

The Confessor's Tongue for February 9, A. D. 2025

Publican & Pharisee; Leavetaking of Meeting, Martyr Necephorus

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.

The Sayings of St. Anthony the Great 2

When Abba Anthony thought about the depth of the judgments of God, he asked, 'Lord, how is it that some die when they are young, while others drag to extreme old age? Why are there those who are poor and those who are rich? Why do wicked men prosper, and why are the just in need?' He heard a voice answering him, 'Anthony, keep your attention on yourself; these things are according to the judgment of God, and it is not to your advantage to know anything about them.'

Anthony Saying 2 in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*

Questions of this sort often trouble us in this life, either concerning ourselves or others. Why does a good, all-powerful God allow innocent children to die young? Why tidal waves? wars? earthquakes? famines? Why is the world such a mess? Some people dwell on such questions and lose their faith in God, or murmur and complain against Him.

Jesus was asked such a question. When a tower in Siloam fell and killed eighteen people, Jesus responded, "Think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:4-5).

With this answer, Christ challenges a prevalent notion, that good people are rewarded in this life and evil people are punished. Such a thought would lead one to judge that those on whom the tower fell were more evil than others, and God had judged them accordingly. Jesus denies this, and from this we should learn that God's judgments are inscrutable. Why does He allow one person to live to ripe old age and to die peacefully in sleep, while permitting another to die young in a car accident, another to suffer horribly from cancer, or thousands to die suddenly in a terrorist attack or earthquake? We cannot say why, though we can say God's judgments are just. In this world, though, there is usually no connection clear to us between good and reward, evil and punishment. Often, the good suffer greatly while the wicked live in apparent peace.

Christ accordingly warns us, that we, too, will likewise (suddenly, unexpectedly) perish unless we repent. Because of our sins, we are all under condemnation of death. There is no "innocent" on the face of the earth past the age of accountability. When we speak of "innocent" victims, we mean "innocent" so far as we know before the law of the land that they die not having been convicted of any crime. But before God, no flesh is innocent, no flesh will be justified. All are guilty, all stand in jeopardy of death, and all need to repent. We have no guarantees that death will not find us before what we consider to be "our time" or before we are prepared for it.

We love to ask "why?", even to the point of subjecting God to our judgment. But as Anthony was

told, so must we: it is most often not to our advantage to know why. We walk by faith, not by sight, and our faith is in the God who loves mankind so much that He became man and humbled Himself to an unjust, humiliating death at the hands of His rebellious people. We live by our faith in the Crucified One who demonstrates God's implacable love for man and His burning desire to save man. We may not understand the particular sufferings of the race of man, but we know God loves us and is not indifferent to our suffering and will save us through them.

But if God's judgments are beyond us, what we may readily understand is the condition of our own soul. Rather than interrogating God as to why the world is so unfair, we ought rather to interrogate ourselves as to why, in consideration of all that God has made available to us in Christ, we fail to live worthy of our high calling. Why do we act unjustly towards God? Addressing this "why" will profit us when the other "whys" only distract us from what is essential for us. This matter lies in our power to amend, and to this we must attend. *See the story by St. Nicodemus in this issue for more on this subject.*

Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee

On this day we contemplate the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, which occurs in the Holy Gospel according to Luke.

With God's blessing, we enter this day into the period of the *Triodion*.

The three festal Sundays, the Publican and the Pharisee, the Prodigal Son, and the Last Judgment, were intended by the Holy Fathers to be a period of preparatory training and exhortation so that we might equip ourselves for the spiritual contests of the Fast by forsaking our habitual foul practices.

First of all, they present to us the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, calling the following week the "Week of Proclamation" because it heralds the approach of the Fast. It is like those who are going off to war: they learn from their generals when the war will occur so that they can clean and polish their swords, taking care of everything and thus removing every obstacle to defeating the enemy. Likewise, the divine Fathers also sound the bugle in advance, calling us to the coming Lenten battle against the demons so that we might purge our souls of any passion or ailment that has possessed us over the past year.

We must properly arm ourselves for the contests of Great Lent. The principal weapons for the maintenance of virtue are repentance and humility, and the greatest obstacles are arrogance and pride. The Holy Fathers have set forth the present trustworthy parable from the divine Gospel, exhorting us through the Pharisee to banish the passions of arrogance and presumption and through

the Publican to strive to acquire the opposites of these passion, humility and repentance.

