

The Confessor's Tongue for February 19, A. D. 2023

36th Sunday After Pentecost; Last Judgment, St. Archippus

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 Last Judgment

On this Sunday one week before the Great Fast begins, the Holy Church calls us to contemplate the Second Coming of Christ, the Resurrection of the Dead, and the standing of all before the judgment seat of Christ. The words and images are sobering, even frightening, as we realize that we must stand there in the penetrating glory of Christ to be revealed for what we have chosen to become in the course of our lives. We shall be able to hide nothing, forget nothing, excuse nothing. Everything will be revealed, everything made manifest. The Judgment is set before us to motivate us in the fast diligently to cultivate repentance, to deal with our sins now, in this life, which is given to us for repentance, so that all our sins may be removed from us "as far as the East is from the West" and will not remain to appear on that day. But if we are negligent regarding our sins in this life, we shall answer for them there. With such a fearful certainty before us, how can we be careless now? Let us read and contemplate a few hymns for this Sunday that they may motivate us to a deeper repentance.

When Thou shalt come, O righteous Judge, to execute just judgement, / seated on Thy throne of glory, / a river of fire will draw all men amazed before Thy judgement-seat; / the powers of heaven will stand beside Thee, / and in fear mankind will be judged according to the deeds that each hath done. / Then spare us, Christ, in thy compassion, with faith we entreat Thee, // and count us worthy of Thy blessings with those that are saved. *Vespers, LIHC, tone 6*

Here (above) we affirm what we confess in the Creed, that Christ will come again in glory to judge the race of man.

Then there these texts which speak about what that coming in glory portends for man:

When **Thou** comest, O God, upon the earth with glory, / the whole world will tremble. / The river of fire will bring men before Thy judgment seat, / the books will be opened and the secrets disclosed. / Then deliver me from the unquenchable fire, // and count me worthy to stand on Thy right hand, O most righteous Judge. *Kontakion, Tone 1*

O Lord, supreme in love, as I think upon Thy fearful judgment seat and the day of judgment, I tremble and am full of fear, for I am accused by my own conscience. When Thou sittest on Thy throne and bringest all to trial, none will be able then to deny his sins, for the truth will accuse him and terror will constrain him. The flames of Gehenna will roar and the sinners will gnash their teeth. Therefore, have mercy upon me before the end, and spare me, Judge most righteous. *Ikos*

The hymns speak of the "books being opened", but the Church understands those books to be the human conscience opened in the full light of Christ's glory, as the *ikos* for Matins expresses.

The "Glory" verse for the Aposticha at Vespers instructs us in how we should respond now to the inevitable and inescapable coming judgment:

Alas black soul! How long wilt thou continue in evil? / How long wilt thou lie in idleness? / Why dost thou not think of the fearful hour of death? / Why dost thou not tremble at the dread judgment seat of the Savior? / What defence then wilt thou make or what wilt thou answer? / Thy works will be there to accuse thee; / thine actions will reproach thee and condemn thee. / O my soul, the time is near at hand; / make haste before it is too late, and cry aloud in faith: / I have sinned, O Lord, I have sinned against Thee: / but I know Thy love for man and Thy compassion. // O good Shepherd, in Thy great mercy, deprive me not of a place at Thy right hand. *Vespers Aposticha, Glory, tone 8.*

The thought of judgment terrifies us, as it should, and provides a beginning to spiritual life in the desire to avoid condemnation at the judgment. In the hymns, we face that terror head-on, as we must. But each hymn imparts hope to the sinner tempted to despair: "Therefore we beseech Thee, O compassionate and loving Lord: spare us who sing Thy praise, for Thou alone art rich in mercy"; "O Judge compassionate, in Thy mercy save me"; "O Lord of glory, take pity on us in Thy goodness, and count us worthy of a place with them that have loved Thee"; "O God who only art compassionate, turn me back and save me." May we seize that hope and act on it.

The Commandments of Christ

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

Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee. (John 5:14)

Such are the words our Lord addressed to the paralytic who long lay at the Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem awaiting the stirring of the water for healing. Ailing with his infirmity for thirty-eight years, he took up his bed and walked at Jesus' command. After the Pharisees reproved him for carrying his bed on the Sabbath as Jesus had commanded him, he was found by Jesus in the temple who gave the command to him: "sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee."

From these words, the Fathers perceive that the man's infirmity was related to his sin. This may readily be understood in the context of the covenant God made with Israel at Mt. Sinai. Under the Old Covenant, sickness was, at least in part, a curse brought on the people for breaking the covenant and was intended to get their attention and lead them to repentance and to turn away from their self-destructive ways. At the Exodus, God promised this to the Hebrews: "If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: for I am the Lord that healeth thee" (Exodus 15:26) If they will diligently hear and obey, then, they will be blessed with health, but in both Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, God warns them about the diseases that will come upon them if they break

the covenant. "I will bring on you seven times more plagues, according to your sins" (Lev 26:21); "The Lord will send on you poverty, hunger, and consumption..." (Deut 28:20), "the Lord will strike you with perplexity, fever, shivering, irritation, murder, blight, and mildew" (Deut 28:22). Gehazi, Elisha's servant, was stricken with leprosy for his greed and dishonesty, King Uzziah for his pride and presumption to offer incense in the temple. Sin has consequences, and often those are physical.

