

III - The Gospel Readings from the End of the Pentecostarion to the Beginning of the Triodion

A) The Gospel Cycle of St Matthew

(From the End of the Pentecostarion to the Feast of the Holy Cross)

*At the Divine Liturgy we read the epistles of St. Paul which are numbered “after Pentecost.”
We read the Gospel Cycle of St. Matthew which has its own numbering.*

IN THE BYZANTINE TYPIKA, the Scriptures read at the Divine Liturgy are chosen in two ways. On feasts the passages selected refer to the event being celebrated. The Gospel reading usually recounts the event while the Epistle selection often suggests its spiritual meaning.

On most days of the year the Church reads the Scriptures continuously according to the following pattern: the Gospel of St John and the Acts of the Apostles are read from Pascha to Pentecost; Matthew and the Epistles, beginning with Romans, are read from Pentecost to the Exaltation of the Cross (September 14). The Epistles continue in order after this feast with Hebrews read especially during the Great Fast. The Gospels are read as follows: Luke from the Holy Cross to the Great Fast and Mark on the weekends of the Fast as well as to fill on weekdays during the cycles of Matthew and Luke. Thus we are now at the start of the public reading of Matthew and Romans in the Byzantine Churches.

Matthew: the Gospel of the Kingdom

In printed Bibles the Gospel according to St. Matthew is the first of the four. For many years this arrangement was thought to reflect the sequence in which the Gospels were composed: Matthew first, then Mark, etc. Many contemporary scholars, however, feel that the simpler Gospel of Mark was written first (before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70) and then expanded by Matthew after that event.

The first ancient testimony to Matthew comes from the second century Bishop of Hieropolis, Papias. In a work now lost but quoted by others, Papias says that “Matthew composed the sayings [of Jesus] in the Hebrew dialect [of Aramaic]”. If Papias is correct, Matthew’s collection of sayings was written for a group of Jewish Christians who spoke the Palestinian (“Hebrew”) dialect of Aramaic. Matthew’s original work, then, may have been simply a collection of sayings later incorporated into the Greek narrative we now have.

Our Matthew, although written in Greek, was still written for Jewish Christians. Of all the Gospels Matthew is the one that most refers to the Old Testament. Jewish customs are mentioned but not explained since the readers would be familiar with them. Questions about observing the Law of Moses and the Sabbath come up again and again. We know that there were many Jews

who understood and spoke Greek – it was the universal language of the Mediterranean – and there were many Jews who no longer spoke Hebrew or Aramaic. It is thought that the Gospel was written in a Jewish Christian community in Syria, probably at Antioch.

Matthew's Gospel is clearly a literary work with specific movements and themes. Sandwiched between the infancy narrative and the story of the passion and resurrection of Christ, Matthew puts forth five narratives and discourses that remind us of the five books of Moses (the Torah). Jesus is the New Moses, giving the new law, written in the hearts of those who love Him. The Gospel is roughly divided in two, focusing on its main message. The first part leads up to the confession of Peter ("*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*") in chapter 16 and the transfiguration of Christ ("*This is my beloved Son*") in chapter 17. The second part then takes us to Jerusalem and the great events of the Paschal mystery. Jesus is revealed in His passion ("*Truly this was the Son of God*" – 27:54) and in His glorification ("*All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth*" – 28:18). Jesus is not only the "new Moses;" He is the "*One greater than the temple*" (12:7), "*greater than Jonah*" and "*greater than Solomon*" (12:41-42).

First Sunday of St Matthew

The Sunday of All Saints (See p.)

Second Sunday of St Matthew

The Seed of the Word in the Gentiles (Mt 4:18-23)

TODAY'S READING FROM MATTHEW (4:18-23) is, as it were, the kickoff to the earthly ministry of Christ. Christ calls His foremost disciples, the brothers Peter and Andrew and their fellow fishermen, the brothers James and John. He then sets out preaching "*the Gospel of the kingdom*" (v. 23) throughout Galilee.

The Jews equated the kingdom of God with the Hebrew commonwealth, those who believed in the one true God. When a kingdom, "*like all the nations*" (1 Sam 8:5) was established, people began to think of God's kingdom as a physical entity. After being a subject people since their subjugation to Babylon in 587 BC, the Jews sought freedom from their occupiers and looked to the Messiah as a political liberator. Jesus message contradicts this: "the kingdom of God has come upon you," He says (Mt 12:28), by His presence. He confronts the ultimate oppressor, through whom physical, psychological and spiritual traumas befall us, and He defeats him. The kingdom of God is where Jesus is

Israel during its formative period was a traditional society. In many respects it was similar to its neighbors in the Middle East with one exception that set them apart from others: Israel held strongly to monotheism, belief in only one God, and to a moral system believed to be given by Him. Neighboring peoples – such as the Assyrians, Babylonians, Canaanites – each revered a host of gods and goddesses which the Israelites held to be no gods at all. The Israelites classed all

these peoples as *goyim*, a word which first referred to a horde of pests, such as locusts. Our Bibles translate *goyim* as “Gentiles.”

Jewish identity was to a great extent defined by their monotheism, which was always threatened when they mingled with Gentiles. Their identity – and their purity before God – suffered when “*they mingled with the Gentiles and learned their works*” (Psalm 106:35). There were numerous occasions during the first millennium BC when the political elite fostered alliances with *goyim* and adopted some of their ways.

By the time of Christ permissible contact between religious Jews and Gentiles was severely restricted. Thus Jesus sent His disciples to proclaim the Kingdom of God first among Jews: “*Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*” (Matthew 10:5-6).

The Jews considered themselves the people of God, the nation through whom He worked in the world. The Lord Jesus was referring to this conviction when He told the Samaritan woman, “*You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews*” (John 4:22). This did not mean that their place as God’s chosen people was given to them as a privilege but as a responsibility. God would work through Israel for the sake of all who would believe in Him. Gentiles, too, would take their place in God’s People.

Third Sunday of St Matthew

The One who Gives Life to the World (Mt 6:22-33)

“THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT” (Mt 5-7) is the name given to the first of the five Discourses of Jesus in Mathew’s Gospel. The term – from its introductory phrase, “*Seeing the multitudes He went up on a mountain*” (Mt 5:1) – was popularized by St Augustine’s commentary on Mt 5-7, *De Sermone Domini in Monte* (c. AD 392- 396).

Remember that Matthew was written for Greek-speaking Jewish believers in Syria, perhaps at Antioch. Their minds would immediately be drawn to another mountain, Sinai, where God gave the Hebrews the basics of their faith, the Law of Moses. They would find in Jesus’ teaching from this mountain the fundamental texts of their faith: the Beatitudes (Mt 5:3-12) and the Lord’s Prayer (Mt 6:9-13) as well as Jesus’ interpretation of the Commandments and the precepts to pray, fast and give alms. They would see Jesus portrayed as the New Moses and more for, unlike Moses, He taught on His own authority: “*You have heard it said... but I say to you...*” (Mt 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32 38-39, 43-44).

“Seek First the Kingdom”

In our Byzantine typika the bulk of these chapters is read at the Divine Liturgy on the weekdays after Pentecost and the Sunday of All Saints. Mt 6:22-34 is reserved for Sunday, however, for it provides the principle underlying the entire discourse: “*Seek first the kingdom of God*” (v. 33).

Commentators have often said that it is practically impossible to put the precepts in this discourse into action and they are right, if we see these instructions in isolation from their underlying motivation. If a person is truly seeking the kingdom of God, then keeping the radical nature of these precepts will come naturally. If someone is following the Lord wholeheartedly they will see Him accepting and supplying the strength for every sacrifice they make to keep His commandments.

If a person does not put the kingdom first then his “*eye is bad*” (v.23). His outlook on life leads only to darkness, whether it is the dreariness of a life committed to unrighteous living or the shadowy world of one who seeks to serve two masters by doing “just enough” to get into heaven without commending one’s whole life to Christ. As St John Chrysostom observed, no further punishment is needed; having such a mindset is punishment in itself. “To have mammon for your master is already worse itself than any later punishment and enough retribution before the punishment for any one trapped in it. . . . Think of the lawsuits, the harassments, the strife and toil and blinding of the soul! More grievous, one falls away from the highest blessing – to be God’s servant” (Homily on Matthew, 21.2),

What holds people back from seeking the kingdom of God wholeheartedly? – a preoccupation with what we eat and drink and with what we put on (v. 32). Can we afford the better cuts of meat and the best wines, or to be seen in the restaurants everyone is talking about? Can I afford the latest fashions? Do I have the right jewelry for this or that occasion? What about the right address, the furnishings everyone will admire, a more expensive car than my neighbor, a vacation to be envied, etc. etc.? Not that material things are sinful in themselves; the Lord said that we will have enough of these things to meet our needs (v. 32). We sin when we make acquiring them the chief aim and purpose of life. As St Augustine noted, there is a difference between seeing something as a *goal* and seeing something as a *means*. Those who claim to be believers and yet pursue the goods of the world as their first priority in life must listen carefully to the words which the Lord addressed at the end of the discourse: “*Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven*” (Mt 7:21).

This week prayerfully read the entire Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7) and reflect on what it says to you. Has your spiritual life lost its savor (v.13)? Is your life a light which can bring glory to God (v.14)? Think about your life and how Christ’s teachings on the Commandments (5:17-48) concern it.

Fourth Sunday of St Matthew
Signs of the Messiah (Mt 8:5-13)

THE GOSPELS PRESENT A PICTURE of the world in which Christ lived which is not always understood. While they focus on His interaction with the leaders of Israel, the Gospels also show us how many other groups and peoples He encountered. Official Judaism, centered on Jerusalem, was made up of several strains. We hear of the Pharisees (the rabbis, focused on the Torah) and the Sadducees (the priests, centered on temple worship). The Gospels also mention the Samaritans with their reverence for the ancient shrines rather than Jerusalem. And we know of others groups who did not esteem the Jerusalem establishment but retired to the Judean desert to await the expected Messiah. Many feel that John the Forerunner was one of them.

Besides these representatives of mainstream and fringe Judaism, the area was also home to Gentiles. Some were native to the area. Jesus often traveled to the east side of the Jordan, and to the area of Tyre and Sidon where He encountered many Gentiles as well. Then, of course there were the colonists who inhabited the cities of the Decapolis, ten Roman and Greek cities in today's Jordan and Syria, and the Roman presence, based in Caesarea on the Mediterranean which governed the area in the name of Caesar. Some of these Gentiles respected Jewish belief and were known as "God-fearing" although they were not part of the Jewish people.

The centurion in Mt 8:5-13 was probably one of these God-fearers, stationed at Capernaum. The corresponding passage in Luke cites the praise of the local Jews that "*he loves our nation, and has built us a synagogue*" (Lk 7:5).

The story of the centurion and his servant reveal two themes important to the Jewish believers for whom the Gospel of Matthew was written. The first theme is the belief that Jesus is the Messiah. Like all Jews, these believers held that the Messianic era would be marked by physical as well as spiritual renewal. In crafting the Gospel the Evangelist intersperses the five Discourses (Jesus' teachings) with accounts of how Jesus' presence revitalized people. This would be the proof that He was the Messiah, as we read in His encounter with the disciples of John the Baptist:

"Now when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, 'Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?' Jesus answered and said to them, 'Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them'" (Mt 11:2-5). In other words the messianic signs are evident – the Messiah is at hand.

The second theme would be increasingly important as more Gentiles entered the community of the Church. It is expressed in the words of Jesus concerning the centurion, "*Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel! And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*" (Mt 8:10-12). Gentiles would believe and by their faith they would displace the Jews in the people of God.

The Sun of Righteousness

One of the last of the Hebrew prophecies in the Old Testament, Malachi, spoke of the coming of “*the Sun of Righteousness*” in words which seem to summarize the entire Gospel. Early Christians saw this as a prophecy fulfilled in Jesus and His Forerunner, John the Baptist:

“Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple – even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,” says the LORD of hosts. ... But to you who fear My name the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings...” (Malachi 3:1, 4:2)

Early Christians soon connected this image of Christ as the Sun of Righteousness to the progress of the Gospel among the Gentiles. The Sun of Righteousness shone His light over the darkness of idolatry and eclipsed it. To this day we proclaim this in the troparion of the Nativity, speaking of the Persian magi, “through it [Christ’s birth] those who worshipped stars were taught by a star to worship You, the Sun of Righteousness.”

And so we hear Christ proclaimed today as the fulfillment of the Messianic hopes of the Jewish people and the One who shines the light of true righteousness among the Gentiles. He is, as we sing so often in the Canticum of Simeon, “Light to the revelation of the Gentiles and the glory of Your people, Israel.”

Fifth Sunday of St Matthew Of Demons and Pigs (Mt 8:28-9:1)

THE PASSAGE FROM ST MATTHEW’S GOSPEL describing the healing of the demoniac begins with the words, “*When Jesus had come to the other side...*” (Mt 8:28). “The other side of what?” we may ask, raising questions of where Jesus went and what it meant for His ministry. How does knowing where He lived and where He travelled contribute to our understanding of who He is and to our way of following Him?

The Lord Jesus spent most of His earthly life in the province of Galilee, the northernmost district of the Holy Land. Galilee, north of Samaria, was the ancient territory of the Israelite tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. With Samaria it had formed the northern kingdom, Israel, after the split following Solomon’s death (c. 931 BC). In 740 BC the northern kingdom had been conquered by the Assyrians; it would not be ruled again by Jews until 140 BC.

Galilee of the Gentiles

Already in the eighth century BC the prophet Isaiah referred to this territory as “*Galilee of the Gentiles*” (9:1), a phrase which will be quoted in Mt 4:16. Isaiah may have been referring to an event mentioned in 1 Kings 9: 10-13. There we read that Hiram, the King of Tyre, had supplied

cedar, cypress and gold to build the temple at Jerusalem. To repay him, “*King Solomon then gave Hiram twenty cities in the land of Galilee...*”

The story of Hiram is the first of two rather disparaging references to Galilee in the Scriptures. Solomon’s gift did not please the King of Tyre “*So he said, ‘What kind of cities are these which you have given me, my brother?’ And he called them the land of Cabul, [good for nothing] as they are known to this day.*”

For the 600 years after the Assyrian conquest much of Galilee had been all but abandoned by the Jews, who concentrated on rebuilding Jerusalem and Judea. Like Samaria, Galilee saw foreigners – in this case Phoenician farmers and Greek mercenaries employed by the Persians – among its new residents, apparently not the result of any intentional efforts by the various ruling powers, none of whom introduced a substantial number of colonists.

Jewish resettlement of Galilee proceeded very slowly until the reestablishment of Jewish rule in the second century BC. According to the evidence of archaeology, there was a sudden change at the beginning of the first century BC. Within a few decades, dozens of new villages appeared, indicating that a new population had come into Galilee. By the first century AD Galilee included 204 prosperous villages and 15 fortified cities (Josephus, *Vita*, 45). Was St Joseph’s family, whose roots were in Bethlehem of Judea, one of those who emigrated to Galilee at that time?

Nazareth vs. Sepphoris

The town of Nazareth where Jesus was raised was on the outskirts of one such city, Sepphoris, the administrative center of Galilee and the home of the region’s prosperous Jewish elite. Nazareth was a working man’s town in the shadow of Sepphoris, of no importance to anyone but its residents. When the Lord’s disciple Philip told Nathanael that he had found the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, Nathaniel responded, “*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*” (Jn 1:46)

The cosmopolitan and deeply Hellenized city of Sepphoris is never mentioned in the Gospels. Jesus is never depicted as going there – although it was only 3½ miles from Nazareth – and none of His closest followers are said to have lived there. Instead the Lord spent His time in and called disciples from the nearby working-class towns of Cana and Capernaum where He found “*the poor in spirit*” (Mt 5:3), people more likely to accept His words.

The contrast between Nazareth and Sepphoris exemplifies Christ’s preference for the poor in spirit, the attitude of spiritual poverty before God contrasted with the proud, exemplified in the Beatitudes, and which He personified in the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee. The figures associated with His birth – the holy Virgin, St Joseph, the shepherds, Simeon and Anna, even the magi – all display this quality.

Contemporary writers often use the Hebrew term *Anawim* to describe those people who look to God for everything. It was the word used by the Essene community to describe themselves. The

Anawim usually have nothing that the world wants; their “wealth” consists in God. These are the people to whom Jesus referred in His first sermon at the synagogue in Nazareth, quoting Isaiah 61:1, 2: “*The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor*” (Lk 4:18).

The Lord’s identification with the humble – the needy widow, Lazarus the beggar, the blind, the lame, and the lepers – has led churchmen throughout the ages to assert that the Church is called to imitate Christ by declaring its preference for the poor and powerless of this world. “Prove yourself a god to the unfortunate by imitating the mercy of God,” wrote St. Gregory the Theologian (Oration XIV, *On the Love of the Poor*). “There is nothing so godly in human beings as to do good works.” Sixteen centuries later Pope Benedict XVI taught that “love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 22).

Foreigners and Samaritans

Archaeologists suggest that the population of Galilee at the time of Christ included transplanted Judeans. They joined many Gentile Galileans (Phoenicians and Greeks) and Idumeans who some scholars say had been forcibly converted to Judaism. If so, Galilee in Jesus’ day contained many Jews whose ancestors had only been Jewish for about a century.

At the same time the Galileans were surrounded by native pagan peoples: Phoenicians to the north, Ammonites and Moabites to the east, Edomites to the south and Palestinians to the west, while their immediate neighbors to the south were the Samaritans. Strict Jews like the Pharisees reviled all these peoples as unbelievers or as heretics and therefore unclean.

The Lord Jesus was not put off by the isolationism of the scribes and Pharisees. Not only did He eat with sinners and with the tax collectors, who were collaborators with the occupying Romans, He ministered to Samaritans (Jn 4:5-42) and soldiers of the Roman occupation (Lk 7:1-9). He visited pagan territories such as Tyre and Sidon, where He helped the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mk 7:24-30), and Gadara, across the Jordan, as we see in today’s reading.

A Galilean befriending sinners, embracing the poor and powerless, foreigners and Samaritans despite the precepts of the Torah – is it any wonder, then, that the Lord Jesus made enemies among the scribes, the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law?

The Problem with Pork

Just what is it about pork? Any contact with it is prohibited in the Torah. There we read: “*Now the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying to them, ‘Speak to the children of Israel, saying, ‘These are the animals which you may eat among all the animals that are on the earth: Among the animals, whatever divides the hoof, having cloven hooves and chewing the cud—that you may eat. Nevertheless these you shall not eat among those that chew the cud or those that have*

cloven hooves: the camel, ... the rock hyrax, ... the hare, ... and the swine, though it divides the hoof, having cloven hooves, yet does not chew the cud, is unclean to you. Their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall not touch. They are unclean to you” (Leviticus 11:2-8).

Here the reason given seems arbitrary: is there a divine reason for preferring animals which have cloven hooves and chew their cud? If so, we are not told.

Modern commentators have suggested ecological and hygienic reasons for the Jews' attitude. It has been suggested, for example, that because pigs will eat anything – garbage, offal, even carcasses – they were thought of as “unclean,” that is, unfit for God's People.

The Quran also prohibits the consumption of, and even contact with, pork: “*He has made unlawful to you only that which dies of itself, and blood, and the flesh of swine, and that on which the name of any other than Allah has been invoked*” (2.174). This and similar texts record the prohibition but do not explain it.

The prohibition in the Quran does suggest another possible reason when it couples pork with “*that on which the name of any other than Allah has been invoked.*” In fact, pigs were regularly sacrificed to “other names” at the time of Moses. In the Egypt of his day pigs were sacrificed to the gods, especially to Set, the ruler of Upper Egypt, and the pork was consumed in a ritual feast. One of their most important gods, it was Set, along with Horus, the ruler of Lower Egypt, who were depicted as crowning Pharaoh.

Pigs were also sacrificed to various deities by the Philistines, the Greeks and the Romans. Would this ongoing association of pigs with pharaoh and idolatry have influenced the condemnation of pork by the Hebrews? Idolatry and its attendant practices would certainly have been the greatest uncleanness to an observant Jew of the day; anything connected with idolatry would have been equally condemned. Perhaps the same reasoning applies to the Jewish prohibition against mixing meat and dairy. Would the fact that Canaanites offered lamb cooked in its mother's milk to their gods, make it unfit for God's People?

In any case, pigs became the ultimate symbol of uncleanness in Judaism and, later, in Islam. When Jesus tells the story of the Prodigal Son, for example, the lad's final degradation was to feed husks to the pigs.

The Pigs of Gedara

Jesus' encounter with the demoniacs is directly connected with the story of how He calmed the sea (Mt 8:23-27) which precedes it. The Gospel says that Jesus and His disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee when a storm erupted. Commentators have stressed that Matthew used the same word here as he did in the account of the Lord's crucifixion when the earth quaked. It represents an apocalyptic event, heralding the coming of the Messiah and the Kingdom of God to the Gentiles.

When Jesus and His disciples get to the eastern side of the sea, they come upon the demoniacs whose healing is described in Mt 8:28-34. Part of Jordan today, this was a region inhabited by Jews, local Gentiles (Amonites and Moabites), and Greco-Roman settlers. Early manuscripts of the Gospel story vary, locating this event in Gadara (the center of Hellenism in the region), or Gerasa (modern Jerash). Both were Gentile towns, more Greek than Semitic, with pagan temples side by side with Jewish synagogues. Pagan festivals were observed, with dramas depicting the gods and sacrifices offered to them. Pork would have been considered acceptable here.