This parable demonstrates that no one should become prideful, even if he commits acts of kindness and righteousness, but one should always be humble and beg God's favor with all his soul. Even if he has fallen into the worst evils, he should never lose hope or courage, as he is never far from salvation.

So that we can learn to avoid the pride of the Pharisee by following our own self-imposed and self-directed fasting – instead of the moderate and time-tested fasting traditions of the Church – the following week is fast-free.

A Narrative on the Manifold Judgments of God *St. Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain*

A certain abba of the monastics, with great boldness and with tears, asked God that He reveal to him some of His judgments on men: judgments which they do not recognize, but mistake for extraordinary events. For a long time, God did not show him anything (for men can never fully know and understand the mysteries of God), but the ascetic did not cease from that prayer day and night. One day, God, wishing to satisfy fully the monk's prayer, put into his heart the thought that he visit an ascetic elder who lived a many-days' journey away.

As the ascetic began his journey, God sent an angel in the form of a young monk, who met the elder and greeted him, "Bless, Father." The elder answered, "May God give you forgiveness, child." And the angel said to the elder, "Where do you go, Abba?" The elder said, "I go to see such-and-such, an ascetic." The angel exclaimed, "I also go there; let us two go in company."

They walked on together until a pious man took them into his home, and, at dinner, he brought a silver platter to the table. When they were about to depart the next morning, the angel took the platter, tossed it into the air, and it disappeared. The elder was troubled at seeing this, but he said nothing.

The second day, they journeyed until they raised the dust in another village, where a very pious Christian was friendly and hospitable to the travellers. He had an only son, whom he brought for the monks to pray over and bless. But when they were to continue their journey, the angel suddenly grasped the child by the neck and strangled him. The elder, seeing this, was shaken and astonished, but he stood silent.

And walking on, the third day they rested in another place, but because they found no one to receive them, they sat in a courtyard. The courtyard had a wall that was leaning over and about to fall. The angle loosened the stones by pounding and tore it down; then he rebuilt it from the foundation.

At this, the elder could bear it no longer and cried out: "I adjure you by the Most High God, tell me the truth! What are these things you have done? These works are not human works." The angel asked, "What did I do?" The elder said, "Yesterday and the day before, those lovers of Christ received us and were

hospitable to us; you took the silver platter of the one, tossed it into the air, and it disappeared; you strangled the son of the other; we come here, and they did not give us any consolation or hospitality, but you took hold and built and benefited them."

The angel said to him: "Hearken, Abba, and I shall reveal the truth of these matters. The first one who received us is a God-loving and righteous man, and he manages and governs his property according to God. But that silver platter was an inheritance from an iniquitous person, and, so that he would not lose the wages of the righteous, God ordered that I destroy it, so his hospitality would be pure and without guile. And the other one who was hospitable to us is pious and a man of excellent virtues, but if his son had lived, he would have become an instrument of Satan and done many things to bring the works of his father to oblivion. Because of this, God appointed that he die while he was still young, so that his soul and his father's be saved."

"You have done well in all these things," the elder responded, "but what have you to say about here?"

The angel answered, "Know, Abba, about this also. The householder of this courtyard is a wicked man and iniquitous. He would do wickedness to many, but he cannot because of his poverty. His grandfather, when he built the wall, hid much money in it. If I had allowed it to continue falling over, that malicious man whose domain it is would have tumbled it down in order to rebuild it. Thus he would find the treasure and use it for his wicked desires and the harm of men. God has a time when He will reveal it to a man who will use it for good works.

"These are some of the judgments of God, which you sought to learn. Therefore, go to your cell and be not concerned about the things of the world, as to how and why they are done, because the judgments of God are a great abyss. As the prophet said, 'His ways are unsearchable and beyond understanding,' and man cannot know all things with exactness. Therefore, Abba, believe that God is just and does not do any iniquity, but that all He permits to be done is righteously done."

Having heard these things from the angel, the ascetic glorified God and returned to his cell and no longer made inquiries into anything. *copyright © George Rallis, 1982*

Upcoming Events 2025

7-10 February: Fr. Justin in Alpine
14 February: Parish Fundraising Gala
1 March: Forgiveness Vespers, 5:00 p.m.
3-8 March: Clean Week
14-19 April: Holy Week
20 April: Great and Holy Pascha

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!