against us? Any offense we have given in word or deed that has negatively affected our relationship. This is not the time to assess blame: he is 60% responsible, or 75% to blame, or 90% at fault; we must own up to the fact that we ourselves have fallen short of love for our brother and take responsibility for our part however small it may seem to us.

When are we to address the offense and make it right? Immediately, really. Jesus makes this point by giving reconciliation primacy over something that comes first in almost every other case: our worship of God. Normally we do not let anything come between our bringing our gift to the altar in worship, but here is something that takes precedence, so important it is. Even if we have come to church to the Divine Liturgy to worship God and to receive the Holy Mysteries, we are to put that aside for the sake of being reconciled with someone who has something against us.

Of course, normally we search our hearts and address these matters before we come to church. But if one should slip by us and we remember only then, our Christ-given priority is clear: leave our gift at the altar, go be reconciled to our brother, and then complete the offering of our gift. To presume to offer worship to God standing in the same building with a brother with whom we will not speak or who will not speak with us out of some offense is incongruous, to say the least.

Breaks in relationships that are not quickly healed can fester and do us and others great harm. They can create relational fires that burn quickly and grow ever bigger. As disciples of Jesus Christ, Orthodox Christians, we are to put out these fires and heal these wounds quickly. *Fr. Justin Frederick*

Preparation for Great Lent

We cannot expect to keep the Fast with great benefit in most cases if we only attend the Sunday Liturgy. Plenty of opportunity is 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 2); 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 3-6) to get the Fast started in the right spirit. 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 (if not weekly!) as well as a weekday Matins or Vespers now and again. It goes without saying that we should set aside as much of Holy Week (April 9-15) as possible to attend in the incomparably beautiful services before Pascha.

A Christian should be reading the Scriptures regularly as a matter of course, but the Fast is a time to increase this. A good minimum to strive for is a chapter from the Gospels and two chapters from the rest of the New Testament each day (followed at Optina Monastery), which will take us through the whole New Testament in ninety days. More rigorous plans may be devised. Your priest will make one more rigorous plan available for the fast for those so inclined. In addition to Scripture, 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.

Consider how and when you will pray: what prayers? what psalms (perhaps you will add something from the Psalter to your prayers each day)? what time of day? with how many prostrations? how many ropes of the Jesus Prayer?

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 will choose a local charity to help support during the fast, but you are free to give as you are led. Connected with almsgiving are works of mercy and service to others, which we should ready to undertake during the fast.

It is time for us now to consider the specifics of how we shall keep the Fast. The Church gives us the next two weeks to plan and prepare.

Remember the goal of all this is to know Christ, to see Him as He is, to make more room in our souls for Him through repentance, and to be filled with a greater measure of His Spirit. We aim to become God's children in character and not only in name.

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

For the Sick

Troparion: O Christ, who alone art our Defender, speedily from on high visit thy suffering servant N., delivering him from sickness and bitter pains; raise him up that he may sing to thee and praise thee without ceasing by the prayers of the Theotokos, O thou who alone lovest mankind.

Kontakion: O Merciful Lord, visit and heal this sick person N. now lying on the bed of sickness and sorely afflicted, as thou, O Savior, didst once raise Peter's wife's mother and the man sick of the palsy who was carried on his bed: for thou alone has borne the sickness and afflictions of our race, and with thee nothing is impossible, for thou art all-merciful. Amen.

Upcoming Events 2017

20 February Game Night at church
26 February Forgiveness Vespers, 6:00 p.m.
16 April: Pascha

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!