

The Confessor's Tongue for February 21, A. D. 2021

37th Sunday after Pentecost; Publican & Pharisee,

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.

Sunday of the Publican & the Pharisee

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. 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.

Sleep is an icon of death, because when we sleep we are unaware of where we are for so many hours. When we wake up, we become living people with a conscience once more. After we thank God with all our heart for allowing us to see the light of day again, we should beseech Him to forgive us our sins.

Elder Ephraim of Arizona

On Almsgiving

St. Isaac the Syrian, Homily 4

If you have something above your daily needs, give it to the poor, and then go with boldness to offer your prayers, that is, to converse with God as a son with his Father. Nothing can bring the heart so near to God as almsgiving, and nothing brings such serenity to the mind as voluntary poverty. It is better for you to be called an ignoramus by the many because of the generosity of your hands and your measureless liberality because of your fear of God, than to be called wise and sound of mind by reason of your niggardliness. If someone on horseback should stretch out his hand and ask alms of your, do not refuse him, for at that moment he is certainly in need, just as one of the destitute. When you give, give generously, with a joyous countenance, and give more than you are asked for, since it is said: 'Send forth thy morsel of bread toward the face of the poor man, and soon you will find your recompense.' Do not separate the rich from the poor, nor try to discriminate the worthy from the unworthy, but let all men be equal in your eyes for a good deed. In this way you can draw even the unworthy toward the good, since the soul is easily led to the fear of God by means of bodily things. The Lord ate at table with publicans and harlots and did not alienate the unworthy, that He might in this way bring all to the fear of God, and that through bodily things they would approach the spiritual. For this reason, and especially because they are your brethren, of your very nature, and have erred from the truth unwittingly, deem every man equally worthy of benefaction and honor, be he a Jew, and unbeliever, or a murderer.

Homily: On How the Love of God is Shed into Men's Hearts

St. Nicholas of Zicha (+1956)

"Because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given unto us." Romans 5:5

Love is joy, and anoints the human heart with joy. Love is strength, and anoints the human heart with strength. Love is peace, and anoints the heart with peace. And from joy, strength, and peace is born fortitude, and love anoints the human heart with fortitude.

The love of God, like a fragrant oil, is shed upon our hearts in no other way than by the Holy Spirit, the all-good and all-powerful Spirit. Though we are utterly undeserving of it, the Spirit of God pours the divine Law of God into our hearts in the Mystery of Chrismation. But we sometimes neglect this love and estrange ourselves from God by sin, and fall into spiritual weakness. And the Holy Spirit, unable to dwell in an unclean vessel, departs from our hearts. When the Holy Spirit departs from us, joy and strength, peace and fortitude depart at once with Him, and we become miserable, enfeebled, disturbed, and afraid. But the all-good Spirit of God only puts Himself at a distance from us; He does not abandon us completely. He does not abandon us, but rather offers us, as to sick men, medicines through the Mysteries of Repentance and Holy Communion. And when we have cleansed ourselves anew by repentance and Communion, then God the Holy Spirit makes His abode in us again and pours the love of God into our hearts. We fall down and get up; we fall down again and get up again. When we fall, the Spirit of God stands beside us and lifts us up, if we desire to be so lifted. And when we are on our feet, the Spirit of God stands in us until, through our sinfulness and stupidity, we fall again. And so we are by turns a fruitful meadow and a wasteland, sons of repentance and of perdition, of fullness and emptiness, of light and darkness.

O all-good Holy Spirit, our God, do not depart from us either when we need Thee or when we do not feel the need of Thee. Abide with us until our death, and save us for life eternal. To Thee be glory and praise forever. Amen.

Do not regard the feelings of a person who speaks to you about his neighbor disparagingly, but rather say to him: 'Stop, brother! I fall into graver sins every day, so how can I criticize him?' In this way you will achieve two things: you will heal yourself and your neighbor with one plaster. This is one of the shortest ways to forgiveness of sins; I mean, not to judge. 'Judge not, and ye shall not be judged.'

St. John of the Ladder, Step 10.7

On the Basis for Christian Unity

Fr. George Florovsky

In modern times, it has been widely believed and often suggested that it was precisely theology that was primarily responsible for the tensions and divisions in the Church and in the wider world of religion. And possibly the same prejudice still prevails in many quarters in our day too. It has often been contended that "tensions" and divisions were initiated exactly at the moment when the Church, or rather, her leaders and teachers, decided or attempted to stabilize and formulate beliefs. If only people could escape once again into the realm of personal religion (it was contended), all dissensions would have been overcome.

A freedom of "personal religion" is in fact the main divisive and disrupting factor of our spiritual life. Unity and "agreement" can be achieved only on the level of doctrine.

Religion and doctrine (i.e. precisely, theology) are usually still contrasted in our day. Men in pews sometimes pretend that they would have been united across all historical borders had they not been prevented by men in pulpits who impose upon them divisive "doctrines." An average believer is inclined to apply the famous dictum of Goethe to the word of religion also. "All theories, i.e. doctrines, are gray and dull, but the tree of life is ever green."

Yet precisely at this point the major doubt arises. Berdiaev has recently suggested that, as a matter of fact, it is exactly our actual life that is gray and dull and hopeless, and often dirty, and only in "theory," in *theoria*, i.e. in contemplation, can we recover the dimension of truth.

It is a very helpful suggestion indeed. And, first of all, in the world of "personal religion" (of an "immediate" religious experience) we meet exactly a hopeless "variety of religious experience" which evades any integration and provides no unity at all. A freedom of "personal religion" is in fact the main divisive and disrupting factor of our spiritual life. Unity and "agreement" can be achieved only on the level of doctrine.

Historically speaking, in the Christian Church, theology was usually a remedy and a safeguard against an utter confusion of free experience, an only means to overcome the vagueness of an immediate experience. *From volume 13 of Collected Works, "Theological Tensions Among Christians", pp. 9-10.*

Upcoming Events 2021

7 March: Meatfare Sunday
14 March: Forgiveness Sunday, Cheesefare
15-20 March: Clean Week
26-30 April: Great & Holy Week
2 May: Holy Pascha

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!