

The Confessor's Tongue for February 4, A. D. 2018

Sunday of the Prodigal Son; Venerable Isidore of Pelusium

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.

Preparation for Great Lent

We have now entered the preparatory period for Great Lent. Zacchaeus Sunday each year marks the last Sunday counted from Pentecost before the Lenten Triodion is opened. Zacchaeus teaches us to desire Christ and what effort we must make if we are to expect to meet Christ.

The three Sundays prior to Forgiveness Sunday are preparatory to Great Lent. *The Triodion*, the liturgical book that contains the services pertaining to the fast, is opened for the first time for the Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee, the first of the three preparatory Sundays, which begins the "Week of Proclamation" in the Church. The next is the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, and the last is the Sunday of the Last Judgment, also known as Meatfare, as it is the last day that meat is permitted to be eaten until Pascha.

Great Lent itself begins three weeks after the opening of the Triodion, halfway through the Vespers (at the Prokeimenon) of Forgiveness Sunday (Cheesefare, March 2). At that point, the vestments of the church and clergy are changed to the dark lenten colors, and the lenten melodies to the litanies are sung. Fasting begins in full force at midnight.

The Church does not ask us to change immediately from our normal routine to the intense ascetical effort of the Great Fast; rather, She helps us make the transition gradually. The week after the Publican and Pharisee is a fast-free week. The week after the Prodigal Son has the usual Wednesday and Friday fasts, and the week after Meatfare (Last Judgment) is observed with a special fast from meat only. Moreover, the services for Wednesday and Friday of that week are Lenten: no Divine Liturgy is permitted, the lenten tones are used, and lenten forms observed—a warm-up for what is to come.

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 service to others. We should also consider how we may cut back on busy schedules to make 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 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 (February 18); 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 (February 19-22) 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 1-7) 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—or take it up if one hasn't been reading. As a minimum, we should read 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. A more rigorous program to take you through the whole NT during the forty days of Lent is available on the candle stand. In addition, choose a spiritual (Orthodox) book that will nourish your soul, inspire and 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?

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

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

Please consult your priest if you have any questions or concerns about the Fast.

The Epistle of Jude

The Epistle of Jude is short, but it is full. It may be summarized thus:

Contend for the faith because false teachers who are ungodly, who turn grace into license, and who deny Christ have crept into the Church. Recall the examples of unbelieving Hebrews in the desert, the fallen angels, and the destruction of Sodom and

Gomorrah to see how the Lord judges the ungodly. These men are filthy dreamers who defile the flesh and speak evil of proper authorities, unlike Michael the Archangel. They have taken Cain's (envy), fallen into Balaam's error (greed), and rebelled like Korah. They may be likened to hidden reefs in your midst, clouds without rain, trees without fruit, wild waves of the sea casting up foam and refuse, and wandering stars without fixed place. They murmur, complain, follow their own lusts, boast, and flatter for advantage. In response, the faithful are to keep themselves in God's love by building themselves up in their holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, looking for Christ's mercy, and carefully having mercy on sinners who repent.

Because of the threat posed by the false teachers who had crept into the Church, Jude changed his purpose in writing and called upon Christians to "contend earnestly" for the faith once-delivered by the apostles to the saints. This earnest contention evokes the fierce competition of the athletic field, but it is of a more serious nature. As we face the threat of false teachers in our day, it behooves us to ponder how we are to content earnestly for the faith and not be subverted by those who turn God's grace into licentiousness and deny Christ.

Part of our struggle for the Faith will involve what Jude calls his readers to do towards the end of his epistle where he commands them to "keep yourselves in the love of God." This hearkens to Christ's command (John 15) to abide in Him that we might bear fruit. While no power may snatch us out of God's hand, we may readily choose not to abide there. We are to live in such a way as to remain in God's love, not provoking Him with indifference, lack of faith, sloth, coldness of heart, and living for sinful pleasures.