Sickness was never part of God's original intent for man. Sickness came with the corruption of sin. In this sense, sin is the source of all illness. God's intent is to heal mankind, both physically and spiritually. His promise to Israel at the Exodus shows this, as does Jesus's ministry of healing. In Revelation, John witnesses the tree of life which bears twelve types of fruit and the leaves of which are "for the healing of the nations" (22:2). God wants to make man fully well.

Even if sin is at the root of all illness, not every infirmity is the consequence of personal sin. Later in John's Gospel, the disciples ask about the man born blind who it was that sinned that he should be born so, "this man or his parents". Jesus tells them that the blindness was not due to sin of parent or child but that God's glory might be made manifest in him. Not every sickness comes as punishment and correction for personal sin.

But there are sins which bring trouble, chastisement, and consequences, all of which are designed to bring the sinner to repentance. The lame man's affliction was due to his sin. For this man, having long suffered for his sin before finding healing, it was most appropriate for Jesus to warn him: "sin no more". To sin again would have been to jeopardize what Christ had given him and invite a "worse thing" to come upon him. Indeed, the judgments of God against His people in the Old Covenant grow progressively worse if the people will not repent (Deut. 28, Lev. 26). To sin, to be corrected by sickness, to be forgiven, and to be healed should produce deep gratitude and a watchful enjoyment of one's restored state. To be careless about sin then is foolish ingratitude. If get yourself into a foolish bind once, someone will gladly help you get out, even if help involves expense and inconvenience. If you get into the same bind again due to carelessness, will that someone be so eager to help again?

Hence, Christ gives the command, "sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee." This command readily applies to us, who suffer many afflictions of soul and body (personally and nationally) due to our sins. By sinning no more in true repentance, the cause of much sickness and misfortune is removed from our lives.

Spiritual Reading for Lent

Spiritual reading, the reading of the Scriptures, lives of the Saints, patristic literature, and other Orthodox Christian literature that nourishes our faith and cleanses our minds, should be a normal part of our spiritual life. Just as we eat food each day to sustain our body, so we need spiritual food regularly to nourish our souls. This spiritual food includes not only spiritual reading but also Holy Communion.

Part of our ascetic effort during the Great Fast is to cut back on or cut out "spiritual junk food"—stuff we might consume that offers no nourishment to our souls or even does harm. What is spiritual junk food must be honestly discerned in the light of Christ by each one of us, but certainly it would include much of what the "entertainment industry" offers us: television, movies,

magazines, novels, video games, secular music, internet, radio (yes, even talk shows!), etc. We cut back on this so that our attention is not so scattered and dispersed on so many things, so that we can focus on Christ with less distraction, and so we can grow in our relationship with Him, which will not grow unless we devote time to it, much like any other earthly relationship. We cut out what is harmful, we cut back on what is not nourishing and profitable, and we feed our souls on what will give them true nourishment.

If we are to have any success in this upcoming Fast, we must give this matter some thought. What will I cut out? What will I cut back on? How much? And what will I put in its place to nourish my soul?

The Scriptures should come first. They contain words inspired by the Holy Spirit for the nourishment and illumination of our souls. During Lent, the Church reads through Proverbs and Genesis (and the first part of Exodus and a little from Job). A chapter a day of each will get us through them in the course of the Fast. Genesis tells us where we come from, what God intended for us, how man messed things up, and what God did to begin to restore man. Proverbs shows us what virtue and wisdom look like so that we have a standard to which we can compare our lives and strive for virtue.

In addition to these Old Testament books, pick a Gospel or two and read through them: at a chapter a day, you can read Mark and Luke in 40 days. Pick a short epistle: James, I John, Philipians, Colossians, and read through it several times during the Fast. Really get to know it. Let its words sink into your soul. For those who are more ambitious, we have a reading plan that will take you through the whole New Testament in the forty days of the Fast.

Whenever we read Scripture, we must pray first, making the sign of the Cross and asking God to illumine and nourish us through the reading of His Word. The Scriptures will never be opened to us through reason and intellect alone; we must put the teaching into practice.

Besides Scripture, take an Orthodox book out of the library, purchase a book from the bookstore, take a book off your shelf you've always meant to read but haven't—whatever you do, pick a book and read it.

Go to oca.org and find the daily lives of the saints, and read those short lives for each day of the fast. Read the life of Sts. Seraphim of Sarov, Nektarios of Aegina, Silouan of Athos, Sergius of Radonezh, or any of the Optina Elders. Nourish your mind and soul on their good example. It will be just the opposite of the lives you find displayed before you in the grocery store checkout line.

You feed your body daily, even though you know it will die one day and rot. Your soul is immortal. Don't let it go into eternity starving. What we expend on the body is lost in the end, but what we give to the soul is ours forever. Starve your body and senses (relatively) and feed your soul this Lent! *There are four different reading plans for Lent on our website at the bottom of the "Orthodox Prayer" page (found under "Resources").*

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!