

The Confessor's Tongue for February 12, A. D. 2023

35th Sunday After Pentecost; Prodigal Son, St. Meletius, St. Alexis

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.

Preparation for Lent

Today, the Sunday of the Prodigal Son is the second of four pre-lenten Sundays, which calls us to ready ourselves for the contest of the 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 to make 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 is 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 (February 27); 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 (February 28-March 4) to get the Fast started in the right spirit. Everyone is urged to attend Saturday evening Vigils (or at least the Matins portion, 6:00-7:15 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. It goes without saying that we should set aside as much of Holy Week (April 9-15) as possible to attend in the incomparably beautiful services before Pascha.

Besides the Scriptures (which we should be reading as a matter of course), 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.

Consider how and when you will pray: what prayers? what psalms? what time of day? with how many prostrations? We should aim to increase both the quality and quantity of our prayer.

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. This means that everyone can give alms. How may we approximate this? How shall we give, and where? We should aim to increase our almsgiving during the Fast. It goes without saying that we should be faithfully offering the first part of our income (a tithe or tenth) in gratitude to God as part of our worship. If we have been disobedient out of fear, lack of faith, willfulness, or greed, the Fast is the time for us to repent and change our ways.

It is time for us now to begin considering the specifics of how we shall keep the Fast, so that when it comes, we shall be ready. The Church gives us the next two weeks to plan and prepare.

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

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

The Commandments of Christ

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

And he put forth a parable to those which were bidden, when he marked how they chose out the chief rooms; saying unto them,

When thou art bidden of any man to a wedding, sit not down in the highest room; lest a more honourable man than thou be bidden of him; And he that bade thee and him come and say to thee, Give this man place; and thou begin with shame to take the lowest room. But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee. For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted. Luke 14:7-

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Having observed people seeking the best places for themselves, Christ gives a command mixed with a parable: when you are invited to a wedding, do not take the best or most honorable place for yourself, but rather the worse or least honorable place.

This command has at least three obvious benefits.

First, it removes the cause of many petty quarrels and squabbles. We have all seen children fight over a seat that each thinks is best and each wants. Such squabbles are unseemly and foolish, but for the child, it can appear that the issue is one of life and death. Adults in their rivalry with others do the same thing, usually in a more sophisticated way. Jesus would free his disciples from falling into such disputes.

Second, the command teaches us to value honor bestowed by others over honor seized for oneself. The one who appropriates the best place for himself only to be told by the host to vacate it for someone else is humiliated in the eyes of all, while the one who humbly assumes the worst place gains great honor in the sight of all when the host calls him to occupy a better place. Man in this life may seek glory and fame on his own terms, but the humble man who inhabits a mean place only to be honored by God gains true honor. As the Proverb says, "Let another man praise thee, and not thine own mouth; a stranger, and not thine own lips" (27:2). Only the praise and honor that comes from God will endure, and Christ here tells us how we may acquire it.

Third, the command instructs us in how we may practically cultivate humility. As humility is the essential condition for receiving God's grace and making spiritual progress, this command is an invaluable help to us. We cultivate humility by putting others before us, not insisting on being first in line, or having the best piece of food, or sitting in the best place. We may further cultivate humility by not being quick to speak or not insisting on having the first and last word. We must always keep in mind that "God is resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble. . . . Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up" (James 4, 6, 10).

This command is quite simple and most useful. May we put it into regular practice.

Sunday of the Prodigal Son

On this Sunday Gospel parable read in the Church calls to repentance those bound by sinful habits, those who cannot and do not want to be freed from sin. It presents

the disastrous condition of man who has withdrawn himself from God. It provides consolation and encouragement of those who, being depressed by the consciousness of the weight of their sins, fall into hopelessness and despair. It presents an image of repentance of the depraved son and the inexhaustible mercy of the Heavenly Father, Who accepts all sinners who repent. The deeply edifying Gospel Parable of the Prodigal Son with special clarity shows to what an awful degree the flesh prevails over the spirit, and to what sensuality the soul can reach contrary to its highest aspirations, and to what an unfathomable abyss of sin a man may be thrown into when he submits to self-will, takes a great interest in carnal desires, overthrows in himself the good yoke of the law of God, and submits to an unrestrained will in sensual pleasures. The true joy of life consists only in the beneficial union with God. The distance from this union serves as the source of all possible troubles and humiliations.