Three participial phrases modify the command to keep yourselves in God's love. 1. "Building up yourselves on your most holy faith": our faith is to be ever growing, ever gaining strength, and this requires our active attention and engagement. It does not grow by itself without being fed and exercised. This involves growing both in the knowledge of the Faith and the practice of it. One without the other will be vulnerable to trials and temptations. 2. "Praying in the Holy Spirit": Prayer is the intentional direction of our thoughts and attention to Christ. We cannot keep ourselves in God's love without prayer. We cannot pray as we ought without the help of the Holy Spirit, "for we know not how to pray as we ought"; the Spirit is given to us at Baptism. Much of our spiritual life involves learning to engage the Spirit, to open ourselves to His guidance, to surrendering ourselves to Him. Praying in the Spirit requires us to recognize the poverty of our prayer, to depend on the Spirit to pray in us, to deepen our attention and strengthen our focus on Him who has taken up His dwelling within us. The Jesus Prayer can be an important part of this. In any case, we must deepen our prayer life! 3. "Looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto

eternal life." A good bit of our spiritual life involves waiting upon the Lord. Like the paralytic beside the pool, we wait for Him to visit us and heal us. The prophet Isaiah declare that those who "wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength" (Is 40). We should not forget the import of the word "wait"—we don't necessarily get what we want the moment we conceive a desire for it. We wait with patient expectation with confidence that God will give us what we need.

The battle Jude describes was real then and continues until this day. Christ and his apostles warned us about false teachers who would come to draw us away from Christ. In the face of this, Jude instructs us in how to contend for the Faith and stay in the love of God.

Abba Isidore of Pelusia said, "To live without speaking is better than to speak without living. For the former who lives rightly does good even by his silence, but the latter does not good even when he speaks. When words and life correspond to one another, they are together the whole of philosophy."

Two Letters of St. Basil on the Loss of a Son

To Nectarius.

1. I heard of your unendurable loss, and was much distressed. Three or four days went by, and I was still in some doubt because my informant was not able to give me any clear details of the melancholy event. While I was incredulous about what was reported abroad, because I prayed that it might not be true, I received a letter from the Bishop fully confirming the unhappy tidings. I need not tell you how I sighed and wept. Who could be so stony-hearted, so truly inhuman, as to be insensible to what has occurred, or be affected by merely moderate grief? He is gone; heir of a noble house, prop of a family, a father's hope, offspring of pious parents, nursed with innumerable prayers, in the very bloom of manhood, torn from his father's hands. These things are enough to break a heart of adamant and make it feel. It is only natural then that I am deeply touched at this trouble; I who have been intimately connected with you from the beginning and have made your joys and sorrows mine. But yesterday it seemed that you had only little to trouble you, and that your life's stream was flowing prosperously on. In a moment, by a demon's malice, all the happiness of the house, all the brightness of life, is destroyed, and our lives are made a doleful story. If we wish to lament and weep over what has happened, a lifetime will not be enough and if all mankind mourns with us they will be powerless to make their lamentation match our loss. Yes, if all the streams run tears they will not adequately weep our woe.

2. But we mean — do we not?— to bring out the gift which God has stored in our hearts; I mean that sober reason which in our happy days is wont to draw

lines of limitation round our souls, and when troubles come about us to recall to our minds that we are but men, and to suggest to us, what indeed we have seen and heard, that life is full of similar misfortunes, and that the examples of human sufferings are not a few. Above all, this will tell us that it is God's command that we who trust in Christ should not grieve over them who are fallen asleep, because we hope in the resurrection; and that in reward for great patience great crowns of glory are kept in store by the Master of life's course. Only let us allow our wiser thoughts to speak to us in this strain of music, and we may perhaps discover some slight alleviation of our trouble. Play the man, then, I implore you; the blow is a heavy one, but stand firm; do not fall under the weight of your grief; do not lose heart. Be perfectly assured of this, that though the reasons for what is ordained by God are beyond us, yet always what is arranged for us by Him Who is wise and Who loves us is to be accepted, be it ever so grievous to endure. He Himself knows how He is appointing what is best for each and why the terms of life that He fixes for us are unequal. There exists some reason incomprehensible to man why some are sooner carried far away from us, and some are left a longer while behind to bear the burdens of this painful life. So we ought always to adore His loving kindness, and not to repine, remembering those great and famous words of the great athlete Job, when he had seen ten children at one table, in one short moment, crushed to death, The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Job 1:21 As the Lord thought good so it came to pass. Let us adopt those marvellous words. At the hands of the righteous Judge, they who show like good deeds shall receive a like reward. We have not lost the lad; we have restored him to the Lender. His life is not destroyed; it is changed for the better. He whom we love is not hidden in the ground; he is received into heaven. Let us wait a little while, and we shall be once more with him. The time of our separation is not long, for in this life we are all like travellers on a journey, hastening on to the same shelter. While one has reached his rest another arrives, another hurries on, but one and the same end awaits them all. He has outstripped us on the way, but we shall all travel the same road, and the same hostelry awaits us all. God only grant that we through goodness may be likened to his purity, to the end that for the sake of our guilelessness of life we may attain the rest which is granted to them that are children in Christ.