In the Gospel narrative the demons are given leave to enter the pigs and plunge into the sea. All that is unclean in this world (the idolatrous pigs) and in the spiritual realm (the rebellious demons) are destined to plummet into the abyss to make way for the kingdom of God.

While crossing the Sea of Galilee the disciples had asked one another “*Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?*” (v. 27) – they had yet to experience Christ as more than a holy man. When Jesus confronts the demons, however, there is no need for a discussion. “*What have we to do with you, Jesus, you Son of God!*” they whine. “*Have you come here to torment us before the time?*” (v. 29) – these invidious spiritual powers know what, at this stage the disciples do not. Much of Matthew’s Gospel is concerned with the disciples’ growing awareness of Christ’s unique relationship with the Father. Those “*of little faith*” would before long be spreading faith in Christ much farther than they had ever gone before.

The Time Has Come

What is “*the time*” mentioned in the demons’ complaint? These demons were not prepared to lose their power. They are depicted here like many Jews of their time, who expected to have sway until the Last Day, the apocalyptic end of all things, when the Lord’s Anointed would come in glory and judge the world. They were not prepared to encounter the King of the ages in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

This Jesus would come in glory, but not when and how anyone expected. Christ would be glorified when, triumphant over sin in Himself, He surrendered Himself to death in order to abolish it and overturn its power over mankind. Christ’s sacrificial death was His glory, the victory of self-offering in the face of a sterile world.

What is Clean and Unclean?

When scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem criticized Jesus and His followers for not observing the practices of ritual purification, He responded, “*Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man*” (Mt 15:11). Impurity is not a matter of ritual practices but of our actions and intentions.

Not without some initial disagreements, the early Church came to maintain that there would be no clean vs. unclean foods, for all food is from God. As St. Paul insisted, keeping Torah laws does not justify us; rather we put our faith in Christ and in His saving acts. Nothing I do can “save” me. The source of all human uncleanness is that idea that I can save myself by doing this or refraining from that. Our efforts cannot bring us into relationship with God; it is only in God’s work, manifested in Jesus Christ, that we can find security and hope.

Sixth Sunday of St Matthew

The Son of Man Forgives Sins (Mt 9:1-8)

WE READ IN MATTHEW 9: 1-8 that, when people brought a paralyzed man to the Lord Jesus, He healed the man’s paralysis, but not before telling him, “*Your sins are forgiven*” (Mt 9:2). The bystanders’ initial thought that Jesus had blasphemed was replaced by wonder. As Matthew described it, “*they marveled and glorified God, who had given such power to men*” (Mt 9:8).

The Lord Jesus, of course, was more than just a man. His full humanity was joined without confusion to the divine nature of the Word of God. He forgave sin, then, as the only-begotten Son of the Father. But the onlookers’ amazement would be justified in time: God *would* give men the power to forgive sin, in the Church.

When the glorified Christ appeared to His disciples after His resurrection, He told them, “*Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained*” (Jn 20:22, 23). The Church was to extend the presence of Christ in the world both physically and spiritually by imparting the forgiveness of sins to those who came to it in faith.

“First” and “Second Baptism”

The first place where the Church bestows forgiveness of sins is in the **Mystery of Baptism**. When we are buried with Christ in baptism we rise to a newness of life marked by deliverance from the power of sin. Infants brought for baptism, of course, have no sins of which they may be guilty; adults who receive baptism with repentance are freed from their past sins. As the priest announces at the eighth day removal of the baptismal garments, “you have been baptized, enlightened, chrismated, sanctified and cleansed in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit!”

The early Church recognized that believers might fall into serious sin, particularly when threatened with imprisonment and death during the Roman persecution of Christians. It began using its ability to forgive sin in a new way. Those guilty of serious sin would be reconciled to the Church after confessing their sin and undergoing a period of repentance – what came to be called the **Mystery of Repentance**.

Today we express repentance and experience the forgiveness of sins through the Church in a number of ways:

Daily prayer of repentance – For a member of Christ’s Body, the Church, prayer is the most basic way to experience God’s forgiveness. As St John of Kronstadt said, “Often during the day I have been a great sinner, and at night, after prayer, I have gone to rest justified and whiter than snow by the grace of the Holy Spirit, with the deepest peace and joy in my heart” (*My Life in Christ*, Part 1).

Regular Self-Reflection – Periodic, even daily self-examination helps us to see the direction of our lives. Our entire existence should be lived in the light of the Holy Spirit. We examine our actions, thoughts and feelings, then, not to condemn ourselves but to affirm our true selves in Christ who has taught us to live for God’s glory.

A Relationship with a Confessor/Spiritual Father – Each person is in a different place in his or her journey. We may on occasion find thoughts in the Scriptures or the Fathers that touch our hearts, but finding someone who knows you and knows the ways of Holy Tradition is like taking a giant step in the Christian life. The fullest dimension of spiritual guidance involves sharing our thoughts and yearnings, not just our sins with this spiritual guide.

Receiving the Eucharist – Several times during the Divine Liturgy we are reminded that the Eucharist is given to us “for the remission of sins.” To receive this gift we must approach “discerning the Body,” as St Paul says: sensing the depth of this Mystery and our unworthiness to take part in it. And so before receiving we say the prayer “I believe, Lord, and profess” specifically asking for the pardon of our offences – the deliberate and the indeliberate, whether committed knowingly or inadvertently – so that we may receive the remission of sins and eternal life in this mystery.

Observing the Church’s Fasts - The Fasts are another liturgical expression of repentance. Rearranging our lives in obedience to the Church’s weekly and seasonal fasts is a most practical way of affirming our commitment to life in Christ, a daily reminder that “*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*” (Mt 4:4).

The Mystery of Confession – As we have seen, Confession was at first considered a “second baptism,” a starting over in the Christian life, when a person had committed serious sin. Over the centuries it became more widely used and is considered appropriate today whenever a person feels the need for it, particularly:

- When a serious sin has been committed;
- When a habitual sin has overwhelmed the Christian;
- When a Christian has stopped growing spiritually and needs a reorientation of priorities.

Confession, along with prayer and fasting is also a customary preparation for important spiritual experiences such as receiving the Eucharist or other mysteries and observing the Great Feasts of the Church year as a part of the Christian’s ongoing repentance. Thus we read in the *Didache* (late first or early second century), “On the Lord’s Day come together and break bread ... having confessed your transgressions that your sacrifice may be pure.”

No “Cheap Forgiveness”

Some people think that for us to obtain forgiveness we simply need to say a prescribed prayer or undergo a stipulated rite without any real connection to one’s heart. Obtaining God’s forgiveness is not the religious equivalent of paying a traffic ticket. Our sin is forgiven only when two conditions are met.

The first condition is that we extend to those who may have hurt us the same forgiveness we seek to receive from God. We are reminded of this each time we recite the Lord’s Prayer: “forgive us...as we forgive.” If this is not clear enough we also have the Lord’s caution, “*For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*” (Mt 6:14, 15).

The second condition is that we do something about our sin. This may mean that we make some kind of restitution: return stolen property, try to rebuild another’s reputation which we have harmed, or the like. It may mean that we take steps to avoid repeating the same kind of offence in the future, particularly if our sin is habitual like indulging in gossip or unseemly talk. As the nineteenth century Greek Orthodox saint, Cosmas the Aetolian, once remarked: “Even if every spiritual father, patriarch, and hierarch, with all the people forgive you, you are unforgiven if you don’t repent in action.”

To repent in action does not simply mean resolving not to sin again. Like New Year’s resolutions, such declarations rarely are kept for long. We simply do not have the power to keep ourselves from sin. Repenting in action means, first of all, turning to God in prayer to be delivered from our sin. We are counseled to repeat continually the prayer of the tax collector, “O God, be merciful to me a sinner.” Only God, who forgives us when we sin, can prevent us from falling into sin... and that only when we continually desire Him to do so. The sincerity of our prayer to be delivered from sin is shown by how often we are moved to utter it.

Seventh Sunday of St Matthew

The Hidden Messiah (Mt 9:27-35)

THE NINTH CHAPTER of St Matthew’s Gospel records several miracles in succession: the healing of a paralytic, of the ruler’s daughter, of a woman with a flow of blood, two blind men and a mute man. Only in the case of the two blind men do we find that the Lord Jesus “...*sternly warned them, saying, ‘See that no one knows it’*” (Mt 9:30). Why did the Lord want these two to keep quiet while not demanding that the paralytic and the others do the same?

The key seems to be in the way the blind men approached Jesus. Unlike the others healed in this chapter, the blind men called out to Him, “*Son of David, have mercy on us!*” (v. 27) They accorded Him the messianic title “Son of David.” But was Jesus ready to be acclaimed as Messiah at this stage of His life?

What Kind of Messiah?

Many Jewish people at the time of Christ were looking for the Messiah, God's "Anointed One". Most looked for a royal warrior – another David – who would drive out the Romans from the Holy Land and restore the power of Israel in the region. This political Messiah would usher in a period of prosperity and power for the people of Israel.

Others in that period thought that the Messiah would restore the old priestly line and the temple rites used before the exile of the Israelites in Babylon. He would be a priestly Messiah, renewing the temple and restoring the original spirit of its liturgy.

The Lord Jesus had a very different view of His role. He was not to be an earthly king; He never urged political dissention or encouraged revolt against Roman rule. As He was to tell Pilate, "*My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here*" (Jn 18:36).

Neither did the Lord Jesus attempt to restore the usages of Solomon's temple. He would fulfill the entire Old Covenant in Himself, becoming the new temple, the house of God on earth. It was with this in mind that the Lord told the Jews on driving away the money-changers, "*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*' Then the Jews said, '*It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?*' But He was speaking of the temple of His body. Therefore, when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this to them; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said" (Jn 2:19-22).

The "Messianic Secret"

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, biblical commentators began using the term "Messianic secret" to describe Jesus' reluctance to be described as Messiah. Had Jesus allowed Himself to be proclaimed "Messiah" while not fulfilling His hearers' this-worldly expectations, He would have made it impossible for anyone to come to believe in Him. He would have given them the right word, but the wrong idea. He might also have come to the attention of the religious and political authorities before He had developed followers nurtured to any degree with His vision of the Kingdom of God.

Rather we see Jesus beginning a long process of choosing disciples and allowing them to discover for themselves that He was God's Anointed. Jesus never claimed the title of Messiah for Himself and only hinted at it among those most committed to the Kingdom of God. Thus we are told: "*...when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, 'Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?'* Jesus answered and said to them, '*Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me*'" (Mt 11:2-6). Jesus leaves John and his followers to draw their own conclusions.

Some people perceived that Jesus was more than just a teacher. When two of John's disciples went after Jesus, He turned and asked "*What do you seek?*" The tongue-tied Andrew could only

say, “*Where are you staying?*” But after spending the day with Jesus, Andrew would tell his brother Simon, “*We have found the Messiah*” (Jn 1:41).

The Gospels record the disciples’ slow process of learning what the Lord Jesus’ mission actually was. At times they seemed no more attuned to Jesus’ teaching than were the crowds. When Jesus taught the importance of inner purity rather than the ritual purity of “clean” and “unclean” foods, the disciples found it hard to accept. “*Are you thus without understanding also?*” Jesus replied (Mk 7:18).

While the Gospels show how gradually the disciples grew to appreciate Jesus as the Messiah, they also note that others had no hesitation in proclaiming His true identity. The demons, as bodiless powers, understood from the start just who Jesus was. The spirit which Jesus expelled in Capernaum affirmed, “*I know who You are – the Holy One of God*” (Mk 1:24). The Gergasene demoniacs protested, “*What have we to do with You, Jesus, Son of God?*” (Mt 8:29). Jesus silenced them all and “*...did not allow them to speak, for they knew that He was the Christ*” (Lk 4:41).

Neither Power Nor Glory

The disciples found it hard to think of God’s kingdom except in terms of power. When the Lord began preparing His disciples to see that the Messiah must suffer, “*Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, ‘Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!’ But He turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men’*” (Mt 16:22-23). Later in Jesus’ ministry – despite several previous warnings that the Messiah must suffer – the Lord reiterated His teaching (Lk 9:44-48): “*Let these words sink down into your ears, for the Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of men.’ But they did not understand this saying, and it was hidden from them so that they did not perceive it; and they were afraid to ask Him about this saying.*

“Then a dispute arose among them as to which of them would be greatest. And Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart, took a little child and set him by Him, and said to them, ‘Whoever receives this little child in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me. For he who is least among you all will be great.’”

Despite all this, when Samaritans refuse to allow Jesus entry into their village, the disciples’ reaction still shows their lack of understanding. They had yet to comprehend the ways of God’s kingdom. “*And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, ‘Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?’ But He turned and rebuked them, and said, ‘You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them’*” (Lk 9:54-56).

Even the experience of the resurrection was not sufficient to turn the disciples from their pursuit of power. When they were all gathered in Jerusalem with the risen Christ, the Book of Acts relates, “*... they asked Him, saying, ‘Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’ And He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you*

shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:6-8). It would only be by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that the first Church came to understand the real mission of the Messiah.

Eighth Sunday of St Matthew **A Table in the Wilderness (Mt 14:14-22)**

THE MIRACULOUS FEEDING OF 5000 with five loaves and two fish is reported in each of the four Gospels. In both the earliest and latest Gospels there is an unusual unanimity in the details they relate: more than most other Gospel narratives, including the resurrection. This reflects the great importance which the first Christians attached to this narrative. In it they saw the Lord Jesus connected to the great movements of God in the past, the present and the future.

The Past: the Exodus from Egypt

As is well known, the Gospel of Matthew was written for Jewish believers who were convinced that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. They also saw many Old Testament events as “types,” pointing to New Testament events which fulfill and surpass the Old in God’s plan for our salvation. The early Church Fathers in the Greek and Latin worlds had the same vision. Thus St. Cyril of Alexandria would write, “All that is written about the blessed Moses we affirm to be an icon and a type of that salvation which comes in Christ” (*Glaphyra [Illumination] on Exodus*, 1.3).

The feeding of the 5000 was one such event, in which Christ’s actions reflect that He is the New Moses and more: the One who worked through Moses on behalf of the children of Israel. Just as the exodus from Egypt begins with Pharaoh oppressing the Israelites, the Gospel story begins with Herod’s murder of John the Baptist. While Pharaoh oppresses the Israelites because they were so numerous, Herod kills John because of his moral stance.

Hearing about John’s death, Jesus goes apart, to “*a deserted place*” (Mt 14:13). Jesus, His disciples and the people who came to Him from the cities were in a “desert” just as Moses, his soldiers, and the crowd were in Sinai.

When the Israelites were in the desert with Moses God fed them with manna and quail, which Psalm 78:24 calls “*the bread of heaven.*” While the Galileans were in the wilderness with Jesus, He himself fed them with bread and fish.

The feeding of the Israelites in Sinai was connected to their passage through the Red Sea “*on dry ground*” (Ex 14:23 et al.). The feeding of the 5000 is connected to the miracle of Jesus “*walking on the sea*” (Mt 14:25) which follows immediately. While the Israelites walked on the ground exposed by the parting of the sea, Jesus walks on the sea itself.

The Present: Jesus Nourishes the Church

This event marks the first time in the Gospel that the whole crowd will be invited to eat together with Christ, showing His desire to gather all His followers around a common table with Him. St Hilary of Poitiers noted that the first Church – those who responded to the preaching of Peter – numbered about 5000 men (Acts 4:4). The 5000 fed in the wilderness point to those 5000 who were the first to be nourished by the presence of Christ in His Church.

On that “table” in the wilderness was bread and fish. We recall that, for Christians during the Roman persecutions, the fish was a code-sign for Christ. The letters of the Greek word for fish – *ichthys* – were an anagram for the profession of faith, “Jesus Christ Son of God, Savior.” The bread – which Jesus “*took...blessed...and broke*” (Mt 14: 19) – was an “icon” for the early Christians of the Eucharist in which we receive the Son of God our Savior, the Bread of life.

Thus the feeding of the 5000 points to the Church and its communal meal, the Eucharist.

The Future: the Messianic Banquet

Earlier in Matthew’s Gospel we see Jesus pointing to the future: “*I say to you that many will come from east and west and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven*” (Mt 8:11). He was alluding to the idea of the Messianic Banquet, the great feast that represented for Jews that communion with God, which the coming of the Messiah would bring about.

This feast is described in Isaiah 25:6-9 in terms which make us think of the feeding of the 5000: “*And in this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all people a feast of choice pieces, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of well-refined wines on the lees. And He will destroy on this mountain the surface of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces; the rebuke of His people He will take away from all the earth; for the LORD has spoken. And it will be said in that day: ‘Behold, this is our God; we have waited for Him, and He will save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for Him; we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation.’”* The Messiah would come and restore Israel. The scattered Jews of the world would be drawn back to their homeland and they would all sit down to a great meal of celebration. How could the first Jewish believers in Christ not have thought of this banquet when reflecting on the feeding of the 5000?

When Jesus spoke of many “*coming from east and west,*” He was adding a new note to the concept of this banquet: it would be open to Gentiles and many “*sons of the kingdom*” would be excluded. The kingdom of God – and this, the great feast of the kingdom – would feature Jews and Gentiles eating together (an act forbidden in Jewish tradition). And so in Mt 15:30-38 we find Jesus’ miracle repeated, after He heals the Canaanite woman in the area of Tyre and Sidon. But this time it is 4000 Gentiles who were fed. The feeding of these multitudes – Jews and Gentiles – would proclaim to believing Jews that the time of the Messiah had arrived.

In Our Worship

Byzantine worship includes several allusions to the feeding of the multitudes. In the Divine Liturgy it is prescribed that five loaves be used to prepare the oblation. The Lamb is cut from one of them; the others are used to provide the particles representing the Theotokos and the saints, and the living and the dead for whom we pray. Once again the Church is fed from five loaves.

Five loaves are also used in the rite of *artoklasia* (breaking of the bread) celebrated on major feasts. The priest prays, “O Lord Jesus Christ our God, who blessed the five loaves in the wilderness and thus sustained five thousand men, bless these loaves, along with this wheat, wine and oil, and multiply them in this holy city and for Your whole world, and sanctify the faithful who partake of them...” Traditionally in some Churches many other loaves would be provided to feed the needy while the people sing, “*Rich men have turned poor and gone hungry, but they that seek the Lord shall not be deprived of any good thing.*” Thus the Messianic banquet and the soup kitchen have something in common: both point to the Lord as the ultimate and unfailing nourisher of all mankind.

Ninth Sunday of St Matthew

Who Is Able to Walk on the Sea? (Mt 14:22-34)

THE STORY OF CHRIST coming to His disciples in the midst of the sea is found in all the Gospels except for Luke. The version in Matthew, however, is the only one containing the disciples’ confession: “*Truly You are the Son of God!*” (Mt 14:33).

John describes the scene in a much simpler way: “...*they saw Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near the boat and they were afraid. But He said to them, ‘It is I; do not be afraid.’ Then they willingly received Him into the boat...*” (Jn 6:19-21).

Mark’s version ends with these words: “*They were greatly amazed in themselves beyond measure and marveled for they had not understood about the loaves, because their heart was hardened*” (Mk 6:51-52).

Feeding the Multitude

In each of the Gospels the story of Christ in the sea follows the report of how He fed the five thousand from a few loaves of bread and two fish. Both of these incidents came to be understood as pointing to the divinity of Christ.

In John’s Gospel Jesus confronts the crowd which had followed Him around the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum: “*You seek me, not because you saw the signs but because you ate the loaves and*

were filled. Do not labor for the food which perishes but for the food which endures to everlasting life which the Son of Man will give you because God the Father has set His seal on Him” (Jn 6:26-27).

The people, John suggests, followed Jesus to Capernaum looking for another meal. Jesus’ closest followers, Mark affirms, were not much better. The first disciples “*did not understand about the loaves*” either. They needed another push to help them see just Who was in their midst.

By the time the Gospels were written, however, Christ had risen from the dead. “*Beginning with Moses and the Prophets He had expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself*” (Lk 24:27). The disciples had received the Holy Spirit and began to speak of Jesus in terms reminiscent of God’s dealings with the Jews in the Old Testament. The Gospel pictures of Christ feeding the multitude and walking on the water were drawn with specific Old Testament allusions in mind.

Christ feeding the multitude with bread and fish is described in terms reminiscent of God feeding the Israelites with manna during the exodus from Egypt. Jesus’ words to Philip, “*Where shall we buy bread that these may eat?*” seemed to echo Moses’ words, “*Where can I get meat to give to all this people?*” (Num 11:13) Jesus’ action answered for the believers the response of God to Moses, “*Is this beyond the Lord’s reach?*” (Num 11:23).

The Gospel writers had come to see the One who nourished the Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai as the same One who nourished their descendants on the hillside. But they described the Old Testament feeding with manna as surpassed by the act of the incarnate Christ. While the Old Testament says that each Israelite was allowed only one omer (c. 3½ liters) of manna, for example, those receiving the bread and fish could eat “*as much as they wanted*” (Jn 6:11). While the manna would spoil if not immediately consumed, the bread which Christ gives produces twelve baskets of leftovers. The message would be clear to Jewish believers: Christ is the One who fed Israel in the wilderness and now outdoes what He did in the past!

