

The Confessor's Tongue for December 8, 2024

24th Sunday After Pentecost; St. Patapius of Thebes

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.

From St. John of Damascus (+749)

Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith

We just observed the feast of St. John of Damascus, both one of the great theologians of the Church and also her greatest writer of hymns. He was also a staunch defender of the veneration of icons. Here is a small selection from his writings.

On Repentance

Repentance is the returning from the unnatural into the natural state, from the devil to God, through discipline and effort.

This definition well captures the notion of repentance. Sin is unnatural, a missing of the mark, a falling short. Repentance is to turn away from our unnatural condition to the condition natural to us ordained of God. Repentance takes effort on our part. It is something we cultivate.

On Foreknowledge and Predestination

We ought to understand that while God knows all things beforehand, yet He does not predetermine all things. For He knows beforehand those things that are in our power, but He does not predetermine them. For it is not His will that there should be wickedness nor does He choose to compel virtue. So that predetermination is the work of the divine command based on fore-knowledge. But on the other hand God predetermines those things which are not within our power in accordance with His prescience [foreknowledge]. For already God in His prescience has prejudged all things in accordance with His goodness and justice.

Bear in mind, too, that virtue is a gift from God implanted in our nature, and that He Himself is the source and cause of all good, and without His co-operation and help we cannot will or do any good thing, But we have it in our power either to abide in virtue and follow God, Who calls us into ways of virtue, or to stray from paths of virtue, which is to dwell in wickedness, and to follow the devil who summons but cannot compel us. For wickedness is nothing else than the withdrawal of goodness, just as darkness is nothing else than the withdrawal of light. While then we abide in the natural state we abide in virtue, but when we deviate from the natural state, that is from virtue, we come into an unnatural state and dwell in wickedness.

St. John expresses a number of important truths here.

On What Is Not in Our Hands

Of things that are not in our hands some have their beginning or cause in those that are in our power, that is to say, the recompenses of our actions both in the present and in the age to come, but all the rest are dependent on the divine will. For the origin of all things is from God, but their destruction has

been introduced by our wickedness for our punishment or benefit. For God did not create death, neither does He take delight in the destruction of living things. But death is the work rather of man, that is, its origin is in Adam's transgression, in like manner as all other punishments. But all other things must be referred to God. For our birth is to be referred to His creative power; and our continuance to His conservative power; and our government and safety to His providential power; and the eternal enjoyment of good things by those who preserve the laws of nature in which we are formed is to be ascribed to His goodness. But since some deny the existence of Providence, let us further devote a few words to the discussion of Providence.

On Providence

Providence, then, is the care that God takes over existing things. And again: Providence is the will of God through which all existing things receive their fitting issue. But if Providence is God's will, according to true reasoning all things that come into being through Providence must necessarily be both most fair and most excellent, and such that they cannot be surpassed. For the same person must of necessity be creator of and provider for what exists: for it is not meet nor fitting that the creator of what exists and the provider should be separate persons. For in that case they would both assuredly be deficient, the one in creating, the other in providing. God therefore is both Creator and Provider, and His creative and preserving and providing power is simply His goodwill. For whatsoever the Lord pleased that did He in heaven and in earth, and no one resisted His will. He willed that all things should be and they were. He wills the universe to be framed and it is framed, and all that He wills comes to pass.

That He provides, and that He provides excellently, one can most readily perceive thus. God alone is good and wise by nature. Since then He is good, He provides: for he who does not provide is not good. For even men and creatures without reason provide for their own offspring according to their nature, and he who does not provide is blamed. Again, since He is wise, He takes the best care over what exists.

When, therefore, we give heed to these things we ought to be filled with wonder at all the works of Providence, and praise them all, and accept them all without enquiry, even though they are in the eyes of many unjust, because the Providence of God is beyond our ken and comprehension, while our reasonings and actions and the future are revealed to His eyes alone. And by "all" I mean those that are not in our hands: for those that are in our power are outside the sphere of Providence and within that of our Free-will.

