

The Confessor's Tongue for December 1, A. D. 2019

24th Sunday after Pentecost; St. Philaret the Merciful, Prophet Nahum

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

From that time, Jesus began to preach, and to say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Matthew 4:17"

The first commandment Christ gives during His earthly ministry is the command to repent. This is the same message that John the Baptist had preached (Matthew 4:2) before Him. It is also the primary message of the prophets of the Old Testament to the wayward children of Israel.

What does it mean to repent? The Greek verb, *metanoeo*, means "to change one's *nous*." The word *nous* is often translated as "mind" or "intellect", but in patristic literature it is most identified with the innermost aspect of the heart, 'eye of the soul,' the center of man, the organ of the soul that apprehends or perceives spiritual realities directly when it is functioning properly after purification. It understands divine truth and the inner essence of created things by means of immediate experience, but its ability to do this is hindered by sin, which obscures and blinds this eye of the soul.

Repentance is thus the process of turning away from all that hinders the function of the *nous* and obscures its sight. This necessarily involves the thoughts of the mind, the desires of the heart, and the actions of the body. As St. Gregory Palamas describes it, the essence of repentance "is never again to touch forbidden things."

To achieve this transformation of the *nous* so it operates properly to perceive God and the reality of the spiritual realm, the sin which obscures its perception must be wiped away. As sin is to be found in thoughts, desires, words, and actions, repentance necessarily addresses all these areas. It changes what a person thinks, what he desires, what he says, and what he does.

Repentance inevitably changes what one thinks about God, about the world, and about man. Man has many mistaken notions, fantasies, and imaginations of God. Christ, by revealing God in Himself, challenges all of them and calls man to change his thoughts about God and conform them to His revelation.

Repentance changes how man views the world. Rather than seeing it as a brute fact or the product of chance, he comes to see it as the work of God manifesting God's power, wisdom, and goodness. He realizes that his study of the material world in all its phenomena in the mineral, vegetable, and animal kingdoms lead him to God (though scientists now identify 5 kingdoms of life plus the mineral). He perceives the world as governed by God's providence as a place for him to work out his salvation. He understands that it is a gift from God for him to use but always with respect.

Repentance changes how a man views himself. He understands that God has made him in His image, and he sees in Christ the image of what he is to become: a holy human being adopted as God's child. He sees that God has made him, male or female, for God's glory and purpose. His life is not his own but a gift which he is responsible to use wisely and not squander. He realizes God is King and he is a subject of the King: he is not sovereign, independent, or his own creator. He learns to accept God's view and judgment of things rather than his own.

Repentance changes what man desires. Rather than living to eat, and drink, and be merry before death takes him away and shuts him up in darkness, man realizes he is made for God and desires to be with Him. Whatever helps him in that quest he embraces; whatever hinders him, he discards. He lives to please God and gain His approval, rather than to win man's praise. He desires to do God's will rather than follow stubborn self-will.

Repentance changes what man says and how he talks. Seeing God and the world for what they truly are, man cannot justly complain and curse, boast or threaten, judge and condemn. Instead, he learns to give thanks to God always for all things, know that God, who is good and the lover of man, is working good for him through all the circumstances of his life, pleasant or unpleasant. He blesses the Lord at all times, His praise shall be continually in his mouth, and the name of Jesus is constantly in his thought and on his lips. He speaks truth and lives not by lies.

Repentance changes what man does, how he lives. He no longer steals, fornicates, does violence to others. He eats and drinks with moderation, fleeing drunkenness and gluttony. He gives his first-fruits to God and gives alms to those in need. He orders his life around the life of Christ's Body the Church. No longer is sensual pleasure the goal of his life. He gives himself rather to prayer and fasting and service to others, first to his family and then to those outside, seeking the salvation of the world and the good of others. All in all, his life takes on a completely different shape and form from what it had before he gave himself to Christ.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus gives us a powerful example of repentance. The young man leaves home with his inheritance, looking for a "good time." He spends it on all the usual pleasures: on food, on drink, on women, on clothes, on entertainment. He has fun until his money runs out. Then, underemployed feeding swine and hungry, he comes to his senses. He realizes he would be better off in his father's house as a servant than free and independent in a pig pen. So he goes home in repentance. He quite rightly confesses he is not worthy to be a son and asks to be taken as a servant. His thoughts of himself and his father, his thoughts about life, his desires, his

words, and his actions have all changed, and because they have, he is able to find a warm welcome and a place for life in his father's house.

