

The Confessor's Tongue for February 9, A. D. 2020

34th Sunday after Pentecost; Publican & Pharisee; Leavetaking of Meeting

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.

Notice: Triodion Opens Today

Today we open the Triodion, the book of hymns for Great Lent, as we remember the Publican and the Pharisee and begin to prepare for the Great Fast. The hymns contained in this work express the whole meaning, purpose, goal, and means of achieving it for our fasting. We do well to make time to hear it in the Lenten services.

Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee

This first Sunday of the pre-lenten period, Jesus tells a parable of two different men who went to the temple to pray with two different outcomes. One was a virtuous Pharisee, the sect of Jew given to the strictest observance of the Law. The other was a sinful Publican, a Jew not known for observance of the Law and despised by his fellows for serving the occupying Romans by collecting taxes and oppressing the Jews. Both went to the right place for the right reason. But the quality of their prayer was strikingly different

The Pharisee contentedly recounted his virtues and thanked God that he was not like other sinful men including the Publican standing nearby. The Publican, unable to lift his eyes to heaven for shame, could pray only "God, be merciful to me a sinner." Jesus relates that it was the Publican who went home justified in God's eyes, not the Pharisee.

The parable teaches important lessons to help us in the fast, and the hymnology appointed for the day develops these. We learn that we can be ever so virtuous, but pride will undo it all and render it useless to us before God. We learn that we must approach God with the humility of the Publican, for "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Yet the contrast between the two is not black and white. Both men had a measure of virtue, and both had failings. The first troparion from Ode 5 of the Matins canon exhorts us:

Let us make haste to follow the Pharisee in his virtues and to emulate the Publican in his humility, and let us hate what is wrong in each of them: foolish pride and the defilement of transgressions.

Each of us should identify himself with each of these men, for each is to be found in each of us.

Open to Me

From the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee through the fifth Sunday of the Great Fast at the Saturday night Vigil, after the Matins Gospel reading, we sing this hymn of repentance, "Open to me, the doors of repentance." Accompanying us during the Fast, this hymn expresses what should be the cry of our souls to God during Great Lent.

It is hard to imagine going through Great Lent without hearing this hymn regularly, for it helps set

the tone for the Fast, but too many of us do not hear it. To hear this hymn sung, be at the Saturday evening Vigil by 6:00 p.m.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. Open to me the doors of repentance of Life-Giver, for my spirit riseth early to pray towards Thy holy temple, bearing the temple of my body all defiled; but, in Thy compassion, purify me by the lovingkindness of Thy mercy.

Now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen. Lead me on the paths of salvation, O Mother of God, for I have profaned my soul with shameful sins and have wasted my life in laziness; but, by thine intercessions, deliver me from all impurity.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to Thy great mercy, and according to the multitude of Thy compassions blot out my transgressions. When I think of the many evil things I have done, wretch that I am, I tremble at the fearful day of judgment. But, trusting in Thy loving-kindness, like David I cry to Thee: Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, O God, according to Thy great mercy.

Preparation for Lent

The Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee begins the "Week of Proclamation" in the Church. The liturgical book of services for the Fast, the *Triodion*, is opened, and we begin to ready ourselves for the ascetical contest of the Great Fast.

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 works of mercy. We should also consider how we can cut back on busy schedules and especially on elective parties, secular entertainments, and the like, so that we have 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 will be 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 key. 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 as well as a weekday Matins or Vespers now and again.

Holy Week (April 13-18) calls for a special focus. It goes without saying that we should set aside as much of Holy Week as possible to attend in the incomparably beautiful services before Pascha. We should treat this week as a time for retreat from the world and its cares to contemplate what Christ has done for us and be renewed in faith.

Besides the Scriptures (which we should always be reading), 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. He will also make a plan for reading the Scriptures during the Fast available.

Consider how and when you will pray: what prayers? what psalms? what time of day? with how many prostrations?

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 does maintain an in-house food bank, and traditionally we have supported a local charity during the Fast.

Consider your participation in the Sacraments. Holy Confession is a necessity for all during the Fast. Moreover, all of us should strive to prepare ourselves to partake regularly of Holy Communion.

It is time for us now to consider the specifics of how we shall keep the Fast. As they say, "If you fail to plan, you plan to fail." The Church gives us the next three weeks to plan and prepare.

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

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

The Commandments of Christ

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

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find, knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for everyone that asketh, receiveth; and he that seeketh, findeth; and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened. Matthew 7:7-9

Jesus commands us to ask, seek, and knock that we may receive, find, and have the door opened. The tense of these verbs suggests repeated, ongoing action, not a one-time work.

Sometimes, we do not have because we do not ask (James 4:2). Other times, we may ask but we do not receive because we only ask once or twice or give up and stop asking after a short time (Luke 18:1-8). Sometimes we do not gain what we seek because we do not pray fervently (James 5:16). In some cases, we do not get what we want because our motives are wrong (James 4:3)—to consume it upon our lusts—

and God would only give us the things that help us attain His kingdom. It may also be that the nature of our problem is such that we must join fasting to our prayer to gain our request (Matthew 17:21).

Despite these possibilities for failure in our requests, seekings, and knockings, Christ promises that we shall receive, find, and have it opened if we ask, seek, and knock—and keep at it, not giving up. If only we believed it! If only we would pray fervently and persistently for our families, our friends, our relatives, our leaders, our enemies, believing Christ's promise, walking in obedience to His command.

We need to understand that our Lord does not distribute His treasures to the sluggard. He does not reveal Himself to the casual inquirer. He will not open to the timid. He wants us, nay commands us, to ask (or we shan't receive), to seek (or we shan't find), to knock (or it won't be opened).

Do you face trouble in your marriage, problems with your children, difficulties from enemies? Pray fervently, keep asking of God, keep seeking His face and His solution to your problem. Show God that you care about the matter. "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." *Fr. Justin Frederick*

Dogmas of Faith & Moral Dogma

A Reflection by St. Nikolai of Zicha

If, at times, the dogmas of the Faith seem like hard food, you should first endeavor to fulfill the moral dogmas of Christianity: then the understanding of the dogmas of the Faith will be revealed to you. The inquisitive examination of higher things, without effort regarding the improvement of your life, does not bring any benefit. Once, the monks of Egypt were reflecting on Melchizedek, and not being able to come to a clear understanding of the mysterious personality of this ancient king and high priest, they invited Abba Copres to their assembly and asked him about Melchisedek. Upon hearing this, Copres struck himself three times on the mouth and said: "Woe to you Copres! You left that which God commanded you to do, and you inquire into that which God does not require of you." Hearing him, the monks were ashamed and dispersed. St. John Chrysostom writes: "If we adhere to the true dogmas and are not concerned about our behavior, we will not have any kind of benefit; and in the same way, if we concern ourselves about our behavior and neglect true dogmas, we will receive no benefit for our salvation. If we want to be delivered from Gehenna and to gain the Kingdom, we need to be adorned on both sides—with correctness of dogmas and honorable living."

Upcoming Events 2019

1 March: Forgiveness Vespers
2-7 March: Clean Week
25 March: Annunciation
13-18 April: Holy Week
19 April: Great and Holy Pascha, Picnic

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!