Walking on Water

The image of Christ walking on the sea is also rooted in the Old Testament which contains several references to walking on water. The fifth-century disciple of St Jerome, Chromatius, writes that God is the One who walked on water in the Scriptures and He is the One who walks on water today:

“Who was able to walk on the sea if not the Creator of the universe? He, indeed, about whom the Holy Spirit and spoken long ago through blessed Job: ‘*He alone stretched out the heavens and walked on the sea as well as the earth*’ [Jb 9:8].

“Solomon spoke about Him in the person of Wisdom: ‘*I dwelt in the highest places and my throne was in a pillar of cloud. I orbited the heavenly sphere alone and walked on the waves of the sea*’ [Sir 24:4-5]

“David likewise declared in his psalm: ‘*O God, Your way was through the sea, Your path through the great waters*’ [Ps76:19, LXX]...

“What is more evident than this testimony? What is more clear? It points to Him walking on the water as well as on the ground. This is God’s only begotten Son, who long ago according to the will of the Father stretched out the heavens and at the time of Moses in a pillar of cloud showed the people a way to follow” (*Tractate on Matthew 52,2*).

Both the feeding of the multitude and the walking on water show Christ acting as only God had acted in the history of Israel.

The Confession of Peter

Only in Matthew’s narrative do we read of Peter’s attempting to walk on the water. Peter was an experienced fisherman by trade; presumably he knew how to handle himself in water. In any event Jesus’ rescue of Peter prompts the others in the boat to affirm, “*Truly You are the Son of God*” (Mt 14:33).

The Gospel of Matthew is so crafted that its climax is Peter’s own confession of faith two chapters later: Jesus said to the disciples, “*Who do you say that I am?*’ *Simon Peter answered and said, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’*” (Mt 16:15-16). Jesus responds with the praise of Peter and his faith, “*on this rock I will build my church*” (v.18). What was so special about Peter’s confession if the disciples in the boat had previously said the same thing?

Although most English-language Bibles translate both confessions the same, there is a significant difference in the original Greek. While Peter says, *Su ei o Xristos o uios tou theou* (“You are the Christ, the Son of God”), the disciples in the boat say, *alithos theou uios ei*, without the definite article *o*. This is perhaps better translated as “Truly you are a son of God.” The disciples confess Jesus as a holy one, as one beloved of God. But Peter confesses Christ’s unique sonship, which would indeed be the cornerstone of the Christian Church’s faith.

A Spiritual Interpretation

The fourth-century Bishop of Poitiers, St Hilary, lived during the major theological controversies on the Trinity and the Incarnation which shook the Church. He saw this event as a preview of the Lord’s Second Coming which would bring an end to these and any tribulations affecting the Church on earth:

“Once [Jesus] got into the vessel, the wind and the sea calmed down. After His return in eternal splendor, peace and tranquility are in store for the Church. With His arrival made manifest, all people will exclaim with great wonder, ‘Truly You are the Son of God.’

Everyone will then declare absolutely and publicly that the Son of God has restored peace to the Church, not in physical lowliness but in heavenly glory.”

Tenth Sunday of St Matthew

Mustard Seed Faith (Mt 17:14-23)

THE HEALING OF AN EPILEPTIC described in Matthew 17:14-21 took place late in Christ’s public ministry. One indication is that the very next verses speak of Christ warning His disciples about His coming Passion (vv. 22-23). It was only as the time of His earthly ministry was drawing to a close that He began insisting on what was about to happen to Him.

Another sign that this healing took place late in Christ’s earthly ministry is the reaction of His disciples. Their question, *“Why could we not cast it out?”* (v. 19), shows that they had already been healing the sick and exorcizing evil powers in Christ’s name. As we read earlier in Matthew’s Gospel, Christ had already given them this power: *“And when He had called His twelve disciples to Him, He gave them power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease...Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give”* (Mt 10:1, 8).

Mustard Seed Faith

Despite all this, we find the apostles powerless here. Furthermore Christ says that they could not heal this epileptic *“because of your unbelief”* (v. 20). Granted that the Gospels show how uncertain the disciples’ faith actually was, even after the resurrection. It was only when they received the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost that they became bold in their proclamation of Christ. Then the sureness of their faith was matched by the hardships they endured and by the signs and wonders they freely performed. At this point, however, the apostles had faith, but it was not extraordinary.

Every believer is by definition a person of faith but not every believer has the kind of unwavering faith the Lord describes in Mt 17:20 – *“...assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”* This kind of faith – some commentators call it “deep faith” – is clearly not common, but it does exist in the Church to witness the truth of the Lord’s words.

This is why, in 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, St Paul identifies a number of particular gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit, among them healings, miracles, prophecy... and faith. This may strike us as odd. Working miracles is clearly a gift given to some, not to all, but also, it seems, is “mustard seed” faith.

Countless examples of extraordinary faith have been recorded both in the Scriptures and in the annals of the saints. Although we may not see them ourselves, there are numerous examples of “mustard seed” faith in our own day. Two such instances are described here as a reminder that Christ’s idea of “mustard seed” faith is not an exaggeration.

“Moving Mountains” in Siberia

Imprisoned in a Soviet work camp during the 1940s and 50s, Father Arseny, a Russian Orthodox priest, intervened in a fight to help a young prisoner named Alexei. For “troublemaking,” he and Alexei were both sentenced to 48 hours in an unheated cell where the floor and walls were covered with sheets of metal. Outside it was -22°F. They would probably freeze to death within a few hours.

Alexei was sure they were going to die, but Father Arseny had a different view. “We are here all alone, Alexei; for two days no one will come. We will pray. For the first time God has allowed us to pray aloud in this camp, with our full voice. We will pray and the rest is God's will!”

As Fr Arseny's biographer would later tell it, “The cold had taken Alexei completely; his entire body was numb. But suddenly the cell, the cold, the numbness of his whole body, his pain, and his fear had disappeared. Father Arseny's voice filled the cell, but was it a cell? Alexei turned to Father Arseny and was stunned. Everything around had been transformed. An awful thought came: ‘I am losing my mind, this is the end, I am dying.’”

“The cell had grown wider, the ray of moonlight had disappeared. There was a bright light and Father Arseny, dressed in brilliant white vestments, his hands lifted up, was praying aloud. The clothing on Father Arseny was the same as on the priest Alexei had once seen in church. Alexei saw with surprise that there were two men assisting Father Arseny. Both were dressed in the same bright vestments and both shone with an indefinable white light. Alexei did not see their faces, but sensed that they were beautiful.

“How much time had passed he did not know, but Father Arseny turned to him and said, ‘Go, Alyosha! Lie down, you are tired. I will keep praying; you will hear me.’ Alexei lay down on the metal-covered floor, closed his eyes, and kept on praying. The words of prayer filled his whole being. All was peaceful and warm. It was important not to forget these words, to remember them all his life.

“Father Arseny prayed, and the two others in bright garments prayed with him and served him. The only things that remained in Alexei's memory were the words of the prayer, a warming and joyful light, Father Arseny praying, the two others in clothes of light, and an enormous, incomparable feeling of inner renewing warmth.

“Somebody struck the door, the frozen lock squealed, and voices could be heard from the outside of the cell. Alexei opened his eyes. Father Arseny was still praying. The two in garments of light blessed him and Alexei and slowly left. The blinding light was fading and the cell at last became dark and, as before, cold and gloomy.

“‘Get up, Alexei! They have come for us,’ said Father Arseny. [*Two days had passed. One of the party, a prison doctor was astounded.*] ‘Amazing! How could they have survived? It's true, though; they're warm.’ The doctor walked into the cell, looked around it, and asked, ‘What kept you warm?’

“‘Our faith in God, and prayer,’ Father Arseny answered...’

“The barracks met them as if they had risen from the dead. Everyone asked, ‘What saved you?’ They both answered, ‘God saved us.’” (*Father Arseny, 1893-1973: Priest, Prisoner, Spiritual Father* by his spiritual son, Alexander)

“Moving Mountains” in the Ivory Coast

The faith of ordinary people is often helped by that of extraordinary believers, the saints. After buying her sons, Christian and Elie el-Chartouny, a new car, their mother took them to the Maronite church in Abidjan for the Divine Liturgy on May 8, the birthday of St. Charbel. However, the boys decided to skip the Liturgy and go for a drive instead. Their mother knelt in front of Saint Charbel’s icon, asking him to protect them and bring them back safe.

At about 11:30 p.m. the woman heard her sons when they came back home; relieved, she went to sleep. When she woke up in the morning, she found the boys on the balcony, still awake, and the new car wrecked. The boys told her that they were driving too fast and their car went off the road, hitting an electrical post 10 km away from home. At that moment, an old monk showed up, but they didn’t see his face. He came up to the car and pulled it away from the post! He tied a rope to it and pulled it extremely fast, crossing those 10 km in two minutes. Stopping the car in front of their house, he removed the rope and disappeared. The mother’s prayer and Saint Charbel’s intervention had saved the boys.

Unwavering faith can move mountains, cars or freezing cold. Just so you know.

Eleventh Sunday of St Matthew

70x7 = Infinity (Mt 18:23-35)

WHAT IS THE HARDEST THING to accept in Christianity? Is it the doctrine of the Trinity? The idea that God became man? Or that the Eucharist is the body and blood of Christ? While these teachings may meet with obstacles in our minds, the hardest thing for us to accept in practice is the absolute need to forgive others.

In our broken humanity we are much more at home with seeking vengeance. We are often more comfortable with the pre-Christian vision of a vengeful God: “*And the LORD said to him, “Therefore, whoever kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold”* (Gen 4:15).

The Torah enshrined the concept of vengeance in its laws concerning violence: “*But if any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe*” (Ex 21:23-25). While modern law is not as demanding, it still endorses the idea of vengeance, clothed in modern dress as “Justice” and “Closure” (which often comes down to a question of money). Perhaps the best comment on this principle is by the Lebanese author Kahlil Gibran, “An eye for an eye, and the whole world would be blind.”

Forgiveness: the Heart of the Gospel

Contemporary Catholic writer Scott Hurd describes the Gospel ideal of forgiveness as “...both the central idea of Christianity, and an assault on the conventional human understanding of justice.” It is an “assault” because it challenges the very nature of the world’s way of handling things. It is the heart of our faith because it is the basic attitude of God toward us and the model of how we can act as the images of God.

“Yours it is to show mercy...” we say to God in many prayers, because He is by nature the forgiving Father, the One who runs to welcome home His prodigal children after they stray. God incarnate in Jesus Christ expresses this forgiveness in His humanity when He prayed for His killers, “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do*” (Lk 23:34). And so it is in imitation of God that His disciple, the Protomartyr St Stephen, prayed for those who delivered him to death: “*And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not charge them with this sin.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep*” (Acts 7:59-60).

That forgiveness is required, not an option, in the Christian life we see from the Lord’s words in the Sermon on the Mount. Christ would come back to this theme again and again, doubtlessly more often than the Gospels record:

- “*Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you*” (Lk 6:37-38).
- “*Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him*” (Lk 17:3-4).

Forgiveness is particularly necessary when we presume to pray:

- “*And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.*” (Mk 11:25-26).

It is especially necessary when we look to make an oblation:

- “*Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift*” (Mt 5:23-24).

The kiss of peace at the Eucharist of all the historic Churches is a rite based on this requirement of the Lord.

The Parable of the Unjust Debtor

In story form this passage, unique to Matthew, repeats the Lord's fundamental teaching that forgiving others is a prerequisite for being forgiven by God.

The call for the godly-minded to forgive others was already common in late Judaism, but in a limited way. Thus the second century rabbinic scholar Issi ben Judah wrote, "If a man commits an offence once, they forgive him; if he commits an offence a second time, they forgive him; if he commits an offence a third time, they forgive him; the fourth time they do not forgive." Rabbi Yossi bar Hanina, writing in the second half of the third century AD counsels, "He who begs forgiveness from his neighbor must not do so more than three times."

By this standard Peter was being downright generous when he suggested forgiving seven times as the new standard. Christ replies by turning around Lamech's rule of vengeance ("*If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, Then Lamech seventy-sevenfold*" – Gen 4:24). Now, Christ says, consider forgiving others seventy times seven, a number meaning "without limit."

St John Chrysostom saw a particularly damning indictment of the tendency to hold grudges or seek vengeance in this parable. Pointing to the fate of the unforgiving servant, Christ says, "*So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses*" (Mt 18:35). Chrysostom offers this interpretation: "Note that He did not say 'your Father' but 'my Father' for it is not proper for God to be called the Father of one who is so wicked and malicious" (*Homily on Matthew* 61, 4).

These harsh words go unheard by many in the Church who hold grudges, often for many years. People often feel that broken relationships have nothing to do with our faith. In reality our unwillingness to forgive says that we think God is a sucker for being so compassionate: we know better. As Mother Teresa of Calcutta once said, the rift is with more than our relative or neighbor. "For you see, in the end, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway."

Twelfth Sunday of St Matthew

In What Is Our Joy? (Mt 19:16-26)

THE THREE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS – Matthew, Mark and Luke – all record Christ's meeting with a rich young man who sought His guidance. The young man (Luke calls him a "ruler") seeks to know what to do to have eternal life. Christ responds by telling him to keep the commandments. When pressed to be more specific, the Lord begins by listing the Ten Commandments. Then He quotes the Great Commandment from Leviticus, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*"

The young man says that He has kept all these commandments from his youth and presses the Lord to tell him what more he should do. The Lord Jesus then attempts to lead him from a stage of merely being obedient to God's commandments to one of being in a relationship of love with God.

Christ tells the young man what must happen "*If you want to be perfect*" (v. 21): he must give his wealth to the poor and follow Jesus as He went from place to place proclaiming the Kingdom of God. The Lord offered this inquirer the chance to join the company of His disciples, to show that he preferred life with Christ to enjoying his possessions. The young man declined.

What Does It Mean to Be Perfect?

The Lord has held out this goal of "perfection" before, in the Sermon on the Mount. Being "perfect" seems an impossible task if we think it means absolute perfection without any fault or stain. In the Greek of the New Testament (and our Liturgy), however, to be "perfect" or to be "complete" might best be translated "to be all we were meant to be:" living in the light of the Lord, walking in His way. Jesus pushed His hearers to go beyond the commandments to arrive at a more godly way of life.

The Lord then contrasted regard for God with attachment to one's belongings. They will ever be competing for a person's devotion. As Christ tells His listeners, "*Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*" (Mt 6:21).

The path to perfection as Christ teaches begins with making a choice between following Him and devoting oneself to enjoying the things of the world. As He said so clearly, "*No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon*" (Mt 6:24).

Do I Serve Mammon?

Most of us do not think that we are "serving mammon." We may even look down on the obviously greedy or on people driven by addictions. Yes, there are people who "serve" money, drugs or sex. They may be slaves to alcohol or tobacco. We don't believe that we are controlled like that.

We may not be overly driven to making inordinate amounts of money, but we should consider that dependency on mammon takes many forms. We should become more conscious of how many of this world's riches we feel that we "need," that we "can't do without," from our morning coffee to the latest smart phone. We don't physically need these things; it is our ego that requires them. Is this not another form of serving mammon?

To reflect on just how ego is tied to the things of this world we are, consider how difficult it is to fast for any length of time: how much we feel the loss of a favorite food and to what lengths we go to find a pleasing substitute... and how happy we are when the Fast is over.

In addition “mammon” can also include the non-material wealth of this world: power, prestige or social position. How do we feel when another is promoted over us, receives a bigger bonus or a more lucrative assignment. Serving mammon takes many forms and they all interfere in some way with our relationship to God.

The Fathers on the Power of Mammon

When St John Chrysostom commented on this Gospel passage he noted that being devoted to the things of this world did not make you free. “The rich man is a slave, being subject to loss, and in the power of every one wishing to do him harm” (Homily 46 on Matthew). Serving mammon is a form of slavery

In another place Chrysostom said, “If you see someone greedy for many things, you should consider him the poorest of all, even if he has acquired everyone’s money. If, on the other hand, you see someone with few needs, you should count him the richest of all, even if he has acquired nothing. Be accustomed to judge poverty and affluence by the disposition of the mind not by the substance of his possessions.” Serving mammon is a kind of poverty.

A century before on another continent, St Cyprian of Carthage had said much the same thing. “The property of the wealthy holds them in chains . . . which shackle their courage and choke their faith and hamper their judgment and throttle their souls. They think of themselves as owners, whereas it is they rather who are owned: enslaved as they are to their own property, they are not the masters of their money but its slaves.”

Asceticism and the Pursuit of Perfection

The choice between serving God and mammon is at the heart of Christian asceticism, where making that choice is lived and experienced on a daily basis. It is most intensely observed by monastics but also by Christians living in this world, married or single. A person living an ascetic life tries to distance himself or herself from being tied to the passing pleasures of the world so as to be more open to following Christ and living the life of God.

People often equate life with God to the world to come. It is clear to most people, even in the wider society, that our earthly attachments have no place in heaven. A recent installment in Dan Piraro’s widely syndicated cartoon strip, *Bizarro!* makes this point. Two long- time residents of heaven are observing two younger ones. “Most of the new arrivals seem incapable of conversation,” the eldest notes. “They just stare at their hands in despair” trying to text, but there are no electronic devices in heaven!

Yes, there are no cigarettes, no movies, no alcohol, in heaven. To be without them would surely frustrate someone who had made enjoying these things the focus of life. Thus some Christian thinkers have observed that to be in heaven without the object of one's passions would actually be to dwell in hell.

But the differences between this age and the age to come are not really the point. Life with God, transformation into the image of Christ, begins now with baptism. That life is meant to be experienced in ever deeper ways as we mature in the Christian life here as well as in the life of the age to come. The Christian ascetic seeks to avoid anything which can captivate our minds and, at best, distract us from that relationship to God. Following Christ is meant to be the real source of our joy here on earth as well as in the world to come. Serving Christ in worship and ministering to Him in the needy should be our joys, rather than obligations to be gotten through as quickly as possible. The Christian life, to paraphrase St Catherine of Siena, is meant to be "heaven all the way to heaven."

Thirteenth Sunday of St Matthew

The Vineyard of the Lord (Mt 21:33-42)

THE HOLY LAND IS DESCRIBED in the Torah as "*A land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of olive oil and honey*" (Deut. 8:8). All of these so-called seven species have figured in Biblical imagery, decorative arts and liturgy, but none more than the vine, the vineyard and the grape.

The prophet Isaiah used the image of a vineyard to describe the condition of Israel in his day, the eighth century BC: "*My Well-beloved has a vineyard on a very fruitful hill. He dug it up and cleared out its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. ... For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are His pleasant plant*" (Is 5:1-2, 7).

Isaiah's imagery reappears frequently in the Scriptures and resonates deeply among believers to this day. The vineyard represents God's people – Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New – and we continually ask God's blessing upon it in the words of Psalm 80: "*Look down from heaven and see, and visit this vine and the vineyard which Your right hand has planted*" (vv 15, 16). At hierarchical Liturgies the bishop still prays over the people with the words of this psalm.

Trouble in the Vineyard

But all was not right in Isaiah's vineyard: the crop was not as the landowner expected. *"He looked for justice, but behold, oppression; for righteousness, but behold, a cry for help"* (v. 7). Found wanting, the vineyard would be judged and left desolate.

Those who heard Jesus' parable of the vineyard (Mt 21:33-46) knew well that it echoed Isaiah's imagery. But the Lord was even more specific in laying the blame for the vineyard's poor state on the vinedressers. They were the ones who mistreated the landowner's servants and even his son.

After the Lord cataloged the sins of the vinedressers – beating, stoning, and killing those who were sent to them – He asked His hearers, *"Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?"* (v. 40) He does not depict the landowner as vengeful, but His hearers are quick to see the consequences of the vinedressers' actions. *"He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons"* (v. 41).

The punch line to this parable is not included in the passage read liturgically. The Lord concluded by saying, *"Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it"* (v. 43). The vinedressers will lose control of the vineyard they have mismanaged and others will take their place.

Christ could not have confronted the Jewish leadership in a clearer or more challenging way. The Gospel goes on to say that they got the point: *"Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them. But when they sought to lay hands on Him, they feared the multitudes, because they took Him for a prophet"* (vv. 45-46).

The Stone Rejected

In the Gospel Christ tells this parable in Jerusalem a few days before His arrest. It follows on His cleansing of the temple and climaxes the message that He has been proclaiming throughout His ministry: that the Kingdom of heaven is near at hand and that the Kingdom will be accomplished in Him. With that in mind He quotes Psalm 118:22-23, *"Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?"* (v.42)

The Lord Jesus Himself is the stone rejected by the builders, the Jewish leadership, who becomes the chief cornerstone with His death and resurrection. Life in God will depend on a person's acceptance of Christ, and so He adds *"And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder"* (v.44).

Many of those who witnessed Christ's crucifixion were alive to see the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. The temple was razed to the ground and the high priests and the Sadducees

ceased to exist. The Kingdom had been taken from them and a new Israel, the Church, was being erected with Christ as the chief cornerstone.