Christ gives His hearers the reason to repent: "the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Christ has entered the world as a man, forever joining Himself to the human race. He is not a distant God handing down edicts from above; rather He brings His divinity down to man veiled in flesh in order to raise man up into the glory of His divine life. "Prior to the incarnation of the Logos of God, the kingdom of heaven was as far from us as the sky is from the earth; but when the King of heaven came to dwell amongst us and chose to unite Himself with us, the kingdom of heaven drew near to us all," Palamas says. Since the kingdom of heaven has been brought close to us, "let us not distance ourselves from it by leading an unrepentant heart." Christ's membership in the human race changes everything, and man's logical response to being confronted with the God-man, Emmanuel, "God with us", is to purify his spiritual sight that he may perceive God, the world, and himself in the light of truth and turn from his own deluded ways and submit himself to Christ. "God is with us, understand all ye nations and submit yourselves, for God is with us."

Our Christian life thus begins in repentance; in fact, without repentance, it does not begin at all. We hear the Gospel proclaimed, the good news that God and man are joined in the person of Christ and the kingdom is near. Confronted with Christ, we have to begin to change our perception of everything. The catechumenate is properly a time of repentance in which actions and thoughts, desires and words are brought into agreement with God's will and the truth of things. Baptism is the culmination of man's obedience to Christ's command to repent, the completion of the process of changing his *nous* so that it may be illumined in the Mystery of Baptism. No longer do we try to live on our own without God, but we have been joined to Christ's body the Church and made members of His household.

Yet the Church in her daily services also asks God that we may "end our lives in repentance." Though the grace of salvation comes to us in Holy Baptism and Chrismation, we can still sin against it, we can quench and grieve the Holy Spirit given to us, we can still turn our backs on God. Thus we cultivate repentance throughout our lives. As we notice thoughts, words, desires, and actions in our lives that are contrary to God's will for us, we repent, turning away from them and seeking to be conformed to Christ and His example. We see that as Christians we cannot be dominated by anger, lust, pride, gluttony, hatred, and the like, and we change our minds about tolerating these things in our lives. We seek to end our lives in repentance, knowing that it is the condition God finds our soul in at the end of our lives that will determine our eternal destiny. If Christ finds us with hard, sinful hearts at the end after a lifetime of opportunity to put on Christ, the final judgment

will not go well for us. As we have no guarantee that we shall be able to effect a last-minute, sincere deathbed repentance, or even have the opportunity for one, we "live as though dying daily", living in repentance ready to meet our Lord at any time. May none of us fall short in fulfilling this first command of Christ! *Fr. Justin Frederick*

From St. Theophan the Recluse

Prayer is the test of everything; prayer is also the source of everything; prayer is the driving force of everything; prayer is also the director of everything. If prayer is right, everything is right. For prayer will not allow anything to go wrong.

Every prayer must come from the heart, and any other prayer is no prayer at all. Prayerbook prayers, your own prayers, and very short prayers, all must issue forth from the heart to God, seen before you. And still more must this be so with the Jesus Prayer.

The principal thing is to stand with the mind in the heart before God, and to go on standing before Him unceasingly day and night, until the end of life.

You must never regard any spiritual work as firmly established, and this is especially true of prayer; but always pray as if beginning for the first time.

Our Task in the Parish

The parish is the local manifestation of the Church, Christ's body. It is a candle set on a candlestick to give light to those in darkness. It is salt working to preserve the locality against the decay wrought by sin. In a world gone mad, it is a place of sanity. In a world sick with sin, it is a place of healing. In a world of excess, it is a place of restraint and self-control. In a world of cursing, it is a place of blessing. In a world of doubt, it is a haven of faith. In a world of distraction, it is a place of true focus. In a world of forgetfulness, it is a place of remembrance. In a world of rebellion, it is a place of obedience. In a world of proud self-assertion, it is a place of humility. In a world of idol worship, it is a place of true worship. In a world of petitions and demands to the State, it is a place of prayer to the true God and King. In a world of alienation, it is a place of reconciliation. In an ungrateful work, it is an island of gratitude and thanksgiving. In a world of anger, it is a place of forgiveness. In a world of hatred, it is a place of love.

In the parish, the life of Christ is made manifest to the world for the salvation of the world. The parish is the local ascetical center of Christian life. It is a sort of "monastery in the world", a "repenting-liturgical family" striving together to acquire the fullness of Christ.

Upcoming Events 2019

9 December, 7:00 p.m.: Holy Unction
25 December: Nativity of our Lord
28 December: Pilgrimage to Nativity Monastery
31 December – 1 January: All-Night Vigil for St. Basil
4 January, 10:00 a.m.: Baptisms

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!