These troubles, however, are not continual for that sinner, who has not yet completely deadened his conscience, who has not reached complete despair in the persistence and hardness in his sins, and finally has not fallen under the authority of the devil. The love of the Heavenly Father does not leave him. Even when he wanders on the path of vice, thinks not about returning under his father's roof, slumbers in the embrace of vanity and of earthly sweetness, not noticing the abysses under him which his passions attract—even then, the grace of God does not cease to call upon him: that voice of love and mercy, that by fear of foreboding and threats, through the mouths of the holy prophets and apostles, touching and softening the heart by its many diverse benefactions, that by striking with tribulations and calamities, that awaking his conscience by especially significant events and meetings, that shaking all his being by such occurrences in life which involuntarily awakens his conscience, that sobers his mind, that strikes his heart with the fear of God, fear of judgment and of torture. The Lord Jesus Christ, according to his own promise, stands before the doors of his heart and knocks, that he opens the door to Him and receives Him into the room of his soul. And here the sinner wakes up from his spiritual slumber and from there comes to the idea that his unique rest is in God.

To strengthen us all in this saving idea in order to wake all of us from the spiritual drowsiness in which all of us are more or less immersed during the usual course of our life, in our habitual pleasures and entertainments, in our many anxious cares of everyday life, in our thoughtlessly breaking the commandments of God and carelessly continuing in our sinful ways, not suspecting that this path can result in our death, the Holy Church also changes the chants for this day into one continuous repentant prayer of our souls crying out to the Lord.... From: *S. V. Bulgakov, Handbook for Church Servers*. Translated by Archpriest Eugene D. Tarris © 2002

Book Review: *Darwin Comes to Africa*

Olufemi Oluniyi, *Darwin Comes to Africa: Social Darwinism + British Imperialism in Northern Nigeria*, Discovery Institute Press, Seattle, 2023.

Hot off the Discovery Institute Press, this short work by Nigerian professor Olufemi Oluniyi explores the effects Darwinism applied to human social life had on British imperial policy in northern Nigeria in the 19th and 20th centuries, the consequences of which linger to this day.

The premise of Darwinism holds that living organisms compete for existence, and those that are more

advantageously adapted to their environment are more likely to survive. This he called "natural selection". Darwin's theory of the origin of species in primitive forms that developed into their modern forms through a long process of natural selection was quickly applied to humans, both by Darwin in his *Descent of Man* and by many others to assert the superiority of some races over others.

In northern Nigeria, the ideas of Social Darwinism and race were applied to favor the lighter-skinned Muslim Fulani people to serve under the British as the immediate governors of the mass of people. Christian missionaries were discouraged there so as not to upset the lighter-skinned Muslims who were judged more capable and advanced compared to the others. Education of Africans was limited to male Fulani, largely the children of ruling emirs. In southern Nigeria, Christian missionaries were welcomed, and their widespread educational efforts were supported by colonial authorities. There, European Christians not blinded by Social Darwinism perceived the essential and equal humanity of the Nigerians.

Frederick Lugard who governed the northern region and later the whole colony, himself an agnostic, viewed Christianity as too difficult for Africans in their current stage of evolution to embrace, but thought Islam was sufficiently simple for them. Thus, he favored Islam and actively hindered the spread of Christian missions in the north.

Social Darwinism undermines all objective moral standards. By declaring that man is but an animal evolved by chance in a struggle to survive, Social Darwinism effectively destroys any notion of morality binding man to hinder him in that struggle to live. Man thus lives by the law of the jungle where might makes right.

Oluniyi rejects Social Darwinism as evil and Darwinism itself as unscientific. He presents Christianity as the faith that teaches the equal humanity of all humans, and shows how Christianity worked in southern Nigeria to overcome prejudice. He documents modern science's rejection of race as a meaningful scientific category and affirms that there is just one human race and no basis for asserting the innate superiority of one people over another.

Oluniyi book offers historical insight helpful to understanding the effect that evil or mistaken ideas have on human action. Ideas have consequences, and Oluniyi has given us a useful case study of that proposition. *Fr. JBAF*

P.S. We have a large collection of books from Discovery Institute which effectively reveal the failure of Darwinism to account for the world that is. You are encouraged to seek them out and read them.

Upcoming Events 2023

- 25 February: Parish Work Day, 9:00 a.m.
- 26 February: Forgiveness Sunday
- 27 February Beginning of Clean Week
- 4 March: Retreat at Nativity Monastery with Fr. Stephen Freeman: The Humility of Christ
- 9-15 April Holy Week

GLORY BE TO GOD FOR ALL THINGS!