Fourteenth Sunday of St Matthew

Are You Invited? (Mt 22:2-14)

THE GOSPEL PARABLE READ at today's Divine Liturgy is actually two stories with two different if complementary points. The first concerns those invited to the banquet and those who finally came. The second is the issue of the so-called "wedding garment."

The Gospel of Matthew depicts Christ encountering increasing opposition the closer He came to the center of the Jewish establishment, Jerusalem. In Matthew 21:1-17 Jesus enters the Holy City, ejects the money changers from the temple and confronts the chief priests. Then we read four vignettes, each criticizing the Jewish leadership in the harshest of terms.

The first such condemnation is the episode of the withered fig tree (Mt 21:18-22). Then, in Mt 21:28-32, we read about the two sons: one who professed obedience to his father but in words only – a veiled criticism of the Pharisees who claimed to know the will of God – and the second who actually did the father's will.

In the words of St Hilary of Poitiers, the religious leaders "...put their faith in the Law and despised repentance from sin, glorying instead in the noble prerogative that they had from Abraham" (*Homily on Matthew 21*, 13). The second son recalls the sinners who repented at the preaching of John the Baptist: the tax collectors and harlots who enter the kingdom of God before "the righteous" because one can repent of greed and lust, but not of the denial for the need of repentance. Finally in verses 33-46 we read the parable of the wicked vinedressers whose infidelity leads the owner of the vineyard to lease it to others. And, as the Gospel reminds us, "*When the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them*" (Mt 21:45).

The Royal Wedding

The story of the wedding banquet is in many ways an echo of the parable of the vinedressers. In each story an important person reaches out to his people; he is rebuffed, and finally turns to others. The vineyard owner in the first parable and the king in the second represent God. The disdainful tenants and the invited guests signify the people of Israel. The new tenants of the first story and the new guests of the second represent the Gentiles who would respond in faith.

It may be hard for us to imagine the reaction of the invited guests to the banquet. An invitation to such an occasion would be esteemed, even coveted. "*But,*" as the Gospel says, "*they made light of it and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business*" (Mt 22:5). It is as if Matthew were describing our own day rather than his. This is the way many Christians – our

own friends and relatives sadly among them – react to their invitation to the Eucharistic Banquet week after week. But how could an invitation to a royal wedding be dismissed so easily?

Couching this parable in terms of a royal wedding is a way of saying that the initiative of God in sending the prophets to Israel, announcing the coming Messiah was at least as compelling as a kingly gala. One after another, prophets came and were recognized in some way as foretelling what was to come. At last the Forerunner came and proclaimed “Everything is ready – this is the Lamb of God” but was ignored by many who heard him. Those invited had so lost themselves in the concerns of the everyday world that they treated the invitation like junk mail.

Those Who Accept the Invitation

The messengers seek out – not the pillars of society at their farms and businesses – but the insignificant on the highways, representing the Gentiles. According to the Jewish opinion of the day, the Gentiles are inferior in God’s eyes to the Chosen People. Nevertheless, they respond to the king’s invitation where the important people did not.

Churchmen are often criticized for catering to the well-to-do: landowners, benefactors, etc. Pope Francis of Rome has repeatedly pushed Catholic leaders to focus their efforts on the poor without ignoring the leaders of society. In fact he notes, what generally happens in our world is the opposite. “If investments in the banks fail, ‘Oh, it’s a tragedy,’” he said at a Pentecost vigil in Rome; “But if people die of hunger or don’t have food or health, nothing happens. This is our crisis today.” In the language of Mt 22, Pope Francis might be called the Bishop of the Highways.

The Wedding Garment

In the second part of this parable the people from the highways have come to the banquet, but one is not wearing the appropriate “wedding garment.” In Jewish tradition this meant finery, one’s best clothing. A Jewish parable tells of a king inviting people to a banquet. Some went home and prepared immediately; others continued working and therefore arrived still in their work clothes and so were not allowed in. In the Gospel this theme of readiness is frequently found in Jesus’ teachings, particularly in the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Mt 25:1-13).

Many Fathers interpreted the “appropriate garment” to mean a virtuous life. The Gentiles may have replaced the leadership of Israel in the People of God, but if they ignored the Gospel way of life, they too would be excluded. St Gregory the Dialogist saw the garment as woven out of love of God and love of others. “These are great precepts,” he wrote, “sublime precepts, and for many they are hard to fulfill: nevertheless this is the wedding garment. And whoever sits down at the wedding feast without it, let him watch with fear, for when the King comes in, he shall be cast forth.”

The “Bridegroom Matins” of Holy Week uses this interpretation as the basis of its beloved exapostilarion, “I see Your bridal chamber adorned, O my Savior, but I do not possess the right garment that I may enter therein. Brighten the robe of my soul, O Giver of light, and save me!”

We much acknowledge our own spiritual emptiness (“I have no garment”) and seek God’s grace (“Brighten the robe of my soul”) to be made worthy of a place at the banquet.

How shall I enter the splendor of Your holy place, for I am unworthy? If I dare to enter the bridal chamber, my clothing will accuse me, since it is not a wedding garment, and I shall be chained and cast out by the angels. O Lord, cleanse the stain of my soul and save me, for you are the Lover of Mankind.

O Bridegroom more beautiful than all men, who have called us to the spiritual banquet of Your bridal chamber, remove from me the ill-clad image of my iniquities by this sharing in Your sufferings. Adorn me with the glorious robe of Your beauty and manifest me as a radiant guest of Your Kingdom, for You are compassionate.

From the Bridegroom Matins of Holy Week

Fifteenth Sunday of St Matthew

No Greater Commandment (Mt 22:35-46)

IN OUR SCHOOL DAYS we all were subjected to “trick questions,” designed to fool us into giving an incorrect answer. Is this the kind of question which the “expert in the Law” described in Matthew’s Gospel asked Jesus to “test Him”? Was he trying to trick Jesus with this question or does “test” here mean something else?

The way in which this encounter is described in the Gospel of Mark can help us understand how the lawyer was “testing” Jesus. Matthew, when reporting this incident simply says, “*One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question...*” (Mt 22:35). Mark, however, gives us the man’s motivation: “*Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked Him, ‘Of all the commandments, which is the most important?’*” (Mk 12:28)

Mark’s explanation suggests that the lawyer was not trying to trap Jesus, but to probe His view of the Law *because* He showed a good understanding of it. The man was testing Jesus, not in the sense of trying to trap Him but to learn His understanding of the Law’s deepest meaning. He sensed that Jesus had a more profound view of the Law than the Sadducees who were debating with Him (see Mk 12:18-27). And so his question was motivated by a sincere desire to deepen his own appreciation of the Scripture.

The Lord’s Answer

The Lord did not answer this inquirer with a new teaching. He simply repeated the commandments found in the Torah. Mark quoted the preceding verse as well, “*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength*” (Deut. 6:4, 5). Both Matthew and Mark give us variant readings of the commandment. The Hebrew text of Deuteronomy mentions only “heart, soul and strength.” Matthew replaces “strength” with “mind”, while Mark adds “mind.” Since there were various texts of the Old Testament Scriptures in use at the time that the Gospels were written, the Evangelists may have been simply using the version known in their community.

The Lord’s second commandment is also found in the Torah. In Leviticus 19:18 we read, “*Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.*” The Torah here identifies one’s “neighbor” as another Jew (“anyone among your people”). The Lord Jesus would expand that definition in the parable of the Good Samaritan. There it is the Samaritan, reviled by Jews, who is portrayed as the model of the good neighbor. Clearly for the Lord, ethnicity is not the standard for judging who is my neighbor.

In the Torah these two commandments are found in different books, so why are they connected here? The answer found in the Greek Fathers is both simple and profound: man is God’s image. The person who loves another as being in God’s image is, in fact, loving God who created him. A true believer cannot look at another without seeing God in him or her.

The Lawyer’s Response

The last thing the Lord says in Matthew is different from the text in Mark, but both mean the same thing. Matthew says, “*All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments*” (v. 40). Mark, however, simply notes: “*There is no commandment greater than these*” (v. 31). Commentators from the earliest centuries have thought that Matthew was writing for believers with a background in Judaism while Mark was writing in a Gentile community. It would make sense for Matthew and not Mark to cite the Hebrew Scriptures in making the same point.

In Mark the scene is concluded by citing the lawyer’s reaction and Jesus’ response. “*Well said, teacher,’ the man replied. ‘You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.’ When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ And from then on no one dared ask Him any more questions*” (vv.32-34).

The lawyer expresses what Jesus had been saying so often in other circumstances during His ministry: it is love, rather than religiosity, that expresses the will of God for us: “*Go and learn the meaning of the words, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ I did not come to call the righteous but sinners*” (Mt 9:13, also 12:7). The Lord’s response is one we would all like to hear from His mouth.

The Lord's Turn to Ask a Question

As Matthew tells it, the Lord then turned to the Pharisees with a question of His own. “*What do you think about the Messiah?*” He asked. “*Whose son is he?*” *‘The son of David,’ they replied*” (vv.41, 42).

In Jewish belief of the day the Messiah was called “the son of David.” In part, this referred to the prophecy which Nathan pronounced to King David: “*When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom... And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever*” (2 Sm 7:12-13, 16). On one hand this prophecy referred to the physical line of David’s descendants, his own son Solomon and his sons after him. But David’s descendants did not rule forever. When the Greeks conquered the Holy Land in the third century BC, the royal house of David came to an end.

When the Greeks were defeated by the Maccabees, another line, the Hasmonians, who had no connection to the house of David, began to rule. This prompted some Jewish thinkers to see “the throne of David” in a spiritual way, referring to the presence of the Messiah. In this sense many people in Jesus’ lifetime referred to the Messiah as “the Son of David.”

Jesus’ question helped nudge His followers toward a deeper understanding of His Messianic role. He quoted Psalm 110 which begins, “*The LORD said to my Lord, ‘Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool’*” (v. 1). The first “Lord” clearly referred to God, but who was the person David, the Psalmist, called “my Lord”? Jesus then posed His question, “*If David then calls Him ‘Lord,’ how is He his Son?*” (v. 45)

Jesus’ suggestion that the Messiah was greater than King David helped His followers to understand Him as more than just a prophet. If the Messiah was not just an ordinary man, could He be the Son of God in a unique way?

The reading concludes, “*And no one was able to answer Him a word, nor from that day on did anyone dare question Him anymore*” (v.46). To question Him might take them into unfamiliar territory – territory which even His closest disciples could not imagine until after His resurrection.

Sixteenth Sunday of St Matthew
Stories That Tell a Story (Mt 25:14-30; Lk 8:8)

THE CULTURE OF WESTERN EUROPE which we have inherited is based on the ideas and methods of Greek philosophy. We use abstractions, logic and the devices of classical thought to express ourselves. That sort of thinking was alien to the Semites of the ancient Middle East. Where a classic philosopher might speak of generosity, a Middle Easterner would tell a story about a generous person. The parables found in Scripture are examples of stories told to teach a truth.

The greatest number of parables in Scripture are found in the Gospels but the Lord Jesus was hardly the first to teach in parables. One of the most striking parables in the Old Testament is found in 2 Samuel 12:1-9. In it the prophet Nathan confronts King David who has arranged the death of Uriah the Hittite so that he could marry Uriah's wife. Nathan makes his point with a story:

“Then the LORD sent Nathan to David. And he came to him, and said to him: ‘There were two men in one city, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had exceedingly many flocks and herds. But the poor man had nothing, except one little ewe lamb which he had bought and nourished; and it grew up together with him and with his children. It ate of his own food and drank from his own cup and lay in his bosom; and it was like a daughter to him. And a traveler came to the rich man, who refused to take from his own flock and from his own herd to prepare a meal for the wayfaring man who had come to him; but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it

“So David's anger was greatly aroused against the man, and he said to Nathan, ‘As the LORD lives, the man who has done this shall surely die! And he shall restore fourfold for the lamb, because he did this thing and because he had no pity.’ Then Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man!’ ...” (vv. 1-7).

Parables such as this use concrete narratives to express abstract arguments. Here Nathan was reproaching David for his own actions under the figure of the rich man in the parable. Very likely, the parable was much more effective than a discourse on the Commandments would have been.

Parable of the Talents

The Lord Jesus teaches His followers about what we would call stewardship in the parable of the talents. In the Mediterranean world a talent (*talanton*) was a measure of weight. In the Palestine of Christ's day a talent would have equaled 130 pounds, as of a precious metal (silver or gold). Today a pound of gold might be worth \$15,000.00, so three talents (390 pounds) was a considerable sum.

The master expects his servants to be productive: to increase the value of what he was given. The first two servants in the parable did exactly that; the third fellow buried the money in the ground. He did not squander what he had received, but he did not increase its value either.

On his return the master commended the first two servants, but told the third: *“You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have*

received back my own with interest" (vv. 26, 27). Even that would have been productive but the servant did not even make the effort to do that.

The Lord points us to the parable's spiritual meaning in its first line: "*The kingdom of heaven is like...*" (v.14) this. There will be productive servants who will be rewarded and foolish ones who will be humiliated... and worse. As we read earlier in Matthew, "*Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire*" (Mt 7:19). The basis for this judgement will be what the servants have done with the wealth entrusted to them.

When Will the Master Arrive?

There have been several answers to this question because the parable applies equally to all of them, human nature being what it is. Perhaps the original reference was to Christ's coming to Jerusalem which exposed some servants as productive and others as wasteful. In this interpretation it is the Messiah Himself who is the pearl of great price. Some received Him to their profit; others wasted their chance of entering His joy.

Some have said that the Master entrusts Himself to us in any number of ways: in the Scriptures, the Eucharist, the Church, the poor. The way we respond to His presence shows whether we are bearing fruit or not.

The most common interpretation has been that at the Second Coming of Christ His servants will receive what their deeds deserve.

What Do the Talents Represent?

The Fathers offered varied answers to this question as well. St. John Chrysostom said that, "This parable is delivered against those who will not assist their neighbors with money, or words, or in any other way, but hide all that they have." St. Jerome interpreted it to mean that, "In the five, two, and one talent, we recognize the diversity of gifts wherewith we have been entrusted." St. Gregory of Nyssa expands on this thought, pointing to all the gifts believers receive in and for the sake of the Church: "Let him then who has understanding look that he hold not his peace; let him who has affluence not be dead to mercy; let him who has the art of guiding life communicate its use with his neighbor; and him who has the faculty of eloquence intercede with the rich for the poor."

Each of us in the Church has received talents of various kinds and degrees. As St Paul taught, they are meant to be used for the benefit of the community: "*Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness*" (Rom 12: 6-8). If we use our gifts to benefit the Church they will increase and bear fruit; if we bury them we will incur the judgment of the Master.

Seventeenth Sunday of St Matthew – Sunday of the Canaanite

Unwavering Faith (Mt 15:21-28)

THE MIDDLE EAST TODAY IS an ethnic and religious jumble: Mediterranean and European Jews, Eastern and Western Christians, Sunni and Shiite Muslims and innumerable other variations on each of these themes. This is not merely a present-day phenomenon. This is the way it has been throughout the Christian era and even earlier. The Middle East and the entire Mediterranean region have always been home to a rich mix of peoples.

The Jews always lived surrounded by others. The coastal regions, including Caesarea, the regional capital, Haifa, Tyre and Sidon were at first controlled by the seafaring Phoenicians. Later it was the Greeks and Romans who dominated in these areas. By the time of Christ, archaeologists, affirm there were upwards of 30 Gentile towns in what we call the Holy Land. The area of Capernaum, where the Lord lived as an adult, was called “Galilee of the Gentiles” (Mt 4:15) since there was a great number of them there.

During their first years in the Holy Land strict Jews sought to minimize their dealings with the Gentiles. God’s people were too young in their faith to withstand the cultural pressure of their idolatrous neighbors. When Jezebel, daughter of the king of Sidon married Ahab, the Samaritan king of Israel in the ninth century BC, she promoted the worship of the Phoenician gods and many, including the king, followed her lead. He *“began to serve Baal and worship him. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab also made an Asherah pole [i.e. a shrine to the Phoenician fertility goddess] and did more to arouse the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than did all the kings of Israel before him”* (1 Kings 16:31-33). Ahab so decimated the prophets of the God of Israel that the Prophet Elijah complained, *“I am the only one of the LORD’S prophets left”* (1 Kings 17:23). Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal and convinced the people to destroy them and return to the LORD.

Centuries later, by the time of Christ, however, the Jews were much more secure in their conviction that the God of Israel was the only true God. They had been scattered throughout the Mediterranean world and retained their faith. Furthermore, as contacts with the Jews increased, Gentiles had been drawn to the faith of Israel. Even Roman military officers – such as the one who begged Jesus to heal his servant (Mt 8:4-14) or Cornelius, who invited Peter to share his message (Acts 10) – had accepted the God of the Jews as the only true God.

Still, strict Jews refrained as much as possible from contact with Gentiles. As Peter told Cornelius, *“You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation”* (Acts 10:28). Yet we find Jesus going to the region of Tyre and Sidon or across the Jordan without hesitation. He was about to bring salvation to the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

Christ's encounter with the woman seeking His aid showed that true faith in God was not the exclusive property of the Jews, and that Gentiles could have even greater faith than any in Israel. He works miracles among the Gentiles as He did among the Jews. At one time it has been necessary for God's people to be separate from the Gentiles. Now it was time for God's people to lead the Gentiles to God.

Separation in the Church

As communities of Gentile believers sprouted up in the Mediterranean world we find their leaders, such as St. Paul, encouraging isolation from those around them. "*What agreement has the temple of God with idols?*" he writes, quoting Isaiah and Ezekiel, "*Therefore come out from among them and be separate,*" (2 Cor 6:16, 17). These early Gentile believers, like the Jews of Elijah's day a thousand years earlier, were too young in their faith to withstand the influences of the pagan culture in which they lived.

As the years passed and many were martyred rather than deny their faith in Christ, the Christian community became stronger. Believers began to explain their faith to pagans on their own terms. Their "Apologies," as they were called showed that their understanding of the Gospel was more mature and that their commitment to Christ was firm. Christians would ultimately go out into completely alien cultures for the Lord. The faith of the Canaanite woman would be sought and found among Slavs and Franks and Saxons.

Where Are We in Our Faith Journey?

Like the Jews in the time of Elijah, we live in a pluralistic society surrounded by people of many religions and of none. There is an atmosphere of mutual respect but not everyone is able to make some important distinctions in maintaining the purity of their traditions. As a result many people find particular traditions unimportant because "we're all worshipping the same God." For some this even extends to basic doctrines like the Trinity and the unique role of Christ in the redeeming of the world. Their faith – and in some cases their morals – have been watered down because they were not mature enough to live in a pluralistic society without losing their own identity.

Like the first Gentile believers we live in a non-believing culture, increasingly secular and even aggressively opposing any public expression of biblical faith or morals. We are free to worship inside our churches in what one bishop has called "our weekly Sabbath hobby." But expressions of faith in the public sector are definitely discouraged. Woe to politicians or athletes who dare to speak about their faith, much less act in line with it. Is our faith today too immature to withstand these pressures?

Many feel, like the Jews and the first Christians, that we should isolate ourselves from outside influences to retain our traditional Christian identity. Many Eastern Christians have taken refuge in the foods, music, and dancing of their home country cultures to insulate their children from the

wider society. If the church or ethnic community is sufficiently active, this may keep its children from dating “foreigners,” but will it keep them from aborting an unwanted pregnancy?

Our churches have, by and large, concentrated on building programs and social events rather than on faith building. In many parishes there are more parties and fundraisers than holy day services, much less instruction programs. What is there in our parish life to help us discern which elements in our popular culture are compatible with the Gospel and which are not? Does our church life assist us to mature in our faith or does it insure that we remain children?

If we or our children readily accept secular values merely because everyone else is saying or doing them, it may be because Christ is on only the fringes of our lives. If so we need to ask ourselves whether we have truly encountered Christ. Without truly knowing Him, how can we be prepared to prove our faith despite any pressure to the contrary? The Canaanite woman was not discouraged when even the apostles wanted her to be sent away. She persisted in her faith and was rewarded. She is thus a model of perseverance for us seeking to uphold our faith and traditions in the world.

B – The Gospel Cycle of St Luke (From the Feast of the Holy Cross to the Beginning of the Triodion)

At the Divine Liturgy we continue reading the epistles of St. Paul which are still numbered “after Pentecost.” We read the Gospel Cycle of St. Luke which has its own numbering. The Gospel readings are not necessarily read in numerical order, but the cycle always ends with the Sunday of Zacchaeus.

THE FEAST OF THE EXALTATION OF THE CROSS is the occasion for us to begin the reading of St. Luke’s Gospel. As we have seen, Pascha begins the reading of John and with Pentecost we start to read Matthew. At the same time we continue the cycle of Epistle readings begun at Pentecost without interruption.

Luke, whom St Paul describes as “*the beloved physician*” (Col 4:14) is thought to have been a Greek-speaking native of Antioch, probably a Gentile, possibly a Jewish proselyte. Luke may have been one of the multitudes who came to Jerusalem that Passover, was attracted by the teaching of Jesus and then encountered the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:12-35).

