

The Confessor's Tongue for October 25, A. D. 2020

20th Sunday after Pentecost; Martyrs Marcion & Martyrius; St. Tabitha

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.

ὁ ὄν 'Ho On'--'He Who Is'

At the end of most services, the priest exclaims: "Wisdom...He Who Is is blessed, even Christ our God, always, now and ever, and unto ages of ages." This is Archbishop Dmitri's translation of ὁ ὄν εὐλογετός, Χριστός ὁ θεός ἡμῶν (*Ho On eulogetos, Christos ho Theos emon*). The 'standard' OCA translation has "Christ our God the existing One is blessed..." Apart from the ungainly inelegance of speaking of God as 'the existing one', the 'standard' OCA translation is theologically inferior, for it obscures an important connection to the Scriptures.

At the top of all icons of Christ, we find the Greek words in the halo: ὁ ὄν (*Ho On*). These words help identify the figure in the icon as Christ. "Ho" is the definite article *the*, while 'on' is the present masculine participle of the verb 'to be', which may be translated as 'the one being', 'the one who is' or 'He who is'. This hearkens back to the name God gave for himself to Moses at the Burning Bush: I am He Who Is—*ego eimi, ho On* ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὄν. With this phrase the Greek Septuagint renders the sacred but mysterious name of God YHWH that God revealed to Moses. Thus, the Church identifies our Savior Jesus Christ as the One who spoke to Moses from the burning bush. Thus, the Church at the end of services cries "Wisdom"—one of Christ's names—and then proclaims "He who Is" as our blessed Christ God forever.

The Commandments of Christ

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

Give to him that asketh thee: and from him that would borrow of thee, turn not thou away. Matthew 5:42

Almsgiving is one of the pillars of spiritual life in Christ, but it was established in the Old Testament. The Hebrews under the Law of Moses had obligations to the poor among them. For instance, they were not to reap the corners of their fields or pick up the stalks of grain that fell to the ground during harvesting so that food would be left in every field for the poor to come and glean. So too, they were not to charge each other interest on loans to those in need (a fee for the use of someone else's money traditionally is called 'usury'). All debts were wiped out every fiftieth year in the Year of Jubilee, and one was forbidden to refuse a requested loan on the grounds that the Jubilee was near.

Jesus expands the command on giving alms as He instructs his Jewish audience in the Sermon on the Mount. Later He will tell them *how* to give alms (secretly without public notice), but now He establishes the principle of giving them and to whom they should be given. Notice, He does not say "give to your fellow Jew who asks" or "give to the worthy man

in need". The command is not limited by race or any condition other than one: give to the one who asks.

Christ's command to give is activated by someone's request for help. If someone asks for help, the Christian is to give it. This mirrors the Christian's relationship with God: Christ says, "Ask, and it will be given to you." As the Father gives in response to His adopted children's requests, so the children are to give to those who ask them. Notice, too, that there is no qualifying how morally worthy the one asking is, the truthfulness of his claims, or any other such thing. Someone has asked us for help, we are to give, even if, as one elder put it, the beggar comes riding a fine horse.

Naturally, the command is mitigated by our ability to give. If we do not have it, we cannot give it. Jesus also does not say that we have to give exactly whatever someone asks for, e.g., someone says he has a need for a particular sum. If we give cash, we are not told we necessarily have to give the whole sum requested, but we are to give something if we have it. We may also give goods to meet a need rather than cash. What is requested is also relevant. When someone wants the basic necessities of life—food, drink, clothing, shelter—we are obligated to help if we can. Beyond this, the obligation lessens or dissipates. Things like utility bills, rent, transportation, telephone might well be seen as necessities in modern life. Other things, however desirable they may be, are not necessities, and the request for them does not place us under obligation. One is under no obligation to give to one asking for a big screen television, a new computer, or a leather basketball. When a man says he is hungry and you offer him food, but he spurns it, demanding cash, you are also not obligated. Some considerations for safety may limit giving. We probably should not stop our car to give to every beggar on the side of the road, as that could create a danger for other drivers. A woman alone should not feel obligated to stop to help a strange man on a lonely street. Nonetheless, each must seriously consider the person he encounters.

How does one give? St. Philaret the Merciful (Dec. 1) would reach into his bag and give whatever his hand drew out, whether the coin was gold, silver, or brass, trusting that God had guided his hand. This would be analogous to us reaching into our wallets and blindly pulling out a bill—and giving it, regardless of the denomination. St. John the Merciful, Archbishop of Alexandria, would give a set amount to anyone who asked. Both of these are possible models for us, depending on our faith and our discernment of God's will for us. We may also conceive of other approaches.

