

The Confessor's Tongue for December 15, A. D. 2019

26th Sunday after Pentecost; Holy Forefathers

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 Holy Forefathers

The Sunday of the Holy Forefathers occurs between the 11th and the 17th of December. This Sunday commemorates all the spiritual ancestors of the people of God, the holy patriarchs living up to the law given on Sinai and under the law, – from Adam to Joseph the Betrothed; together with them are commemorated “those who preached Christ”, the holy prophets – from Samuel to Zechariah and to John the Baptist, and all the Old Testament righteous men, who were righteous in the faith in the coming of the Messiah. In sum, the Church on this Sunday commemorates all the saints of the Old Testament, some of whom have their own feast days and other who do not. This Sunday is distinguished from the next, which is the Sunday before Nativity and the Sunday of the Holy Fathers when Christ's physical ancestors from whom he is descended in the flesh are remembered. Thus, all those celebrated next Sunday are also celebrated this Sunday, but not the other way around.

Singing in the service for this day “the god-pleasing life” of the Old Testament righteous men, the Holy Church thus offers a look at the whole universe of great virtues: for example, the God-loving gentleness and meekness of the first martyr in the world, Abel; the holy zeal for the glorification of the name of God, Enos; the high divine thinking and the fear of God, Enoch; the firmness in faith and piety, Noah among the general depravity of his contemporary world; the wonderful faith and obedience to the word of God, Abraham; filial obedience, Isaac up to the preparation to be offered as a burnt offering according to the command of God; the kind domestic bravery, Sarah; the penetrating maternal love, Rebecca; the mild humility, Jacob who earned the rage of Laban and Esau; the holy chastity, Joseph who was more than ready to suffer and die, rather than to sin before God; the unhampered invincible patience in the sufferings and misfortunes, Job; the meek, wise leadership, Moses and Samuel; the inspiring courage through faith, Joshua son of Nun, Barak, and Gideon; the high self-sacrificing love for their country and people, Judith and Esther; the plaintive and contrite repentance, David and Manasseh; the ascetic and divinely intellectual life, Elijah and Elisha; the zeal for the glory of God of the holy prophets; the unhampered invincible dedication to the law of God and usual patriotism of the three youths in Babylon, and the rest of the good deeds of all the other Old Testament men we celebrate, «of whom the world was not worthy» (Hebrews 11:38). According to the teaching of St. Gregory the Theologian, each of these virtues stand by themselves «as a special way to salvation, and undoubtedly results in any one of the everlasting and blessed abodes; for

as the generations of life are various, so are the abodes of God are many (John 14:2), and in them are divided and are assigned to everyone according to his worthiness. Therefore let one fulfill his virtue, one to another, the other of the many, and whoever, if it is possible, and in everything; only let everyone go without stopping, let everyone strive forward and follow steadily in the steps of the good leaders, who directly leads a path for him, and makes his way through the narrow gate (Matthew 7:14) to lead to the heights of the blessed heaven».

On the Mystery of Holy Unction

St. Nicholas of Zicha (+1956)

‘...and anointed with oil many that were sick, and healed them.’ Mark 6:13

The holy Apostles did this, and we are commanded to do likewise. The Apostle James wrote for us: “Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the Church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him” (5:14-15). One must call no-one but the priests, the elders of the Church, and they must anoint him in no one's name (so that it be not diabolical) but that of the Lord. No one but the Lord will raise him, neither can anyone but the Lord forgive him his sins. By why with oil, and not by some other means? Because it is so commanded; and it is for us simply to show our obedience and faith. Why is it commanded that we be baptized with water, chrismated with myrrh, and communicated with bread and wine? These things are God's choice and God's business, and it is for us to be obedient and to believe. The elements used in the various Mysteries differ, but the grace is one even as the Lord is one, and everything is from the Lord.

Why does the Lord use material means to pour His grace upon us? The Lord does not need these material things, but rather we, as long as we are material, need them. In condescension to our weakness, the Lord makes use of matter. To the immaterial angels, He gives grace by immaterial means.

Of itself, the oil is powerless, as is every material things on its own, but God's grace is all-powerful. God gives His grace through the oil, and it heals the sick, raises the weak, and restores the insane to sanity.

Oh my brethren, how ineffable is God's goodness! What has the Lord not done for us? What more could we desire? He has foreseen all our needs and provided medicine for them in advance. He only seeks from us that we believe in Him and fulfill His commandments. Is it not blind of us, and shameful, that we often carry out the directions of doctors,

mortal men like ourselves, more carefully and conscientiously that we do those of God immortal?

O all-gracious Lord, shatter the stone of our hearts with the power of Thy grace; that we may, before our last hour, show Thee the gratitude we owe Thee, O our gracious and most wise God. To Thee be glory and praise forever. Amen.

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 demonstrated 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 in 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 and spreading harm to many. As disciples of Jesus Christ, Orthodox Christians, we are to put out these fires and heal these wounds quickly. *Fr. Justin Frederick*

St. Justin of Chelije, from a Nativity Sermon

As for you: live in Him, live in the God-Man, and you will be healed of all deaths, sins, passions, and of every work of the devil. Let your life become Divine-life. In that, O man, as soon as you become a member of the Church, a member of the Divine-human Body of Christ, rests all of the Mystery of Heaven on earth: And how does one live in the Church of Christ? Live by the Holy Mysteries and the Holy Virtues. This is why the Feast of the Nativity is preceded by a Fast. Fasting is the first among the virtues, and is always accompanied by prayer. Those two fundamental virtues lead man to God-Man, and through Divine Wisdom teach him how to live by Him and in Him. And what is to be done with the body given you by God? – Purify it, free it from all uncleanness, from all passion, from all evil, from every demon. What does that mean? It means to purify it of every sin, for the devil hides in any sin, in every sin the devil works without regard to your free will. In great sins, it is prince of demons, in little sins, a little demon. You and I and everyone else, have been given all of the resources with which to defeat all of those demons, all of the passions, all of the sins, all of the deaths in us and in the world around us. First and foremost among those resources are prayer and fasting. From the truthful lips of the Lord Jesus Christ, who always speaks the real Truth, [we hear] the life-giving truth: "This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting." (Matthew 17: 21),- "this kind" of all manner of sins, all manner of passions, all manner of demons.

Lying before you and me, before all of us, brothers and sisters, is the Nativity: God is born as a person "so that we might receive life through Him" and so that through God we might perfect both soul and body. That is something easiest to achieve through prayer and fasting, which cleanse and purify both body and soul, so that the sweetest Divine Infant, our Lord Jesus, might joyously come to dwell in them, and that by God our human essence, in all its infinite variety might be fulfilled and perfected. For that was why your body and your soul, o man, were created, so that they might be fulfilled through God and [you] might live in God in God's kingdom above. Our God-given teachers in this matter are humble prayer and fasting with humility. They are sacred and fundamental virtues [found in the] Gospels. May they soar with us, may they anticipate and proclaim to us and to all people throughout Creation the all-salvific and all-joyous Good News: Christ is born!

Upcoming Events 2019

16 December, 7:00 p.m.: Holy Unction
24 December, 10:00 a.m. Baptisms
24 December, 6:00 p.m. Nativity Vigil
25 December: Nativity of our Lord, Divine Liturgy 8:00 a.m.
28 December: Pilgrimage to Nativity Monastery
31 December – 1 January: All-Night Vigil for St. Basil,
10:00 p.m. to 4:00 a.m.

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!