Luke may have returned to Antioch as one of the first members of the Church there, as he recalls with pride that “*the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch*” (Acts 11:26). He later became the companion of St Paul, who was himself a missionary sent out by the Church of Antioch to preach Christ. In Acts Luke describes how he traveled with St. Paul on his journeys to

Macedonia (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15), how he returned with him to Syria and went from there to Jerusalem to report to the Eleven.

Luke composed both the Gospel which bears his name and the Acts of the Apostles as a kind of diptych. While the Gospel sets forth God's call to mankind in Christ, Acts shows the response of the first disciples, both Jews and Gentiles, to the message of salvation.

The Good News on the Move

Luke's Gospel is based largely on Mark, which commentators think was the first Gospel written in the form we know it. Luke made a significant change, however, to illustrate his theology. Luke rearranges several of the passages in Mark to depict Jesus' ministry as a purposeful journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, to the confrontation with the Jewish leaders, the cross and the tomb. He does this to say that Jesus' knowingly and freely embraced the passion. He "*steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem*" (Luke 9:51) i.e. to the offering of Himself for the sake of the human race.

The Gospel ends in Jerusalem and the Acts of the Apostles picks up there with the early activities of the disciples after the Lord's ascension. But Acts does not remain in Jerusalem – it leads us through Asia Minor to Rome, the capital of the empire, the heart of the Mediterranean world. The Christian community, Luke tells us, was not simply a local Jewish sect – it was the Body of Christ spread throughout the world.

First Sunday of St Luke

Holy Ground (Lk 5:1-11)

THE READING OF LUKE'S GOSPEL began during the past week with chapters 3 and 4: the narrative of the Lord's baptism (Monday), His genealogy (Tuesday), His temptation in the wilderness (Wednesday), the beginning of His ministry in Nazareth (Thursday and Friday) and in Capernaum (Saturday). On this, the first Sunday in the Cycle of St Luke, we read the story of the miraculous catch of fish.

Jesus is already known in Capernaum. He has taught in the synagogue on the Sabbaths and healed a man there. He had already attracted the attention of Simon and visited his house where he healed his mother-in-law of a raging fever. The next day everyone was back to work and Jesus appears at the lakeside where Simon and others are ending a fruitless night on the water. Meeting the disciples, the Lord Jesus encouraged them to throw their nets in again. "*Simon answered, 'Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets. When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. ...'*" (Lk 5:5, 6).

"Depart from me, Lord!"

St Luke's Gospel gives us an interesting insight into the character of St Peter. Simon Peter could be described as a faithful observant Jew. He attended the synagogue, heard Jesus teaching there and invited him to his home. Yet, when he witnessed the miraculous catch of fish he says, "*Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord*" (Luke 5:8).

Simon had encountered something he did not understand and judged – rightly, as it happened – that it must have been an experience of God's power. His first reaction was to shrink away from this holy man, Jesus. He felt deeply inadequate before the holy; he didn't belong in Jesus' company and felt that he would be consumed by this contact for which he was so unprepared.

St Peter, like many of the first disciples of the Lord Jesus, was a sincerely observant Jew. He kept the Law as best he could, observed the Sabbath and the holydays and the rest; but Peter sensed the difference between these "icons of holiness" (if we can invent such a term) and the real thing (the Lord Jesus).

At first hearing Peter's protest might sound like that of the Gergasenes who saw their swine plunge into the sea: "Leave us alone – don't make trouble for us." In fact, his response puts Peter in a long procession of biblical figures overwhelmed by the presence of God in their midst. When Isaiah experienced his vision of God in the temple, for example, he responded: "*Woe to me! I cried. I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty*" (Isaiah 6:5).

Peter and Isaiah were overcome by what they had seen. Each recognized that somehow he had been touched by the divine. Their response was to see themselves as unclean, as sinful. They may have been conscious of a particular sin from their past, but there is no evidence for that. Rather their reaction mirrored that of many godly people who unexpectedly came upon the presence of God. Even for those who are striving to live righteously, an experience of the power of the Lord entering into our world makes us confront the great gap between us and Him. We see instantaneously how attached we are to the things of the earth and, correspondingly, how far we are from the Holy One.

When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush He told him, "*Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.*" ... *And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God*" (Exodus 3:4, 6). The only appropriate response of mortals to the holy is the recognition that we have wandered onto Mount Sinai, into a realm beyond our worth.

This reaction became something of a pattern for the ascetic Elders of the Christian East. As St. Clement of Rome counseled, "Even if an angel should indeed appear to you, do not receive him but humiliate yourself, saying, 'I am not worthy to see an angel, for I am a sinner.'" To look upon the holy without repentance, they felt, was like putting oneself on the same plane as God or His saints.

The Fear of God

This sense of utter inadequacy before the Lord is what the Scriptures call “the fear of God.” The English author C.S. Lewis wrote that fear of God is not like fear of a wild animal. It is not terror that God is out to get us. Nor is it panic that we will be punished once God catches sight of us, like a schoolmaster looking for the culprit who is disturbing the class. The fear of God, which is praised as a virtue in both Old and New Testaments, is the sense of our inadequacy once we glimpse the truly holy that destroys any false sense of self-confidence or self-righteousness we may have.

“Fear of God” is a phrase we hear repeatedly in our Liturgy. In the Great Litany the deacon invites us: “For this holy house and for those who enter it with faith, reverence, and the fear of God, let us pray to the Lord.” The phrase is repeated when we are invited to receive Communion: “Approach in the fear of God with faith and with love.” Yet we know that we have been admitted to “this holy house” through baptism and are invited to the Lord’s Table. So with what kind of fear should we be filled when we take part in the Liturgy?

Many of us were raised in the Church and grew up amid its “icons of holiness.” We may have learned the “right answers” expounded in the catechism. We may have learned prayers, practices, principles of morality and the meaning of many elements of our Church’s life but never truly experienced the presence of God. If so, we may find it difficult to appreciate the concept of the “fear of God.” But we then run the risk of believing that we understand God because we know when and how we are to fast or what the Church teaches on this or that matter. But a relationship with God is more than a matter of ritual or doctrine or anything we may feel we possess. As we read in the Sermon on the Mount, “*Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’*” (Mt 7:22-23).

The Beginning of True Wisdom

“*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; knowledge of the Holy One brings understanding*” (Prov 9:10). Not only is fear of God described in Scripture as a virtue, it is praised as the key to true wisdom. In our culture wisdom is often considered the product of how much information we have acquired. In the spiritual life, however, information alone does not make one wise: particularly physical knowledge gained by the senses. As the twentieth-century Serbian saint Nikolai of Zicha noted, “If someone were to know the number of stars in the heavens and the names of the fish in the sea, the amount of grass in the field and the habits of the beasts in the forest but would not have the fear of God, his knowledge is as water in a sieve. Before his death, his knowledge makes him a greater coward than the completely ignorant.” The depression and despair many in the intellectual elite feel at the approach of death confirms the

saint's teaching. True understanding comes from experiencing our inadequacy in the face of God's greatness and learning to rely on His compassion.

The Two-fold Fear of God

As with everything in the spiritual life, fear of God is not static: it grows and develops as our experience matures. St Maximos the Confessor expressed it this way:

“Fear of God is of two kinds. The first is generated in us by the threat of punishment. It is through such fear that we develop, in due order, self-control, patience, hope in God and detachment; and it is from detachment that love comes.

“The second kind of fear is linked with love and constantly produces reverence in the soul, so that it does not grow indifferent to God because of the intimate communion of its love. The first kind of fear is expelled by perfect love when the soul has acquired this and is no longer afraid of punishment” (*First Century on Love*, 81-82).

Our fear of God, then, is like a child's perception of its parent. At first an errant child fears what his parent will do to him when his disobedience is discovered. Later he grows to fear hurting his parent's feelings, showing ingratitude or being separated from the parent. Fear of God is not meant to disappear as we grow to love God but to develop into that mature realization of the love of God despite our weaknesses, which we call true worship.

We Are on Holy Ground

In the Syriac Churches of India it is customary for everyone to remove their shoes before stepping inside the church. Every historic tradition has some act of reverence prescribed for setting foot on consecrated ground. In Byzantine Churches it is prescribed that the worshippers make metanies or prostrations and kiss the icons put forth for veneration. Repeating this action by force of habit we forget what they represent: that the church, the Eucharist, the cross we approach to kiss – all these are manifestations of God's holiness and His love reaching out to us. We see, but we do not perceive.

In the same way we do not comprehend that we are always in the presence of God. The people we meet, the grass and trees, the animals and other creatures among whom we live – all these exist as God's handiwork, as indications of His presence among us. May God grant us to see that every moment of our lives we are standing unworthily on holy ground and that our eyes see the signs of the presence of the Lord.

Fear of God and Humility

‘There is a humility that comes from the fear of God, and there is a humility that comes from the fervent love of God. One person is humbled because of his fear of God; another is humbled because of his joy.

“The person humbled from fear of God is possessed of modesty in his members, a right ordering of his senses, and a heart contrite at all times. But the man humbled because of joy is possessed of great exuberance and an open and insuppressible heart”

(The Ascetical Homilies of St. Isaac the Syrian)

Second Sunday of St Luke

Learning to Love (Lk 6:31-36)

“LOVE, LOVE, LOVE – all you need is love!” That’s what the songs and the tee shirts say. So why do 50% of American marriages end in divorce? And why do so many young people stumble their way through so many abortive relationships? Could it be because love has become a mere slogan, unrelated to the reality of the God who is love?

God’s love is described in Luke’s Gospel as being “*kind to the unthankful and the evil*” (Luke 6:35). An Athonite elder, commenting on this teaching, opined that God loves the devil as much as He does the Holy Virgin. That kind of love is incomprehensible to most of us. Yet this kind of love is put forward as a model for us to imitate: “*be merciful just as your Father is merciful*” (v. 36)

Everyday Ideas of Love

Our ordinary ideas of love fall far short of this ideal. Perhaps you’ve heard the expression, “Show me your friends, and I will tell you who you are.” In other words, what we love displays the secrets of our hearts. Some people focus on sensual love, and everything they desire and fear, admire and loathe follows from this love. Likewise people who have given their heart to wealth, to drugs or drink become the slaves of that which they love. Their every action is directed towards the acquisition of what they worship. In the Lord’s words, “*Where your treasure is, there your heart shall also be*” (Mt 6:21).

Many good people, Church people included, focus on loving their spouses and children and, perhaps, their extended family. There is nothing wrong with that, surely. But the Lord says that we should not get stuck on family love from which we get great rewards in return: “*For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And*

if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so?" (Mt 5:46, 47). If you are seeking to live a godly life, you must do more than that.

Gospel Ideas of Love

When the Lord was asked which commandment was the greatest, He didn't pick just one. He answered, "*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. 'This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*" (Mt 22:38-39). It would be easy to delude oneself into thinking that I love God, when in fact what I love is ceremonial, music, or the fellowship of my church friends. It is not so easy to delude oneself about loving another concrete individual with whom we may not have any particular affinity. As we read in the first epistle of John, "*If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?"* (1 Jn 4:20)

For the believer, then, godly love is directed toward God, but authenticated by our relationships with others.

Love in Action

How can a person show love for God while living an ordinary life in the world? Many suggest that we begin by getting out of ourselves as much as possible in our spiritual lives. We observe a Rule of Prayer without wavering. We don't pray simply when we feel like it or when it is convenient but every day. Just as parents need to feed their child without fail or dog owners need to walk their pet regularly, we need to make that act of love which is prayer as consistently as these other actions. Following a Rule of Prayer becomes as selfless an act because it is done for the Other, not to please oneself.

When we approach fasting in the same way it becomes a clear act of love. When people fast only when they feel like it or according to their own regimen instead of the Church's practice, they may well be doing it to please themselves. Fasting on the days appointed in the Tradition, without making excuses for oneself, is a way of leaving one's ego behind in an act of love for God.

If these practices are authentically directed toward God, they will invariably lead us to reach out to our neighbor whom God loves. Almsgiving, particularly in terms of sharing our precious free time with others, is for the Christian a concrete act of love for Christ in His Body or on His creation.

Setting up one's own plan of Godly practices can be little more than an ego trip. We try to show ourselves as truly spiritual by committing ourselves to unkeepable rules of prayer or fasting beyond what it required. We commit ourselves to serve others in ways that we cannot hope to sustain. Invariably we learn that these practices do not suit us and we give off all attempts at

reaching out to God. The traditional remedy for excesses like these is that people striving to live for God obtain the blessing of their spiritual guide for each ascetical activity they attempt.

People in a free society become used to doing things their own way, to being independent. But a person who resolves to love God needs to move beyond his “rights” and look towards doing whatever is necessary to serve the Other. Following the directions of a knowledgeable spiritual guide in choosing acts of love appropriate to our spiritual maturity and state in life can help us avoid disappointing ourselves and those who we serve by being unable to complete the spiritual work we have begun.

Such a guide should be someone who knows the Church’s Tradition of spirituality and who knows us as well. Having grown through their own practice of the spiritual Tradition, such a guide is helping us, not from books, but from personal experience. By the same token your guide should know you deeply – your strengths and weaknesses, your state in life and responsibilities – and be able to discern what is right for you at this stage in your life. Such a guide is usually a monastic or a priest-confessor, but not every priest or monastic is necessarily the best spiritual guide for you. If you do not now have such a guide, pray that the Lord lead you to such a person who can walk with you on your journey to Him.

Why Do We Love?

The Greek nun, Mother Gavrilia, served in India for many years doing the same sort of work as Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Her witness shows that she learned about love from her own experience.

“[Once she was asked] What does God want me to do?... The answer was: God is not interested in where you are or what you do... He is interested only in the quality and quantity of the love you give. Nothing else. Nothing else.”

“Love as taught by Christ is offered without expecting anything in return. This is the great, the vast difference [from earthly love]. In this love the ego no longer exists. Our own self ceases to be. We give our love to the other as we receive it from God, without any thought as to what he does with it.... All persons of God love in this way. They do not love because they expect something in return from the one they love. They love because if you cease loving you cease living.”

Third Sunday of St Luke
Signs of the Future Resurrection (Lk 7:11-16)

IF YOU WERE TO WALK DOWN THE STREET of an older Middle Eastern town such as the old city of Jerusalem, do not be surprised if you were to come upon a funeral procession like the one described in St Luke's Gospel. Some people still walk from the home of the departed following the clergy and the bearers carrying the body, perhaps wrapped in a shroud, in an open coffin or on a bier. A Christian funeral procession might stop at the church before continuing on to the cemetery. The body might be placed in the ground simply wrapped in the shroud, particularly in Jewish or Muslim burials.

Christ encounters such a funeral at the Galilean village of Na'in, near Nazareth. *"And when He came near the gate of the city, behold, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother; and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the city was with her. When the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her and said to her, 'Do not weep.' Then He came and touched the open coffin, and those who carried him stood still. And He said, 'Young man, I say to you: 'arise.' So he who was dead sat up and began to speak. And He presented him to his mother"* (Lk 7:11-15).

Resurrection or Resuscitation?

We commonly think of what Jesus did for this young man as "raising him from the dead." Speaking in this way, it is easy to mistake this event as being the same as Christ's own resurrection. This is clearly not the case.

The Lord Jesus rose to the new and eternal life of victory over death. The ways in which He manifested Himself were clearly different from our normal earthly experience. He entered rooms when the doors were closed, appeared in other forms (to Mary Magdalene and the disciples on the road to Emmaus) and ascended to His Father with the promise of a future return.

We know of no such happenings in the life of the young man of Na'in. He resumed the earthly life he had before. As the Gospel says, the Lord gave the young man back to his mother. Speaking precisely we should say that he was resuscitated or revived, rather than resurrected.

Three Resuscitations

The Gospels contain three reports of resuscitations, each one being slightly different. Both Mark and Luke report the revival of Jairus' daughter. Her father, *"a ruler of the synagogue"* (Lk 8:40) told Jesus that his daughter was dying. By the time they got to the man's house they were told that the girl had died. *"Now all wept and mourned for her; but [Jesus] said, 'Do not weep; she is not dead, but sleeping.' And they ridiculed Him, knowing that she was dead. But He put them all outside, took her by the hand and called, saying, 'Little girl, arise.' Then her spirit returned, and she arose immediately. And He commanded that she be given something to eat"* (Lk 8:52-55).

Unlike the girl, who had just died, the young man in Lk 7 had been dead for at least some hours. Customarily in the Middle East people would be buried on the day that they died. The third and

even more amazing revival is, of course, that of Lazarus who had died four days before Jesus called him from the tomb (see Jn 11). While each of these people were returned to the same earthly life which they had before, the Fathers saw them as indications of the true resurrection to come. St Cyril of Alexandria, for example, teaches:

“Christ is the Destroyer of death and of corruption: He is the One ‘in whom we live and move and are.’ He it is who has restored the nature of man to that which it originally was; and has set free our death-fraught flesh from the bonds of death. ...

“We understand that those persons who were restored to life by the power of Christ are a pledge of the hope prepared for us of a resurrection of the dead: namely, this young man, Lazarus of Bethany, and the daughter of the chief of the synagogue. ...

“For it was by reason of Adam's transgression of the commandment that we, having our faces turned away from God, returned to our dust: for the sentence of God upon human nature was, ‘Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return.’ But at the time of the consummation of this world, the face of the earth shall be renewed: for God the Father by the Son in the Spirit will give life to all those who are laid within it.” (*Sermon 36 on Luke*).

The Near-Death Experience

In 1975 physician and psychologist Raymond Moody authored *Life After Life*, recounting a number of cases where people were pronounced clinically dead after heart attacks, accidents or other traumas. They regained consciousness after a period of time, anywhere from 10 minutes to several hours, and told of being able to see their physicians working on them or viewing their death from outside their bodies. One accident victim only came to when he felt a pathologist begin to autopsy him!

Most spoke of beatific after death experiences such as a feeling of peace and happiness, meeting spiritual beings and/or dead loved ones and seeing a radiant light. Some – upwards of twenty percent in one study – spoke of frightening experiences: extreme fear, panic or anger, demonic creatures or embittered human-like voices that mock or taunt the subjects.

Many of our otherwise skeptical contemporaries have concluded that near-death experiences prove the existence of an afterlife. Some believing Christians have taken these recorded experiences in our own day as confirmation of the Church's faith.

In any case, the Lord did not promise to take away death; rather, He died with us and instead of us. He has transformed death into a bridge for us to cross over to paradise in order to await the great Day of the Lord. This is why St Augustine says, “It is more of a miracle that someone rises to live forever than that he rises to die again.”

NDE's in the Tradition

Today's near-death experiences in some ways reinforce the experience of the saints.

St Bede the Venerable (673-735) reported in his *Ecclesiastical History*: "There was a certain householder in that district of the Northumbrians which is called Incuneningum, who led a godly life, with all his house. This man fell sick, and his sickness daily increasing, he was brought to extremity, and died in the beginning of the night; but at dawn he came to life again, and suddenly sat up, whereat all those that sat about the body weeping fled away in great terror; only his wife, who loved him better, though trembling and greatly afraid, remained with him. And he comforting her, said, 'Fear not, for I am now in very deed risen from the death which held me, and permitted again to live among men; nevertheless, hereafter I must not live as I was wont, but after a very different manner.'"

Likewise St Athanasius of the Kiev Caves (+1176) reported retuning to this life after two days in the next world. He refused to discuss what he saw there, saying only, "Even if I were to tell you, you would not believe me or listen to me." When he was pressed to explain, he would only say "Repent and pray!"

Fourth Sunday of St Luke When the Seed Is Choked (Lk 8:5-15, 8)

ONE OF THE SAD MOMENTS in a pastor's life is when beloved parishioners leave the parish. Some move away for work or family reasons and they go with a blessing for their new life. It is so much harder for a pastor to see those he shepherded lessen their parish involvement or fall away completely from the observance of a Christian life. Like a parent, the parish priest may ask himself: "what should I have done?"

As a rule, Jesus did not explain His parables in detail. He left His hearers to interpret their meaning for themselves. The parable of the sower (Lk 8:5-15) is an exception. The Lord assigns a meaning to each item in it: the seed is the word of God, it germinates or not according to the hearers or the circumstances of their lives.

The sower scatters the seed, but how the seed is received and what happens to it is out of his hands. The nature of the ground and the circumstances of the surrounding world join to either foster or hinder the seed's taking root. Those who would have the seed (which is the word of God) mature within them should reflect on what causes the faith to wither in people today.

Some, we know, fall away from influences in the secular society around us. We are accustomed to see making money, shopping and entertainment as *the* life-enhancing experiences our world has to offer. People who have accepted this world view often don't see themselves as "getting anything out of" the Church. In our society standing in the presence of God has no meaning and its spiritual fruits are of no interest to it.

Others, however, are like the seed which takes root but is choked by controversies within the Church itself. In many communities there are a host of parish-dividing issues which drive people

away. Some of them are critical issues which must be dealt with. The Ecumenical Councils were a response to divisive issues over the Church's understanding of God and Christ which could not be ignored. Today conflicting attitudes toward moral issues such as abortion or same-sex "marriages" have split many Protestant congregations and have no doubt affected many Catholic and Orthodox communities as well.