In the Orthodox wedding service, we pray that God will bless the new couple with an abundance of wheat, wine, and oil so that they will always have

something to give to the poor and never have to turn anyone away empty-handed. Part of our keeping this commandment lies in living in such a way that we always have something we could give. This means bucking the flow of American consumerism and not living on 110% of our income as so many do—or even only on the full 100%. In contrast, Ss. Joachim and Anna gave a third of their income to the temple, third to the poor in alms, and lived on the remaining third. The typical American now gives about 2.9% of his income in charitable giving, (a bit more than one fourth of a tithe, far less than was expected of the Jews under the Old Covenant). It is disobedience to Christ to live beyond our means, to be bound with consumer debt, and consistently to have nothing left over to give to those in need because we have spent it all on ourselves, whether we are consuming it on pleasures and desires or responsibly saving it for a rainy day.

Some almsgiving takes the form of an immediate gift. Other almsgiving may take the form of a loan. When we give a loan, we do not set our hearts on having it repaid. If it comes back, well and good, but if it does not come back, it is credited to us as alms. So too, when we suffer loss by theft, if we do not complain but give thanks to God, that loss is credited as alms. Some people need help in time of shortage

Christians understand that all that they have is God's; they are stewards, not owners, who will give an account for their use of what God entrusted to them. How does God want us to use what He has entrusted to us? Christ reveals part of His will for us in this matter by the command: "Give to him who asks you, and don't turn away from those who wish to borrow from you."

The Curse of Withholding Alms

It was told us at the monastery of St. Theodosius the Great in Palestine that it used to be the custom for the poor and orphans of the region to come here on Holy Thursday to receive half a peck of grain or five loaves of blessed bread, five small coins, a pint of wine, and half a pint of honey. For three years prior to the event which we are about to relate, grain had been scarce and, in this area, it was selling at one piece of gold for two pecks. When the Great Fast came round, some of the brethren said to the hegumen: "Abba, do not make provision for the customary dole to the poor this year, sir, lest the monastery not have enough for the brethren—for grain is not to be found." The abba began to say to the brethren: "Children, let us not discontinue the charity of our father Theodosius [the founder]. Behold, it is his commandment, and it would be held against us if we disobeyed it. It is he himself who will look after us."

But the brethren continued to argue with the abba, saying: "We cannot give the accustomed charity, for we do not have anything to give." Then the hegumen was deeply grieved: "Go then and do what you will." The customary charity therefore was

not distributed that Holy Thursday. But on Holy Friday morning, the brother in charge of the granary opened up and found that what grain they did possess had germinated. So they ended up throwing it all into the sea.

Then the abba began to say to the brethren: "He who sets aside the commandments of his father suffers these afflictions. You are now reaping the fruits of disobedience. We were going to part with five hundred pecks of grain and, in doing so, to serve our father Theodosius by our obedience; also to bring consolation to our brethren the poor. Now about five thousand pecks [1250 bushels] of grain has gone to ruin. What good has it done us, brethren? We have twice been guilty of wrong-doing: once in that we transgressed the precept of our father; and again in that we did not put our trust in God but in our granary. So let us learn from this, my brethren, that God watches over all humanity; and that Saint Theodosius invisibly cares for us, his children."

On Reading Services at Home

Since restrictions were placed on attendance at our services in response to the virus, we have streamed services: Sunday Divine Liturgy, Saturday evening Vigil, and some other services. This was helpful for a time, but we have observed that viewings have dropped, and we have heard that many people have left off watching the Liturgy to read the Typica instead.

Your priest commends this. The Divine Liturgy is not something to watch. It is something to participate in, which is possible only by being present. It is true that one may conduct oneself at home in front of the screen as if one were in church, but this is quite difficult. In most cases, you are better off reading the Hours and Typica in place of watching Divine Liturgy or reading Vespers and/or Matins in place of watching Vigil. By reading, you participate actively rather than watching passively.

Not only is it better for you spiritually to read the services, it is also an important skill to have. The time may come when you do not have a handy parish, or your parish lacks a priest, or in time of persecution your priest is imprisoned and you cannot attend church. In such times, the Church lives on in your heart and in practice in your home as you read the services and lift the Church's prayer to the Lord as your strength permits.

Given the loosening of restrictions, the drop in viewing, and the superiority of reading at home, we shall likely cut back on or drop altogether the streaming of services, encouraging you either to attend them in person or read them at home.

Upcoming Events 2020

25 October: 4:00 p.m. Young Adult Gathering
30 October: All Saints Party, 5:30 p.m. at church
8 November: Parish Thanksgiving meal

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!