To the wife of Nectarius.

1. I hesitated to address your excellency, from the idea that, just as to the eye when inflamed even the mildest of remedies causes pain, so to a soul distressed by heavy sorrow, words offered in the moment of agony, even though they do bring much comfort, seem to be somewhat out of place. But I bethought me that I should be speaking to a Christian woman, who has long ago learned godly

lessons, and is not inexperienced in the vicissitudes of human life, and I judged it right not to neglect the duty laid upon me. I know what a mother's heart is, and when I remember how good and gentle you are to all, I can reckon the probable extent of your misery at this present time. You have lost a son whom, while he was alive, all mothers called happy, with prayers that their own might be like him, and on his death bewailed, as though each had hidden her own in the grave. His death is a blow to two provinces, both to mine and to Cilicia. With him has fallen a great and illustrious race, dashed to the ground as by the withdrawal of a prop. Alas for the mighty mischief that the contact with an evil demon was able to wreak! Earth, what a calamity you have been compelled to sustain! If the sun had any feeling one would think he might have shuddered at so sad a sight. Who could utter all that the spirit in its helplessness would have said?

2. But our lives are not without a Providence. So we have learned in the Gospel, for not a sparrow falls to the ground without the will of our Father. Matthew 10:29 Whatever has come to pass has come to pass by the will of our Creator. And who can resist God's will? Let us accept what has befallen us; for if we take it ill we do not mend the past and we work our own ruin. Do not let us arraign the righteous judgment of God. We are all too untaught to assail His ineffable sentences. The Lord is now making trial of your love for Him. Now there is an opportunity for you, through your patience, to take the martyr's lot. The mother of the Maccabees saw the death of seven sons without a sigh, without even shedding one unworthy tear. She gave thanks to God for seeing them freed from the fetters of the flesh by fire and steel and cruel blows, and she won praise from God, and fame among men. The loss is great, as I can say myself; but great too are the rewards laid up by the Lord for the patient. When first you were made a mother, and saw your boy, and thanked God, you knew all the while that, a mortal yourself, you had given birth to a mortal. What is there astonishing in the death of a mortal? But we are grieved at his dying before his time. Are we sure that this was not his time? We do not know how to pick and choose what is good for our souls, or how to fix the limits of the life of man. Look round at all the world in which you live; remember that everything you see is mortal, and all subject to corruption. Look up to heaven; even it shall be dissolved; look at the sun, not even the sun will last forever. All the stars together, all living things of land and sea, all that is fair on earth, aye, earth itself, all are subject to decay; yet a little while and all shall be no more. Let these considerations be some comfort to you in your trouble. Do not measure your loss by itself; if you do it will seem intolerable; but if you take all human affairs into account you will find that some comfort is to be derived from them. Above all, one thing I would strongly urge; spare your husband. Be a comfort to others. Do not make his trouble harder to bear by wearing yourself away with

sorrow. Mere words I know cannot give comfort. Just now what is wanted is prayer; and I do pray the Lord Himself to touch your heart by His unspeakable power, and through good thoughts to cause light to shine upon your soul, that you may have a source of consolation in yourself.

Thoughts For the Sunday of the Prodigal Son
From the Life of St. Arsenius of Paros

As St Arsenius's virtues became known to people, they flocked to him from near and far. He received all with paternal affection, treating each one with the proper spiritual medicine which would restore their souls to health.