The need to confront challenges to faith and morals in the Church is underscored in our celebration of the Ecumenical Councils. Three Sundays of the year are devoted to these commemorations bringing us to recognize this need. At the same time, we acknowledge that the controversies which led to these gatherings were often affected by issues of language and culture which the participants could not overcome. Over time many of these difficulties have been swept away so that Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox and the Church of the East have been able to issue Agreed Statements affirming the one faith of the Apostolic Church.

Divisions in Our Parishes

More common causes for division in our local communities are centered on far less crucial concerns: issues which suggest that we have yet to become a Church at all! Many parishes are split over who "controls" the parish. Is it the sons and daughters of the original founders who saved to build and adorn the temple? Is it the wave of recent immigrants who have breathed new life into an older parish? Is it the different families competing for social prominence in the local community? In each of these circumstances the parish has become more of a club than a church, subject to worldly politics rather than the dynamics of faith.

Another parish-dividing issue is frequently the location of the parish facilities. An older congregation is divided over whether or where to relocate when the bulk of the parishioners live elsewhere or when the neighborhood of the church had deteriorated. A new parish is divided over where and when to buy or build their own temple. Those who live further from a chosen site resent the families who live nearer and accuse them of trying to take over the church.

Another frequently divisive question is the liturgical language to be used. Some prefer the older liturgical language, such as Greek or Slavonic. Others want the spoken language of the old country to be used primarily, if not exclusively. Another element in the congregation sees no need for any other language than English.

Sometime the secular politics of the parish's countries of origin intrude themselves into parish life here. Even opinions on American politics – which often have moral overtones – can divert the attention of parishioners from the life of the Gospel and divide a congregation. "I won't go back there – they're Fascists, Communists, Democrats, Republicans, etc."

Parish activities themselves can foster their own brand of political rivalries. Those who side with having a parish festival line up against those who do not. Whether stuffed cabbage for the feast

day dinner is prepared “our way” or “their way” has prompted resentments and splits in many a community.

What to Do?

In these issues – most of which have little to do with the apostolic faith – the Liturgy offers a model. Before we presume to confess the Church’s faith and to offer the holy gifts we are admonished, “Let us love one another so that with one mind we may confess...” Mutual love is the prerequisite for the Liturgy and for all our activity as Church.

How are we to act out our mutual love in practice? There are certainly no precise rubrics for this in the Scriptures but there are principles which are appropriately applied in the circumstances we have described. We would do well to reflect on them and consider how they may be relevant to our relationships in the Church.

Let everyone be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath, for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God (Jas 1:19-20).

Let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another (Rom 14: 19).

We who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification (Rom 15:1-2).

Let no one seek his own, but each one the other’s well-being (1 Cor 10:24).

Let all that you do be done in love (1 Cor 16:14).

Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (Gal 6:2).

“The Seed Is the Word of God”

From its beginning the Church saw itself called to continue the mission of Christ the Sower to evangelize: to sow the seed of the Gospel throughout the world. “*The seed,*” the Lord says, “*is the word of God*” but just what is the core message that we are to proclaim? The New Testament suggests an answer: according to the apostolic writer it is “*That which was from the beginning, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and our hands have handled concerning the Word of life...that which we have seen and heard we declare to you that you also may have fellowship with us for truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ*” (1 Jn 1:1, 3).

“That which was from the beginning” – Human experience has never imagined the world without the presence of God, everywhere present and filling all things. He is the only truly existing One, from whom all creation has its being.

“That which we have seen with our eyes” – Jesus is that Word, the Messiah awaited by Israel and incarnate of the Virgin Mary, to whose death and resurrection the apostles testified.

“That which we have looked upon and our hands have handled” – Christians bear witness to continually experiencing Christ in their midst in concrete ways, as He said:

- *“For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them”* (Mt 18:20) – In the Church at worship – principally at the Eucharist but also in the fullness of the Church year with its feasts, fasts and observances – Christ is physically present to us.
- *“Inasmuch as you did it to the least of my brethren you did it to me”* (Mt 25:40) – By extending hospitality, especially to the poor, we look upon and handle Christ, truly present to us in flesh and blood.

“Fellowship with the Father and the Son” – Our life in the Church is meant to open us to have communion with God the Holy Trinity in this life and in the age to come.

A Parish that Sows the Word of God?

In the West evangelists have generally focused on the first two of these points: the existence of God and the mission of Christ in the world, while minimizing “that which we have handled,” the witness of the worshipping community to whom seekers might be brought. As Eastern Christians we have a unique way of proclaiming the message of Christ: through the life of a community energized by the Liturgy. In the West some have reduced the liturgy to bare bones to focus on a message disconnected from community life; still others have trivialized the liturgy into a kind of feel-good community meeting. Eastern communities living their liturgical life to the full are able to proclaim the message “which we have looked upon and our hands have handled” and might thereby speak to some who have outgrown the empty secularism of the day.

For this to happen our experience of a worshipping community must reflect the vision expressed in our Tradition. Fr. Thomas Hopko told the story of encouraging such a seeker to attend the Liturgy to experience the fullness of Orthodoxy. The man did so, and his response was, “Everything you told me was a lie.” The people were physically present, but not participating on any visible level. They ignored him and another visitor at the coffee hour, etc. This incident makes us ask, What would an outsider learn about our parish and its faith on any given Sunday? A brief checklist might help:

Does our parish gathering communicate a sense of fellowship with God? Do people seem eager to stand before the Lord in His holy place, to light candles, venerate icons, etc. or drift in at the last moment and stand in the back?

Is the full observance of the Lord’s Day and the feasts and fasts of the Church year central to parish life? Are our parishioners committed to worship and to growing in knowledge and practice of their faith? What does the parish do to encourage such commitment? How many parishioners could answer a visitor’s inquiry about the Church and its faith?

Is our parish a welcoming community: do visitors feel that they are welcome guests or suspicious outsiders?

Many commentators have observed that for parishes to convincingly sow the seed they must be committed to a strong faith and practice of their tradition. They must also have a zeal for bringing others to the Lord and to His Church. Do your parishioners care that certain families or even a particular generation (young or old) are absent from the Sunday Liturgy? What have they done to concretely manifest their concern? Or do they rely on the priest alone to fill the pews?

Nor every individual is a street preacher, but the parish as a whole should be committed to sowing seeds in one form or another.

Fortune-Cookie Evangelization

Whenever you order Chinese food you receive, unasked, a fortune cookie. A similar approach may help many of our parishioners begin to re-evangelize themselves and painlessly spread the word of God.

The events that draw outsiders to our parishes generally fall into two categories: sacraments and fundraisers. Guests at weddings or funerals who come for social reasons may be given a memento in the name of the parish which connects the word of God with what they have seen and heard, such as *What We Believe about Marriage* or *Is There an Afterlife?* Pamphlets on more general topics could be included with every purchase at bake sales, food festivals or Christmas bazaars. Those interested in learning more could be directed to the parish or eparchial web site. Parishioners, especially your college students and young adults, might suggest topics for these inserts. They could be encouraged to post them on their Facebook pages or on other social media sites.

As a prelude to distributing these messages, parishioners themselves could be walked through the leaflets helping them to answer some basic questions which might arise (and be evangelized themselves). A steady practice of “fortune-cookie evangelism” can raise everyone’s awareness of our call to proclaim that which we have heard and seen.

Was the Sower Wasting the Seed?

In the parable the sower casts his seed about indiscriminately, at the risk of losing much of what he has planted. But where his seed takes root, it multiplies a hundredfold. It was, perhaps, like contemporary advertising. Most ads are thrown out but a few people are drawn to what they offer.

Parishes seeking to share what they have seen and heard can expect a lack of interest on the part of many. This should not discourage them from continuing to sow the seed. If the seed takes root in one out of a hundred hearts, the effort is worthwhile.

Fifth Sunday of St Luke

The Rich Man in Hades (Lk 16:19-31)

WOULD WE BE AFFECTED if someone rose from the dead? We would probably say “Yes,” but the Lord says “No.” What does He know that we don’t?

Throughout the centuries, and even today, many people have what might be called mystical experiences. They see visions and dream dreams, to quote the prophet Joel. Thus St. Paul experienced the risen Christ on the road to Damascus and it changed his life. Similarly St. Peter

and the other disciples encountered Christ risen from the dead and proclaimed it throughout the world. These experiences energized their ministries and jump-started the spread of the Gospel throughout the ancient world.

Such experiences continued throughout Christian history right up to our own day. One well-known Christian thinker in the modern world, the Russian Orthodox bishop in London, Metropolitan Anthony Bloom (1914-2003) described his encounter with the Lord in these words:

“I met Christ as a Person at a moment when I needed Him in order to live, and at a moment when I was not in search of Him. I was found; I did not find Him.

“I was a teenager then. ... I could not accept aimless happiness. Hardships and suffering had to be overcome, there was something beyond them. Happiness seemed to be stale if it had no further meaning. ... I decided that I would give myself a year to see whether life had a meaning, and if I discovered it had none I would not live beyond the year. I had no use for Church. I did not believe in God.”

Under duress, young Anthony attended a religious lecture at the Russian youth organization. He was greatly disturbed by the lecture and asked his mother for a copy of the New Testament to check the truth of what the speaker had been saying. He describes what happened:

“I expected nothing good from my reading, so I counted the chapters of the four Gospels to be sure that I read the shortest, not to waste time unnecessarily. And thus it was the Gospel according to St Mark which I began to read.

“I do not know how to tell you of what happened. I will put it quite simply and those of you who have gone through a similar experience will know what came to pass. While I was reading the beginning of St Mark’s Gospel, before I reached the third chapter, I became aware of a Presence. I saw nothing. I heard nothing. It was no hallucination. It was a simple certainty that the Lord was standing there and that I was in the presence of Him whose life I had begun to read with such revulsion and such ill-will... This was my basic and essential meeting with the Lord. From then I knew that Christ did exist.”

PBS commentator Frederica Mathewes-Green tells of a similar experience. She was a vocal agnostic who had dabbled in Hinduism. In *Facing East – A Pilgrim’s Journey into the Mysteries of Orthodoxy* (San Francisco, 1997), she describes her husband Gary as “a political animal who just didn’t think much about God.” She then tells how that changed:

“Gary’s shell began to crack when a professor required his philosophy class to read a Gospel. As he read the words of Jesus, he became convinced that here was one who ‘speaks with authority.’ Since Jesus said there was a God, Gary began to doubt his doubting.”

Frederica’s turn came on their honeymoon trip to Europe where the following took place:

“One day in Dublin I looked at a statue of Jesus and was struck to my knees, hearing an interior voice say, ‘I am your life.’ I knew it was the One I had rejected and ridiculed, come at last to seize me forever.”

What was different about these people compared to the brothers of the rich man in Christ's parable?

Why "Few Are Chosen"

The apostles were religious people; they observed the precepts of Judaism as practiced in their day. Others were contemptuous of religion and had ridiculed it. Yet somewhere deep inside them was a search for meaning, a hidden disposition to faith, even if they were not practicing any religion at the moment. Thus, when these momentous experiences took place, they received them wholeheartedly and changed their entire way of life.

People who have no interest in God or in any kind of an interior life, who are content pursuing a materialist way of life might easily shrug off a spiritual experience as some kind of delusion. They might blame it on a touch of the flu or having too much to drink.

Similarly the rich man's brothers in the parable may have paid lip service to the Scriptures but the focus of their lives was far from the things of God. They would not even have heard a voice from the dead.

Christ's Alternative

A parable is a story with a moral, not a detailed history of an event. In this case, as in most, the moral is found at the end of the story. When the rich man in the parable asks Abraham to send Lazarus to shake up his brothers, Abraham says, "*They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them*" (Luke 16:29). In other words, they have the Scriptures – what we call the Old Testament – as their means of discerning the mind of God for them.

This saying, of course, is directed at us – it is the moral of the story. We are meant to base our faith on the mystery of Christ as revealed in the Scriptures rather than on some fantasy that the holy Virgin or an angel might visit us. Just as our daily life must be based on something more practical than a hope of winning the lottery, so our Christian life must have the solid foundation of the word of God to us.

We have not only the Law and the prophets, but the Gospels and Epistles. We have the witness of Christ and the apostles, the testimony of the martyrs and the ascetics. We have the power of the holy mysteries, the voice of our liturgical texts and the unspoken voice of the holy icons. These are the voice of the Lord to us – let us hear them in faith.

A Missed Opportunity

When people think about violating God's law they think about sins of commission: doing something prohibited like stealing, harming another, or the like. We often forget that sins of omission – things that we neglect to do – are often even more damaging.

The rich man in Christ's parable is not accused of any sin of commission. He is not blamed for being rich any more than Lazarus is praised for being poor: in itself having money is not a sin. We are not told how he made his money. He is not accused of defrauding people as Zacchaeus claimed to have done. The only thing he is accused of is not giving alms.

The poor man, Christ says, lay at the rich man's gate, hoping for scraps. It may be easy to ignore a panhandler on the street; it is not so easy to ignore him when he is at your doorstep day after day. Yet this is what the rich man did. He did not overlook abstract appeals from far-away charities; he passed by a flesh-and-blood person in need on his own doorstep, "the living creature," as St John Chrysostom describes him, "for whom God cares" (*On Wealth and Poverty*).

The Purpose of Wealth

One of the ultimate questions behind this parable is, "What is money for?" In the ethics of the world the answer is clear: money is there for us to buy more and bigger and newer and better. According to the Scriptures, however, though we walk in the flesh, we do not live according to the flesh. We know that our money is the Lord's, however we may have gathered it.

The purpose of money according to the vision of the kingdom of God depicted in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is set forth directly in St Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians. He writes, "*God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work*" (2 Cor 9:8). Our resources are meant to provide us with "*all sufficiency*," meaning everything that we truly need, and "*an abundance*" – everything more than we need – for doing good. Does having multiple cars and homes or a TV in every room fall under the heading of "sufficiency"?

The rich man in Christ's parable may have felt that he "needed" every scrap he had acquired but, as St. John Chrysostom affirmed, he did not know what he needed it for: "If a person enjoys luxury in moderation and distributes the rest to the stomachs of the poor, then his wealth does him good. But if he is going to give himself up to luxury and profligacy, not only does it not help him at all, but it even leads him down to the great pit. This is what happened to this rich man" (*On Wealth and Poverty*).

Where Do We Encounter God?

Devout believers are convinced that they encounter God in worship – in the words of the Bible, in the Eucharistic presence. The Lord taught the very thing: "*Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them*" (Mt 18:20). When the Body of Christ comes together in worship – particularly in the Divine Liturgy – the Head is surely there as well.

But Christ also indicates another instance of His presence in our midst. He affirms that He is present in the needy of this world. In His parable of the last judgment Christ rewards those who fed and clothed Him, who welcomed Him or visited Him when He was sick or in prison. “Assuredly I say to you,” He tells them, “*inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren you did it to Me*” (Mt 25:40).

In the Liturgy we truly encounter the glorious Christ: the candles, the singing, the incense and the icons all point to Him as He is now: at the right hand of the Father, praised by the saints and angels. But in the poor we encounter the Christ who put aside His glory and took on our broken humanity that we might ultimately share in His divine sonship. The person in need is an icon of the humiliated Christ, the suffering Christ, the dying Christ – as much an icon of Christ in its way as is the Liturgy. Most of us find it easier to see the Lord of glory in the Liturgy. It seems to take a Dorothy Day, a Mother Teresa of Calcutta or a Father Damian of Molokai to see Christ incarnate in human weakness.

The late Catherine de Hueck Dougherty, daughter of a noble Russian family, tells of how her parents recognized the presence of Christ in the poor. “Early in my childhood, the truth that Christ is in my neighbor was shown to me by my parents’ example and words. No one was ever turned from our door, bum or beggar, woman of the streets or thief. The men were welcomed by my father. He gave them a bath himself, or mother would do it for the women; then they would be given clothing if they needed it. They would be served by Mother and Father and by us children – *if we had been good through the week* and thus worthy of serving Christ in the poor – on our best linen and from our best china in the main dining room” (*My Russian Yesterdays*).

The baron and baroness had clearly learned what the rich man in Christ’s parable had not: that the beggar at the gate is one whom God sends as a means for the salvation of the rich. As St John Chrysostom phrased it, “The Rich Man had in Lazarus an opportunity to learn virtue and to show forth love. Instead of accepting Lazarus’ help, he betrayed himself with heartless greed and an unwillingness to share his own wealth... for nothing can so make a man an imitator of Christ as caring for his neighbors.

Indeed, even though you fast, or sleep on hard ground, or even suffer unto death, but should take no thought of your neighbor, you have done nothing great; despite what you have done, you still stand far from this model of a perfect Christian” (*On Wealth and Poverty*).

Who is the Rich Man?

“If we are to tell the truth, the rich man is not the one who has collected many possessions but the one who needs few possessions; and the poor man is not the one who has no possessions but the one who has many desires. We ought to consider this the definition of poverty and wealth. So if you see someone greedy for many things, you should consider him the poorest of all, even if he has acquired everyone’s money. If, on the other hand, you see someone with few needs, you should count him the richest of all, even if he has acquired nothing.

“We are accustomed to judge poverty and affluence by the disposition of the mind, not by the measure of one’s substance. Just as we would not call a person healthy who was always thirsty, even if he enjoyed abundance, even if he lived by rivers and springs, (for what use is all that water when his thirst remains unquenchable). Let us do the same in the case of wealthy people: let us never consider those people healthy who are always yearning and thirsting after other people’s property; let us not think that they enjoy any abundance. For if one cannot control his own greed, even if he has appropriated everyone’s property, how can he ever be affluent? But those who are satisfied with what they have and pleased with their own possessions and do not have their eyes on the substance of others, even if they are the poorest of all, should be considered the richest of all. For whoever has no need of others’ property but is happy to be self-sufficient is the most affluent of all.”

St John Chrysostom, *Second Sermon on Lazarus and the Rich Man*

Sixth Sunday of St Luke

The Gadarene Demoniac (Lk 8:27-39)

THE GOSPELS RECORD SEVERAL INSTANCES when the Lord Jesus called people to be His followers. At times He called people to leave their homes and livelihoods and follow Him. He called Peter and Andrew, James and John as they were busy fishing “*and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him*” (Mt 4:22). Similarly Matthew walked away from his toll booth and followed Jesus (see Mt 9:9); the other disciples whose calls are not recorded in the Gospels did the same.

Sometimes the Lord called but was refused. The cost of following Jesus was more than some people could bear. To the rich young man who wanted to be perfect Jesus said, “*If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*’ *When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth*” (Mt 19:21-22).

In other instances the Lord raised objections Himself before the would-be follower could discover through failure and discouragement that following Christ meant enduring hardships. Thus “*a teacher of the law came to Him and said, ‘Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.’ Jesus replied, ‘Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head*” (Mt 8:19-20). The Lord wanted this teacher of the law to know that following Christ would not provide the comfortable lifestyle he may have been anticipating.

To a procrastinator, however, He gave the opposite advice. “*Then another disciple said to him, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ But Jesus told him, ‘Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead*” (Mt 8:21-22). The Lord surely wanted followers but He had a different approach based on the readiness of the person before Him.

This passage suggests the hurdles that people in any age will face when they consider following the Lord in a radical way: fear of the unknown, self-concern, pre-occupation and attachment to other things all can hinder us from following Christ.

The Vocation of the Gadarene

The Gadarene whom Jesus healed (Lk 8:27-39) wanted to follow Jesus as well; the Scripture says that he “*begged to go with Him,*” but the Lord had another plan for him. “*Jesus sent him away, saying, ‘Return home and tell how much God has done for you.’ So the man went away and told all over town how much Jesus had done for him*” (Lk 8:38-39).

The Gadarenes had made it clear that they wanted Jesus to go away. He would not force Himself on them. At the same time He wanted to leave them with a permanent reminder of His presence: their own fellow countryman whom He had delivered. This man had once been a burden to the townspeople; now he would be a blessing.

The apostles were told to go through the world preaching the Gospel; this man’s call was to go home and do the same in his village. Was his call by Christ less of a vocation than that of the apostles? It was different, surely, but it was a vocation nonetheless.

Some people in the Church tend to think that “vocation” refers exclusively to the calling of a cleric or monastic. The Lord does call some people in every age to serve the Church as priests, deacons, chanters, etc. He does invite others to serve Him as a monk or nun, or as a member of a religious community. But these are not the only people whom He calls to serve Him.

Our Fundamental Vocation

Every person baptized into Christ has a vocation. The essence of that vocation is perhaps best expressed in the First Epistle of Peter: “*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light*” (1 Pt 2:9).

There are three important aspects of our universal vocation expressed in this passage. First, our vocation is to a **priesthood**: what the Scripture calls a “royal priesthood.” Christ is the true kingly priest and because we have been baptized into Him and sealed in His Holy Spirit we share in His priesthood. Secondly, we share in this priesthood as **members of a people**, the people of God. We are not individually priests, as are the ministers of the altar, but members of a priesthood because of our common union with Christ the High Priest.

This passage also tells us **the reason for this priesthood**: “*that you may declare the praises of*” God. Our vocation as members of the royal priesthood is to share in the Church’s call to proclaim the work of God in Christ. Some, like the apostles and evangelizers, are called to bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Others, like the Gadarene whom Jesus delivered in the Gospel or the Samaritan Woman, are called to show forth God’s love for mankind in their own corner of the world. Still others – most of us in fact – are called to share in the Church’s common vocation to proclaim Christ.