Now the works of Providence are partly according to the good-will(of God) and partly according to permission. Works of good-will include all those that are undeniably good, while works of permission are..... For Providence often permits the just man to encounter misfortune in order that he may reveal to others the virtue that lies concealed within him, as was the case with Job. At other times it allows something strange to be done in order that something great and marvelous might be accomplished through the seemingly-strange act, as when the salvation of men was brought about through the Cross. In another way it allows the pious man to suffer sore trials in order that he may not depart from a right conscience nor lapse into pride on account of the power and grace granted to him, as was the case with Paul.

One man is forsaken for a season with a view to another's restoration, in order that others when they see his state may be taught a lesson, as in the case of Lazarus and the rich man. For it belongs to our nature to be cast down when we see persons in distress. Another is deserted by Providence in order that another may be glorified, and not for his own sin or that of his parents, just as the man who was blind from his birth ministered to the glory of the Son of Man. Again another is permitted to suffer in order to stir up emulation in the breasts of others, so that others by magnifying the glory of the sufferer may resolutely welcome suffering in the hope of future glory and the desire for future blessings, as in the case of the martyrs. Another is allowed to fall at times into some act of baseness in order that another worse fault may be thus corrected, as for instance when God allows a man who takes pride in his virtue and righteousness to fall away into fornication in order that he may be brought through this fall into the perception of his own weakness and be humbled and approach and make confession to the Lord.

Moreover, it is to be observed that the choice of what is to be done is in our own hands: but the final issue depends, in the one case when our actions are good, on the cooperation of God, Who in His justice brings help according to His foreknowledge to such as choose the good with a right conscience, and, in the other case when our actions are to evil, on the desertion by God, Who again in His justice stands aloof in accordance with His foreknowledge.

Now there are two forms of desertion: for there is desertion in the matters of guidance and training, and there is complete and hopeless desertion. The former has in view the restoration and safety and glory of the sufferer, or the rousing of feelings of emulation and imitation in others, or the glory of God: but the latter is when man, after God has done all that was possible to save him, remains of his own set purpose blind and uncured, or rather incurable, and then he is handed over to utter destruction, as was Judas. May God be gracious to us, and deliver us from such desertion.

Observe further that the ways of God's providence are many, and they cannot be explained in words nor conceived by the mind.

And remember that all the assaults of dark and evil fortune contribute to the salvation of those who receive them with thankfulness, and are assuredly ambassadors of help.

Also one must bear in mind that God's original wish was that all should be saved and come to His Kingdom. For it was not for punishment that He formed us but to share in His goodness, inasmuch as He is a good God. But inasmuch as He is a just God, His will is that sinners should suffer punishment.

The first then is called God's antecedent will and pleasure, and springs from Himself, while the second is called God's consequent will and permission, and has its origin in us. And the latter is two-fold; one part dealing with matters of guidance and training, and having in view our salvation, and the other being hopeless and leading to our utter punishment, as we said above. And this is the case with actions that are not left in our hands.

But of actions that are in our hands the good ones depend on His antecedent goodwill and pleasure, while the wicked ones depend neither on His antecedent nor on His consequent will, but are a concession to free-will For that which is the result of compulsion has neither reason nor virtue in it. God makes provision for all creation and makes all creation the instrument of His help and training, yea often even the demons themselves, as for example in the cases of Job and the swine.

On the Four Types of Pain

There are four varieties of pain, viz., anguish, grief, envy, pity. Anguish is pain without utterance: grief is pain that is heavy to bear like a burden: envy is pain over the good fortune of others: pity is pain over the evil fortune of others.

On the Six Types of Fear

Fear is divided into six varieties: viz., shrinking, shame, disgrace, consternation, panic, anxiety. Shrinking is fear of some act about to take place. Shame is fear arising from the anticipation of blame: and this is the highest form of the affection. Disgrace is fear springing from some base act already done, and even for this form there is some hope of salvation. Consternation is fear originating in some huge product of the imagination. Panic is fear caused by some unusual product of the imagination. Anxiety is fear of failure, that is, of misfortune: for when we fear that our efforts will not meet with success, we suffer anxiety.

Upcoming Events 2024

- 14 December: Slavonic Divine Liturgy 9:30 a.m.
- 16 December: Holy Unction, 6:00 p.m.
- 24 December: Nativity Eve Vesperal Liturgy at noon, Vigil at 6:00 p.m.
- 25 December: Nativity of our Lord, 8:00 a.m. Liturgy

GLORY BE TO GOD FOR ALL THINGS!