A certain girl from Syros came to the Convent of the Transfiguration to visit her sister, who was a nun. The nun had previously been informed that her sister had fallen into a serious sin. When she learned that the girl was outside the doors of the convent, the nun screamed at her, "Go far away from here. Since you are defiled, you will defile the convent and the nuns." Instead of feeling pity for her sister, and trying to lead her to repentance, the nun and some of the other nuns struck the poor girl and told her to go away.

The wretched girl cried, "I have made a mistake. Forgive me!"

The nun shrieked, "Go away, or I will kill you to wash away the shame you have brought to our family."

"Have you no pity, my sister, don't you share my pain?"

"No," the nun shouted, "you are not my sister, you are a foul harlot."

"Where shall I go?" she sobbed.

"Go and drown yourself," was the heartless reply.

The poor girl fled from the convent, bleeding and wounded, intending to kill herself. At that very moment, Saint Arsenius was on his way to visit the convent. Seeing the girl in such a state, he asked her what was wrong. She explained that she had been led astray by corrupt men and women. Realizing her sin, she went to the convent to ask her sister for help.

"See what they have done to me, Elder. What do you advise me to do? Shall I drown myself, or leap off a cliff?"

"I do not advise you to do either, my child. If you wish, I shall take you with me and heal the wounds of your soul and body," he said gently.

"Where will you take me?" the miserable girl asked.

"To the convent, my child."

"I beg you not to take me there, Elder. My sister and the other nuns said they would kill me if I came back."

The saint replied, "Do not be afraid. They will not kill you, because I shall entrust you to Christ, and no one will be able to harm you."

"Very well," she said, "If you entrust me to Christ I will not be afraid of them, for Christ is more powerful than they."

Saint Arsenius led her to the convent, consoling her and encouraging her to repentance and confession. After hearing her confession, he made her a nun. Then he called all the nuns into the church and severely rebuked those who wounded the girl. He reminded them of the parable of the Prodigal Son, and of how Christ had come to save sinners. He often associated with sinners, showing them great love and mercy.

"You, however, have done the opposite. Though you knew that her soul had been wounded by the devil, you did not feel sorry for her. You did not embrace her and try to save her from further sin, but you attacked her and beat her. Then you urged her to kill herself. Now I, your Spiritual Father, tell you that you are not nuns, you are not Christians, you are not even human beings. You are devoid of compassion, affection, and sympathy. You are murderesses! Therefore, I forbid you to receive Holy Communion for three years, unless you recognize your sin. Repent and confess, weep and ask forgiveness from God and from me, your Spiritual Father, and from the other nuns who did not participate in your sinful behavior."

The nuns began to weep bitterly and they repented. Thus, he lessened their penance and forgave them. He gave the girl's sister the penance of not receiving Holy Communion for a whole year. Because the other nuns had shared in this sin, he would not permit them to receive Communion for six months.

Saint Arsenius foresaw his death a month before it occurred. At the Liturgy for the Feast of Saint Basil, he announced that he would soon depart from them. With great effort, he was able to serve for the Feast of the Theophany. After the service, he told some nuns that this had been his last Liturgy.

News of the saint's illness and approaching death spread quickly to all the villages of Paros. People wept because they were about to lose their Spiritual Father, and they hastened to bid him farewell and to receive his blessing.

On the eve of his repose, he called the nuns of the convent to come to him. He told them that the next day he would leave this temporary life and enter into eternal life.

On January 31, 1877 Saint Arsenius received Holy Communion for the last time and fell asleep in the Lord. For three days, people came to kiss his body, then they followed the funeral procession to the burial site which he himself had selected.

Saint Arsenius of Paros was glorified by the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 1967. He is also commemorated on August 18 (the uncovering of his relics).

Upcoming Events 2018

18 February: Forgiveness Sunday, Forgiveness Vespers at 6:00 p.m. with ice cream at Beth Marie's following. Plan now to keep the evening clear.
19-24 February: Clean Week
1-7 April: Holy Week
8 April: Pascha

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!