How Can We “Proclaim?”

When we think about “proclaiming God’s works” we invariably think about speaking or writing. There is a host of other ways by which the Church makes the Good News present in our world. At the Bridegroom Matins on Holy Tuesday we are reminded that the abilities we have received are often the way in which the Lord makes known to us our way of responding to this call:

“Come, O faithful, let us work eagerly for the Master, for He distributes wealth to His servants; and let us increase the talent of grace, each one according to his ability. Let one adorn his wisdom with good deeds. Let another beautify the celebration of the service. Let someone strong in faith communicate the word to the uninitiated, and another dispense his wealth to the poor. Thus, we shall increase what has been loaned to us and, like faithful stewards of grace, shall be worthy of the Master’s joy. O Christ God, make us worthy of that joy, for You are the Lover of Mankind.”

Through each of these ways and countless others believers can take their place in the royal priesthood, joining in the Church’s mission to declare through word or work “*the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.*”

What Happened to the Gadarenes?

The Gospels record that the Lord Jesus sent the man He had healed back home to witness to his neighbors. They do not tell us whether he was successful: was this village converted or not?

We do know that by the third century AD the village was all but deserted. The crag which overlooked the Sea of Galilee, however, had become a place of pilgrimage for Christians seeking to commemorate the healing of the Gadarene. By the fifth century a large monastery serving the pilgrims had been established there. The monastery was expanded in the sixth century but abandoned after a catastrophic earthquake destroyed much of the area in 749. Ruins of the monastery were excavated in the 1970s by the Israeli department of antiquities and were later incorporated into a national park.

Seventh Sunday of St Luke

The Hemorrhaging Woman (Lk 8:41-56)

WE LIVE IN A SPEED-DRIVEN AGE. We look for faster ways to accomplish every task: in the office, in the kitchen, in the classroom. In our economy, speed is a source of competitive advantage. In the workplace higher speed means greater efficiency. Today “to build a better mousetrap” means “to build a faster mousetrap.”

As a result we are increasingly intolerant of slowness. Waiting becomes more and more difficult. If we encounter a long line in a store, a bank or a post office our impulse is to leave and come back later. Our relationships with others may be scarred or shattered by our impatience with

others. Our impatience with ourselves can make it impossible for us to rejoice in or even accept life in the present.

While people with chronic illnesses or handicaps have health services available to them as never before, their greatest suffering today may be psychological: knowing that they must live with their affliction day in and day out without hope of deliverance. Some advocate suicide or mercy killing as a way out of this impasse. The Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland have decriminalized mercy killing in certain circumstances to give people a “way out” of their hopeless conditions.

In contrast we find the situation of the woman recorded in the Gospels whose hopeless condition exceeded anything prevalent in developed countries today. We are told that she had been hemorrhaging for twelve years. In the Torah any contact with vital fluids such as blood rendered a person ritually impure and called for the sufferer to be avoided. *“If a woman hemorrhages for many days not at the time of her period she shall be unclean as in the days of her period. Every bed that she lies on and every object that she sits on shall be unclean as in the time of her period. Anyone who touches her shall be unclean and shall wash his clothes and bathe in water and be unclean until the evening. When she is cleansed from her discharge, she must count off seven days, and after that she will be ceremonially clean.”* (Leviticus 15:25-28). Since this woman was still hemorrhaging, it meant that she could not have experienced any intimate contact for twelve years.

Christ Alone Brings Healing

In Mark 5:26 we read that her attempts at finding medical help had been as fruitless as they were financially draining. She had no hope until she heard of Jesus. She approached Him secretly to avoid defiling Him or being rejected by Him, but touching the All-Pure One cleansed and purified her. Contact with the Long-Suffering One ended her long suffering.

In the New Testament physical healings and other miracles generally point to spiritual healing. Here the woman’s illness and her healing contact with Christ direct our minds to reflect on our own spiritual condition.

Most Christians today look upon the idea of ritual impurity in the Old Testament manner as antiquated and not part of our spirituality. Yet, each of us is unfit for contact with the Holy One because we share a nature scarred by sin and subject to death. We need to touch the hem of Christ’s garment for our broken nature to be restored.

For us who live in the time after Christ’s resurrection the “hem of His garment,” the physical realities which convey His divine power to us, are the Holy Mysteries. In baptism we rise with Him from the death of our broken humanity. In the Eucharist we become more deeply one with Him in His Body, the Church. We come to Him in the various circumstances of our life – our need for physical or spiritual healing, our desire to experience His blessing on our families and our ministries – seeking to be transformed by His presence. And when we approach the water, chrism, oil, or crowns with the faith of this unnamed woman in the Gospels we are touched by the power going out from Him through them as well.

The Mysteries as “Works of the Law”

It is all too easy for us, particularly those raised in the Church, to approach the Holy Mysteries as if they were acts of ritual cleansing as described in the Torah. We can bring our children for baptism because that’s what we do with babies to “make them Christians.” We can approach the mystery of confession legalistically, so that we can get a pass to receive the Eucharist.

Approaching any of the mysteries as if they were rites of passage or ritual purifications – or as anything other than reaching out to touch the hem of Christ’s garment – turns them into “works of the Law.” And, as St Paul insists, “*by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified*” (Gal 2:16).

Our sacramental contacts with Christ are meant to affect our life. The Holy Mysteries are not simply “rites,” ceremonial moments that we perform then return to ordinary life without their affecting the way we live. On the one hand we live and worship as Christians only because we have “touched” Christ. He alone is holy, He alone is Lord.

On the other hand we know that our baptismal union with Christ does not guarantee that we will live the life we have received. As with the woman in the Gospels, our contacts with Christ are simply part of the story. The way we live determines how the story develops and will end.

The Woman in Eastern Christian Lore

The Scriptures do not mention this woman again. A later work, the *Acts of Pilate*, gave her a name, Berenice, but this does not shed any light on how her healing affected her life. In the West this name was transliterated as Veronica, whose connection with Christ’s passion was popularized in the Middle Ages.

The *Acts of Pilate*, parts of which date to the mid-second to third century, describe this woman as offering testimony at the trial of Jesus: “There was found there also a woman named Berenice, and she said: ‘Twelve years I was in an issue of blood, and I only touched the edge of his garment, and directly I was cured.’ The Jews say: ‘Our law does not admit the testimony of a woman’” (*Acts of Pilate*, 7).

According to one tradition, Berenice caused a statue of the Lord Jesus to be made in gratitude for her healing, before which she prayed to God. The fourth century Bishop of Caesarea, Eusebius, described it: “Since I have mentioned this city [Caesarea Philippi] I do not think it proper to omit an account which is worthy of record for posterity. For they say that the woman with an issue of blood, who, as we learn from the sacred Gospel, received from our Savior deliverance from her affliction, came from this place, and that her house is shown in the city, and that remarkable memorials of the kindness of the Savior to her remain there.

“For there stands upon an elevated stone, by the gates of her house, a brazen image of a woman kneeling, with her hands stretched out, as if she were praying. Opposite this is another upright image of a man, made of the same material, clothed decently in a double cloak, and extending his hand toward the woman. They say that this statue is an image of Jesus. It has remained to our day, so that we ourselves also saw it when we were staying in the city.”

This statue was preserved up to the time of Julian the Apostate, when it was altered to become a statue of Zeus.

Eighth Sunday of St Luke **The Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37)**

WHEN PEOPLE READ THE SCRIPTURES they can often easily grasp the basic meaning of the passage. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, for instance, Christ is clearly exalting the compassion of the Samaritan over the lack of concern on the part of the priest and the Levite. The enmity that existed between Jews and Samaritans is also generally known, so people easily comprehend Christ's point that your enemy is your neighbor when he is compassionate. We can also easily – if grudgingly – realize that we are called to imitate the Samaritan, even in dealing with people not like ourselves.

When passages are not so easily explained, however, people turn to others for help. People may turn to their pastor or another clergyman or instructor. Many will surf the net to see what others say on the subject. As Eastern Christians we have another – and preferred – source for guidance in reading the Scriptures. We look to the tradition of the Church Fathers to explain the sacred texts.

Since the rise of academic, rather than pastoral, theology in its Middle Ages, the West has preferred contemporary scholarship to the Fathers' insights on the Scriptures. Academic scholarship first stressed the context of the Scriptural texts and then sought proof of their historic origins to determine their original literal meaning.

One of the approaches favored by the Fathers but out of favor in scholarly circles has been *allegory*, which sees many passages as a kind of extended metaphor for the entire Gospel. Allegory was virtually universal throughout early Christianity, which inherited from Judaism. It seeks to draw our attention through many well-known Scripture passages to the universal condition of mankind and the all-embracing love of God. It was used in various ways by Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and John Chrysostom in the East, as well as Ambrose and Augustine in the West.

Chrysostom on the Good Samaritan

Using this method St John Chrysostom (feast: November 13) was able to help us see through this text God's constant and all-embracing love for us. This parable becomes a word-picture of the entire mystery of salvation:

A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho – Adam, by trusting in himself instead of God, descended from Paradise into this world. Jericho, at 825 feet below sea level is the lowest city on earth, as far down as you can get.

He fell among robbers – Mankind apart from God is beset by the band of demonic powers led by the ruler of this age.

They stripped him of his raiment – the robe of immortality.

They departed, leaving him half dead – he was reduced to the half-life of this earth, subject to sin and death.

It happened that a priest ...and a Levite came that way, but passed by on the other side – The people of Israel kept to themselves and did not aid mankind.

But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, and went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine – Christ, not from this world, who was accused of being a Samaritan (John 8:48), is that compassionate stranger. He doctors mankind by His teachings (the bandages), His anointing with the Holy Spirit (the oil), and the Eucharist (the wine) by which He begins our healing.

He set him on his own beast, brought him to an inn and took care of him - Christ joined mankind to His own human nature, brought him to the hospital which is His Church and continued to minister to him as the divine physician.

When he left on the next day he gave the innkeeper two dinars and said, 'Take care of him' – After His ascension Christ entrusted mankind to the Apostolic Synod personified by its great apostle to the Gentiles, St Paul, and “through Paul to the high priests and teachers and ministers of each church,” saying: “Take care of the Gentiles whom I have given to you in the Church. Since men are sick, wounded by sin, heal them, putting on them a stone plaster, that is, the prophetic sayings and the gospel teachings, making them whole through the admonitions and exhortations of the Old and New Testaments.” So according to St. John Chrysostom, Paul is the one who upholds the churches of God “and heals all men through spiritual admonitions, distributing the bread of offering to each one...”

'And when I come again I will repay you' – At my second coming I will reward you.

In his important work, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, the contemporary Greek Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos expresses the life of the Church in terms of this imagery. “So in the Church we are divided into the sick, those undergoing treatment, and those – the saints – who have already been healed. ... The Fathers do not categorize people as moral and immoral or good and bad on the basis of moral laws. This division is superficial. At depth humanity is differentiated into the sick in soul, those being healed, and those healed. All who are not in a state of illumination are sick in soul... It is not only good will, good resolve, moral practice and devotion to the Orthodox Tradition which make an Orthodox, but also purification, illumination and deification.” These stages of healing are the purpose of the Orthodox way of life.”



In another place St John Chrysostom taught that ministering to the spiritually ill in the hospital of the Church is for us all:

“Let us not overlook such a tragedy as that. Let us not hurry past so pitiable a sight without taking pity. Even if others do so, you must not. Do not say to yourself: ‘I am no priest or monk; I have a wife and children. This is a work for the priests; this is work for the monks.’ The Samaritan did not say: ‘Where are the priests now? Where are the Pharisees now? Where are the teachers of the Jews?’ But the Samaritan is like a man who found some great store of booty and got the profit.

“Therefore, when you see someone in need of treatment for some ailment of the body or soul, do not say to yourself: ‘Why did so-and-so or so-and-so not take care of him?’ You free him from his sickness; do not demand an accounting from others for their negligence. Tell me this. If you find a gold coin lying on the ground, do you say to yourself: ‘Why didn’t so-and-so pick it up?’ Do you not rush to snatch it up before somebody else does?

“Think the same way about your fallen brothers; consider that tending his wounds is like finding a treasure. If you pour the word of instruction on his wounds like oil, if you bind them up with your mildness, and cure them with your patience, your wounded brother has made you a richer man than any treasure could. Jeremiah said: ‘He who has brought forth the precious from the vile will be as my mouth.’ What could we compare to that? No fasting, no sleeping on the ground, no watching and praying all night, nor anything else can do as much for you as saving your brother can accomplish.”

St John Chrysostom, *Eighth Homily against the Judaizers* 4: 1-3

Ninth Sunday of St Luke

The Rich Fool (Lk 12:16-21; 8:8)

WHAT DOES IT MEAN to be “rich toward God” (Lk 12:21)? Many of us may remember the concept of spiritual bouquets promoted by many Roman Catholic religious orders in schools and churches, particularly before Vatican II. A person accomplished so many Masses, so many Communions, so many rosaries, etc. which were then offered for another person or a special intention. This practice, which urged many people to more frequent devotional practices than they would have observed otherwise, was a kind of piety of numbers: the more you do, the better.

Is this what the Lord Jesus meant by being “rich towards God”? Instead of amassing earthly treasures are we intended to accumulate spiritual “points” which we can bring with us when we stand before the Judge? Such an approach can bring us close to the Pharisee in Christ’s parable

who lists his spiritual accomplishments in contrast to the repentant Publican. At best it reveals our faith as immature, incapable of digesting spiritual meat (see 1 Cor 3:2).

Our True Wealth Is God

The actual treasure which is ours as the adopted children of God is nothing less than “*to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge that you may be filled with all the fullness of God*” (Eph 3:19). We are, as St. Paul insists, a temple in which God dwells both individually and as Church. Our ability to know God begins with His indwelling presence within us.

We certainly know that God loves us in Christ, and may believe that He dwells in us but it often seems to be an abstraction: something we know is true but doesn't touch us in any significant way. “God loves us... Michelangelo gave us great art... Bell gave us the telephone...” we may know all these things in the same way. But to know God's love in a way “that passes knowledge” is to do so in a manner that goes beyond intellectual knowledge to a knowledge of the heart.

As St. Paul says here, this knowledge is not an end in itself but enables us to be filled with God's fullness. Once our hearts are opened by a realization of how God loves us, they can experience God's saving presence. This presence transforms us – deifies us – making us sharers of His divine nature, which the Greek Fathers call *theosis*.

Some people have achieved this “knowledge past understanding” through the direct intervention of God. God makes Himself known unexpectedly to people and energizes their lives dramatically. St Gregory of Nyssa, for example, testifies that “*One night there appeared to Basil an outpouring of light, and, by means of divine power, the entire dwelling was illuminated by an immaterial light, having no source in anything material*” (*Funeral Oration for His Brother, Basil the Great*).

Most of us, however, have not had such an experience. How do we begin to arrive at this knowledge? Our attentiveness to prayer, the sacraments and the Scriptures are certainly signs that we look to know God. Still, our contact with the Bible and the Church's liturgy is intermittent. Even if we pray every day, these acts of openness to God are intermittent. Can ordinary people be in more constant communion with God than that?

Sitting in the Presence of God

St. Isaac the Syrian insists that we can and must commune with God continually to be on regular speaking terms with Him, as it were. “*Sit in the presence of the Lord every moment of your life, as you think of Him and recollect Him in your heart. Otherwise, when you only see Him after a period of time, you will lack the freedom to converse with Him, out of shame; for great freedom of conversation is born out of constant association with Him.*”

What St Isaac calls “sitting in the presence of God” others in both East and West have described as developing an awareness of the presence of God. We regularly pray that God is “*everywhere present and filling all things*” (“O heavenly King”), but are more frequently unaware of God’s presence as we go about our daily tasks. As the Divine Liturgy expresses it, “Christ is in our midst – He is and ever shall be.”

Even more compelling is the realization that the Spirit of God is not only with us but also within us through baptism, that we are members of the Body of Christ. If God “dwells within us,” then everything we do is in the presence of God although we regularly forget it. Developing an ***awareness of the presence of God***, then, simply means keeping the memory of God in our thoughts, and living like we really mean it.

Many people have learned to use an everyday event to trigger their awareness that God is present now. It may be an icon at one’s desk or kitchen counter, the ringing of a telephone or the sight of a child. Whenever they encounter their “trigger” they say a brief prayer.

Learning to Focus on God’s Presence

Setting aside time for silent reflection helps us refocus our attention on the presence of God in our midst. Spiritual writers of all ages recommend that we go apart – to our rooms, the outdoors, a church – where we can be undisturbed. There we can disengage from the activities of the day, close our eyes and begin to focus on the unceasing presence of God in which we stand. A time of silence may be enhanced by a simple breathing exercise to help us concentrate on the fact that we are in the holy presence of God.

St John Climacus, the 7th century abbot of Mount Sinai and author of *The Ladder*, suggests the next step. “*Become aware of God, in whose presence you are while you pray,*” he writes. “*Then take a formula of prayer and recite it with perfect attention both to the words you are saying and to the Person to whom you are saying them.*” In time the Jesus Prayer – *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner* – became the standard prayer in the Byzantine Churches for resting in the presence of God.

Sit quietly and repeat the prayer without hurrying for whatever length of time you have set apart for sitting in God’s presence. It is good to have a regular period of time for this activity – e.g. 15 minutes, for a start – which may be adjusted as circumstances dictate. Counseling 17th century nuns, the Bishop of Geneva, St Francis de Sales, suggests a different kind of adjustment than we would normally consider. “*Half an hour’s meditation is essential except when you are very busy,*” he teaches. “*Then a full hour is needed.*” The more harried we are by stress at home or work, the more we need to focus on the presence of God to bring us peace.

Brother Lawrence, the 17th century Carmelite monk, whose teachings are recorded in the book *The Practice of the Presence of God*, adds another dimension to our consideration of our true wealth as Christians. We are fulfilling our eternal calling as people devoted to the worship of God “*I am doing now what I will do for all eternity,*” he exclaimed. “*I am blessing God, praising Him, adoring Him, and loving Him with all my heart.*”

Tenth Sunday of St Luke

The Challenge of the Sabbath (Lk 13:10-17)

MODERN MEDICINE HAS FOUND treatments for a number of diseases that had plagued mankind for centuries. Some have even been eradicated, at least in the developed world. This is not the case with scoliosis (curvature of the spine), such as afflicted the woman in St Luke's Gospel. To this day no one knows the cause of this affliction in most cases.

The Gospel says she had been afflicted with this condition for eighteen years, but since scoliosis is often manifested at puberty, she was probably not old by our standards. Treatments available in our day such as wearing braces, surgery, physical therapy and pain medication, were unknown in the first century AD. They must have been eighteen long years indeed.

The Gospel tells us that the ruler of the synagogue was indignant "*because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath; and he said to the crowd, 'There are six days on which men ought to work; therefore come and be healed on them, and not on the Sabbath day'*" (Lk 13:15).

The Sabbath in Judaism

One of the hallmark Jewish practices for millennia has been the observance of the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week, as a day set apart for God. We read in the Book of Exodus, "*And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak also to the children of Israel, saying: 'Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you. You shall keep the Sabbath, therefore, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people'*" (Ex 31:14).

According to Exodus, a person profanes the Sabbath by doing any work on it. In traditional Jewish practice, maintained by observant Orthodox Jews in our own day, work is defined as "constructive labor" – whatever is done to benefit our life in this world. The Talmud – the traditional compendium of Jewish interpretation – lists 39 activities prohibited on the Sabbath, including all kinds of farm or household labor including lighting or extinguishing a fire and moving things about from one place to another. The only exception to these rules would be activity which helps save a life, which is why Jewish health care workers may be employed on the Sabbath.

Later commentators have understood these 39 prohibitions as categories, thereby expanding the list of prohibitions. Thus some rabbis teach that, since chaff cannot be picked from wheat on the Sabbath, it follows that one cannot pick the bones from fish as well. Gefilte fish (pre-ground boned fish) became a popular Sabbath food as a result.

In their zeal to preserve the Sabbath some rabbis have gone to what even many Jews perceive as extremes. Thus in some Jewish communities it is forbidden to ride a bicycle on the Sabbath

because, if the chain breaks, you might be tempted to fix it. In a similar case a man was forbidden to drive his handicapped mother to the synagogue as it violated the Sabbath; the rabbi suggested that she move within walking distance. Then she would be welcome. The ruler of the synagogue in Lk seems to have been of like mind.

Christ on the Sabbath

Christ was frequently in conflict with more observant Jews over Sabbath-related issues. He was not opposed to the Sabbath itself – He is depicted in the Gospel as a regular worshipper in the synagogue on the Sabbath (see Lk 4:16). Rather He was opposed to the elaboration of prohibitions favored by the Pharisees. Instead, He favored expanding the traditional exemption. In addition to work involved with saving a life, Christ saw doing good as an appropriate Sabbath activity: *“There was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked [Jesus], saying, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?’—that they might accuse Him. Then He said to them, ‘What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath’”* (Mt 12:10-12).

The Gospels record several incidents of healings which caused controversy because they were done on the Sabbath. St Luke tells how Christ asked some lawyers and Pharisees if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath. When they would not answer, He proceeded to heal a man with dropsy (see Lk 14:1-6). And it was a Sabbath when the Lord Jesus healed the man born blind (see Jn 9:1-41).

We also read in John how Christ healed a paralyzed man at the Pool of Bethesda saying, *“Take up your bed and walk”* (Jn 5:8). The Pharisees did not challenge Jesus; rather they confronted the ex-paralytic: *“It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your bed”* (v.10). The man replied that his healer had told him to do so and, we might add, that was enough for him.

Legalism Is Dangerous

The Sabbath prohibitions were intended to free the Jews from a life which knew nothing but toil. Since they were in the form of bans, some Jews came to feel that extending these exclusions enhanced or honored the Sabbath. The Lord Jesus put forth a different approach, insisting that the Sabbath is honored when we do good on it.

The lawyers and Pharisees whom Jesus challenged were not the first or the last to turn positive precepts into restrictive commands. They turned the joy which should have accompanied the Sabbath into fear of transgressing a prohibition as a particular school of rabbis understood it.

Something similar happens in the Church when we lose sight of the presence of Christ which alone gives meaning to any precept or rubric. When this happens our traditions may become as fruitlessly restrictive as those Christ confronted. Conversely, when we cast them off we may be left, not with renewal but with license.

The Sabbath Today

“Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made” (Gen 2:3). This verse is read at the start of Jewish Sabbath eve services to remind worshippers that the Sabbath is a remembrance of God’s rest after the work of creation.

In the Church the Sabbath has given way to Sunday with its memory of the Lord’s resurrection and the resulting new creation. Nevertheless, the Sabbath still has a place on Eastern Church calendars. In some parishes the Liturgy is offered on Saturday as well as on Sunday.

In our Church remembering the original creation is still a focus for our Saturday prayers. The kondakion sung on most Saturdays reflects the connection of the Sabbath with creation: “To You, O Lord, Ordainer and Creator of the world, the universe offers the God-bearing martyrs as the first fruits of nature. Wherefore through their prayers and through the intercession of the Theotokos preserve Your Church and our country in safety and peace: You who alone are most merciful.”

The Sabbath as a day of rest is expressed on Holy Saturday in recalling the great Sabbath rest of Christ in the tomb. Throughout the year, and especially on the Saturdays of the Dead, the peaceful repose of those who die in Christ is highlighted.

Eleventh Sunday of St Luke – Second Sunday before the Nativity of Christ

See Menaion, p.

Twelfth Sunday of St Luke

The Leprous Nature of Man (Lk 17:12-19)

CHRIST’S ENCOUNTER WITH THE TEN LEPERS offers several points on which we can reflect. We see that Christ heals, that He heals foreigners as well as Israelites, and that the only one who glorifies God is that foreigner, a Samaritan. Christ’s response to the Samaritan, however, is a bit more complicated and merits our attention.

According to St Luke, when the Samaritan returns glorifying God, Christ responds, “*Arise, go your way; your faith has made you well*” (Lk 17:19 New King James Version). Is Christ referring to the original healing in which all ten lepers were cleansed or does the Samaritan receive something else because he came back glorifying God?

Some popular English versions offer interesting alternative translations which suggest an answer. “*Thy faith hath made thee whole*” says the original King James Version. The New American Bible and the Jerusalem Bible translate this phrase “*Your faith has saved you.*”

The Greek verb in this sentence is *sesoken*, a form of the word *sozon* which we regularly translate in our prayers as “save.” It may be translated as “heal,” “make whole” or “save” depending on the context. In such a case it is wise to consult the Tradition for the best interpretation. Early Church commentators on this passage suggest that the Samaritan received more than the physical healing of his disease: he found salvation. As St Athanasius wrote, “This

one was given much more than the rest. Besides being healed of his leprosy, he was told by the Lord, ‘Stand up and go on your way. Your faith has saved you’” (Festal Letter 6).

In his *Explanation of the Gospel of St. Luke* Blessed Theophylact, Archbishop of Ochrid and Bulgaria writes that “This miracle also signifies the common salvation that came to the whole human race. For the ten lepers represent all of human nature – it was leprous with wickedness, carrying about with it the ugliness of sin, passing its life outside the heavenly city on account of its uncleanness, and standing afar off from God.” The complete healing of mankind is, in fact, what we refer to as “salvation.”

It is not uncommon for people to be asked by some Christians (usually Evangelicals or Pentecostals), “Are you saved?” By this they generally mean something like, “Have you personally appropriated the salvation that comes through Jesus Christ?” Their point is similar to that made by Blessed Theophylact. The ten lepers all were cleansed but only one personally appropriated what Christ had done by returning and glorifying God.

What Does It Mean to Be Saved?

When Western Christians talk about salvation they often think of it as described in the fourth-fifth centuries by St Augustine and in the eleventh century by Anselm of Canterbury. In their view all mankind was unrighteous and unclean through the original sin of Adam. It was necessary that mankind make atonement through a well-pleasing sacrifice. That sacrifice was made on the cross, by which Christ offered Himself for the sins of Adam and of the entire human race.

As this view was developed, the West focused increasingly on the cross. Christ’s death was the sacrifice offered to atone for sin and ransom mankind. Some saw the cross as an instrument of the Father’s wrath originally meant for us, now taken out on His Son! Others thought of Christ’s death as a ransom paid to the devil in whose power mankind had fallen. These views took Western Christians further and further from the thinking of the early Church.

The Eastern Fathers had a different view of sin and salvation. Instead of atonement and sacrifice they stressed the loss and restoration of relationship with God as the heart of the question of sin and redemption. The original sin, the sin of Adam, was a break in relationship with God. Adam declines to heed God’s warning and eats of the tree, determining for himself what is good rather than heeding God. Going it alone, Adam no longer “walked with God” but hid from Him (Gen 2).

In Christ God enters the world to become one with mankind once more and, through this complete and eternal union with Him, to deliver it from eternal death. The Son of God becomes like us in all things except sin and in Him God and man are perfectly united. Once again God is fully in communion with a Man, the Lord Jesus, and through Him with all mankind.

Since being human means to endure suffering and death, Christ shared in those things as well. What was unique about Christ is that He did not remain in death but, once He had experienced it, He triumphed over it.

And so Christ's death on the cross is not emphasized in the Christian East as a sacrifice to atone for original sin; rather it is as the inevitable consequence of His desire to become one of us. Christ's death on the cross is an unavoidable result of His being fully human because all humans die.

The Lepers: an Icon of Salvation

As Blessed Theophilact observed, the lepers represent all humanity, scarred by their common affliction but still dear to Christ. "He healed the whole leprous nature of man, when, for every man's sake, He took flesh and tasted of death."

Without a doubt all ten welcomed their cleansing from leprosy; they accepted the gift but ignored the Giver. Only one returned to Christ, glorifying God. He not only received the blessing of health, he also enjoyed a relationship with the Healer. He welcomed, not only the cleansing from leprosy, but also the presence of the One who brings wholeness and salvation to all who accept Him in their lives. His physical healing is the prelude to his communion with Christ, in which is his – and our –salvation.

To Whom Was the "Ransom" Paid?

St Gregory the Theologian asks this question to demolish what he felt were false ideas about our salvation.

"To whom and why is this blood poured out for us and shed – the great and most precious blood of God, the High Priest and Victim? We were in the power of the Evil One, sold to sin, and had brought this harm on themselves by sensuality. ... If the price of ransom is given to none other than him in whose power we are held, then I ask, to whom and for what reason is such a price paid?"

"If it is to the Evil One, then how insulting is this! The thief received the price of ransom; he not only receives it from God, but even receives God Himself. He receives so large a price for his tyranny that it was only right to have mercy on us.

"If to the Father, then, first, in what way? Were we in captivity under Him?... And secondly, for what reason? For what reason was the blood of the Only Begotten pleasing to the Father, who did not accept even Isaac, when offered by his father, but exchanged the offering, giving a lamb instead of the reasonable victim?"

45th Oration on Holy Pascha

Thirteenth Sunday of St Luke
“Sell All You Have” (Lk 18:18-27)

“WHAT MUST I DO TO INHERIT ETERNAL LIFE?” This question is posed by a young Jewish leader whom Jesus meets on His way to Jerusalem. At first glance it seems a reasonable inquiry, one that many people would still ask today. “Tell me what prayer to say, what shrine to visit, what project I can take on which will guarantee that I’ll get to heaven.”

Church Fathers, however, saw this as a trick question, seeking to trap Jesus into setting some new requirement not in the Law. The Lord does not give him another thing to do, adding to the list of precepts which devotees of the Torah felt set forth God’s will for them. Rather Jesus says that to be perfect you must “sell all you have” and commit yourself completely to Him. Perfection does not come from performing this or that isolated action, however good it may be. Perfection comes from entrusting one’s whole life to Christ.

In the Pastoral Epistles we see some consequences of this life in Christ as it was perceived in the apostolic Church. The “elect of God” (Col 3:12) have died to the world, been buried in Baptism and are now alive in Christ. Their way of life is to be Christ’s, embodying the compassion and forgiveness of Christ Himself. They are to bear with one another (after all, others are putting up with them). They are to build up one another’s faith “with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Col 3:16), thankful for the grace filling their hearts. This is certainly in stark contrast to the way of the world, where self-love, resentments, grudges, and slanderously tearing others down is the norm for many.

One of the first qualities of someone dead to the world mentioned in Colossians is humility, a virtue most associate with monasticism rather than life in the world. In fact, as the Church grew, perfection came to be associated increasingly with some kind of ascetic life. At first people like the “sons and daughters of the covenant” in the Syriac Church lived in the world, but somewhat apart from others, devoting themselves to prayer and good works. By the third century ascetics like St Antony and the Desert Fathers lived as hermits in the wilderness, completely apart from others. Monasticism brought like-minded people together to live in a community, where they could commend themselves *and one another* and their whole life to Christ God while being apart from the world at large.

But the Gospel is not addressed simply to monks and nuns; it is meant for all believers. How does a Christian in the world “sell all” and follow Christ? Is there a way for a believer to live in the world but not be of the world, as Christ enjoins? It is not wearing some distinctive dress that says “I am different.” It is rather living by a different set of principles, given by Christ.

The popular book, *Way of the Ascetics* by Tito Colliander, affirms that our “wealth” is nothing less than our self-centeredness. *“Take a look at yourself and see how bound you are by your desire to humor yourself and only yourself. Your freedom is curbed by the restraining bonds of self-love, and thus you wander, a captive corpse, from morning till eve. ‘Now I will drink,’ ‘now I will get up,’ ‘now I will read the paper.’ Thus you are led from moment to moment in your halter*

of preoccupation with self, and kindled instantly to displeasure, impatience or anger if an obstacle intervenes” (p. 5).

Colliander stresses that asceticism is the only path to victory over our self-centeredness. He gives some practical suggestions for living an ascetic life in the world. Like St Paul, Colliander begins with meekness and humility. He contrasts true humility with the desire to be perceived as humble:

“We notice the person who is forever bowing and fussily servile, and perhaps say, ‘How humble he is!’ But the truly humble person escapes notice: the world does not know him (1 John 3:1); for the world he is mostly a ‘zero’” (p. 26).

Humility is rather a matter of not always putting forth one’s own will. Colliander teaches that following the Church’s tradition for fasting is the most basic school for obedience. We fast when the Church says to, we do not fast when the Church says not to. We fast not to be “righteous,” but to be obedient.

Ordinary life provides countless other occasions for us to develop a humble spirit through obedience. Colliander notes, *“Your wife wants you to take your raincoat with you: do as she wishes, to practice obedience. Your fellow-worker asks you to walk with her a little way: go with her to practice obedience. A novice in a cloister could not find more opportunity for obedience than you in your own home. And likewise at your job and in your dealings with your neighbour” (p.44).*

To “sell all one has,” then, ultimately means to give up one’s own will to follow Christ. Along with a certain simplicity of life and chastity appropriate to one’s marital state, we attain what St Tikhon of Zadonsk called “interior monasticism.” We put aside the values and pursuits of the world to follow Christ along the way of perfection in whatever state of life we find ourselves.

Fourteenth Sunday of St Luke – Luke 18:35-43

A Voice for All Mankind

AT THE DIVINE LITURGY ON ANY ORDINARY DAY the phrase *Lord, have mercy* will be repeated over fifty times. At other services we might hear this prayer repeated forty or even one hundred times in response to a single petition. It is not unusual to hear people question this repetition. “Why so many times?” they may ask. “Are we so miserable that we must keep begging for mercy?”

This prayer is easily understood coming from the mouth of the blind man in the Gospel. A blind beggar at the side of the road near the city gate was a person alone, without family to take care of him, dependent on strangers hurrying past, intent on their own affairs, for a few coins to buy bread. Such a person would cry out for mercy, but why should we do so, especially as often as we do in our prayers?

Lord, have mercy comes easily to our lips if we are used to praying in the Byzantine tradition; it may not spring from our hearts, especially in this country, where people are raised to believe that our intelligence and determination can find a solution to any problem. We may need more resources, more time, or more ingenuity to solve our problems, but solve them we will.

Participants in the many Twelve-Step Programs for overcoming addictions which have arisen in the past 75 years are the people in our society who have realized that they cannot solve their own problems. They need “mercy.”

Although they are couched in secular terms, the first steps in these programs express in contemporary terms the impulse which prompted the blind man to cry out for mercy:

1. “We admitted we were powerless over our addiction —that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. “We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. “We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him.*”

Those of us who are not dependent on alcohol, drugs, gambling or any other addictive behavior may not feel that we need either these principles or the blind man’s plea for mercy. We do, however, share fallen human nature trapped by sin, selfishness and the passions which beset everyone in the world. Whereas the recovering addict realizes his problem and makes the decision to turn to God, most of us remain blissfully unaware or unconcerned.

Mental health therapists often ask clients whether anything they do is truly selfless. Most people are not able to come up with anything. Whatever we do, even prayer or charitable work, we do for our own pleasure or self-satisfaction, at least in part. We understand the perils of alcoholism; we do not see the even more pervasive danger of egoism, the mother of the passions..

The believer who comes to know the brokenness of our human nature and our inclination to sin will know that the each of us is as powerless over our passions as the addict is over his or her addictions and will readily embrace the cry of the blind man, “Have mercy on me!”

The Jesus Prayer

The cry of the blind man is also the heart of the Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!” In this prayer we first of all confess Christ as the Son of God, as the blind man confessed Him to be the Messiah, the “Son of David.” Then we admit that we are broken, sinners, in need of God’s mercy.

This prayer summarizes the Christian’s entire spiritual life. Little wonder, then, that it has for centuries been the One-Step Program for countless Eastern Christians seeking to express their connection to God.

“As one, therefore, who already believed that the Word, being God, had of His Own Will submitted to be born in the flesh of the holy Virgin, he drew near to Him as unto God, and said,

‘Have mercy upon me, Son of David (v.38). For Christ bears witness that this was his state of mind in offering his supplication, by saying unto him, ‘Your faith has saved you’ (v.42).’

St Cyril of Alexandria

Fifteenth Sunday of St Luke (Sunday of Zacchaeus)

Zacchaeus and His Treasure (Luke 19:1-10)

ONE OF THE SAYING OF THE LORD JESUS which puzzled His hearers and still puzzles people today is, “*How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God*” (Lk 18:24). It flies in the face of the “prosperity gospel” preached in many mega-churches as it did in Israel. Wealth is a blessing, it is said, and so the wealthy have been blessed by God. This must be a sign of God’s favor to them. The Lord’s words make no sense in the face of this ‘logic.’ When questioned how this could be, Jesus replied, “*The things which are impossible with men are possible with God*” (v.27).

A few verses later in Luke we read the story of Zacchaeus’ encounter with Christ in which a rich man enters the kingdom of God. This happens when Zacchaeus, a leading tax collector – and, therefore, a man in whose position greed and extortion would be a way of life – is so drawn to the Lord Jesus that his riches cease to matter. He gives half his wealth to the poor and restored fourfold anything gained by fraud. Zacchaeus is therefore the opposite of the rich young man in Luke 18 who chose keeping his wealth over following Jesus.

The Gospel story of Zacchaeus’ conversion (Lk 19:1-10) offers some valuable insights into repentance. His spiritual journey begins with an encounter with Christ. At first Zacchaeus is moved by a kind of curiosity to climb the tree and see who this Jesus is. Then Christ calls him personally and they go off to Zacchaeus’ house. True repentance always involves both our work and the Lord’s. If He calls and we are not even curious, nothing will happen. If we seek Him in an inappropriate way – such as only coming to Him when we want something – He may remain silent.

Zacchaeus’ repentance is not mere sentiment; it has concrete exterior manifestations. One is the desire to repair any wrongs he may have done to others. “...*if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore it fourfold*” (v. 8). We cannot move ahead unless we correct what we can of our past sins. When material things are at the heart of our sin it is relatively easy to make restitution. But how does anyone restore a broken relationship, heal a damaged childhood or re-establish another’s reputation which we have smeared? The one we have harmed may demand something from us or our spiritual guide may offer alternative acts of reparation. But something concrete must be done.

Zacchaeus does not only look back, he also looks ahead. “*I give half of my goods to the poor...*” (v.8) Zacchaeus actually does something to fulfill the Lord’s precept to love in a concrete way. This dynamic was explained most clearly by St Diadochos, the fifth-century Bishop of Photiki in northern Greece: “When a man begins to perceive the love of God in all its

richness, he begins also to love his neighbor with spiritual perception. This is the love of which all the scriptures speak.” (*On Spiritual Knowledge and Discernment*, 15).

Zacchaeus’ life-changing decision is clearly spelled out, but the dynamics of his encounter with Christ are not. What brought Zacchaeus to such a decision? What did he see in Jesus? We are not told because it is Zacchaeus’ decision rather than how he experienced Christ which is of importance to us.

Later events in the life of the Church have shown that there are two principal ways to experience God. The first way is more dramatic, but less common. Here ***God reveals himself to a person directly***, as he did to St. Paul, or perhaps through reading the Scriptures or through an icon. When such an encounter takes place the person meeting the Lord reacts much as did Zacchaeus. He puts aside his “wealth” to follow Christ.

While a person’s riches might be monetary like Zacchaeus, it may be other things as well. Paul – Saul as he was then – was not a wealthy man monetarily speaking but he had riches, which he described in Philippians 3:5-8. Paul’s “wealth” was his status as “*a Hebrew of the Hebrews*,” one who credentials as a practitioner of Judaism was unmatched. He was an observant Pharisee, blameless in his observance of the Law. But after encountering Christ he says, “*What things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ*” (v.7).

Throughout the centuries people have put aside their “wealth” for Christ. They gave up lands and possessions like St. Anthony the Great, but also high rank like St. Arsenius the Great, scholarly repute like Evagrius, or political convictions like Dorothy Day. They chose to give up their “wealth” for something greater.

The second way of experiencing God in the Tradition is through ***asceticism: struggling to change*** the focus of our life.

Most people today follow the lead of our secular culture in pursuing whatever gives us pleasure or material security while ignoring the continual presence of God on whom we all depend. Like teenagers focused on their iPhones or MP3 players, they are oblivious to the real world around them, in this case the presence of God.

When people embrace the ascetic life they work to refocus their lives away from the values of this age. They strive to break away from the compulsions or fixations that enslave so many, from a full-time pursuit of the attractions of the world.

They cease relying on their own minds to determine what is good for them and begin looking to God. In their innermost being they hear the Lord’s words, “*Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you*” (Mt 6:33). In this way they prepare themselves to recognize God “everywhere present and filling all things.”

The Lord Jesus described the choice they and countless others have faced like this:

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it” (Mt 13:44-46).

The “treasure hidden in a field” is the unique relationship with God in Christ which Zaccaeus, Paul and all the saints had found and which St Paul described as *“Christ in you, the hope of glory”* (Col 1:27).

Each of us can attain this treasure because:

- While all creation reflects something of God, the Source of its being, we were created with something more of God in us: made *“in our image, after our likeness”* (Gen 1:26)
- The Word of God has become one of us in Jesus Christ, completely sharing our humanity so that we might share in His divine life: *“God became man so that man might become godlike”* (St Athanasius the Great)
- Christ has lived His human life in perfect communion with His Father: *“I am not alone, but I am with the Father who sent me”* (Jn 8:16)
- Christ has promised to dwell in those who keep His word: *“If anyone loves me, he will keep my word; and my Father will love him and we will come to him and make our home with him”* (Jn 14:23)
- When we maintain this communion with God by keeping His word we come to share by grace in His divine nature: *“His divine power has given us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of Him ...that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature”* (2 Pt 1:3-4).

What are you willing to put aside or to take up to attain this treasure?

In the Church calendar the story of Zacchaeus is read as the herald of the Triodion, the last Sunday before we open that guide to repentance and the Great Fast. As we recall the movements of Zacchaeus’ repentance we should be led to ask ourselves about the quality of our love for God. To what concrete action are we being led to perform during the coming Fast? What tangible form will love take in our lives as we look to the celebration of Pascha? And what past offenses to others which have yet to be righted hang over us and taint our intentions for this season? Like Zacchaeus we are called to begin our spiritual exercise with the “warm-up” of repentance in deed as well as in thought.