

A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Orthodox Christian Church



Rev. Matthew P. Binkewicz, Pastor

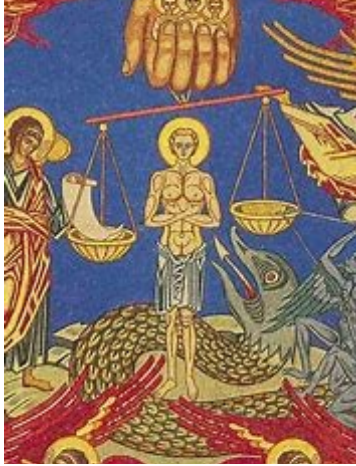
Glory be to Jesus Christ! Glory be Forever!



Volume 10 Issue 450

35th Sunday after Pentecost-Last Judgment

February 7, 2021



This is the Third Sunday of our Pre-Lenten preparations and is called the Sunday of the Last Judgement. The previous two Sundays (the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee, and the Sunday of the Prodigal Son) conveyed God's deep compassion, mercy, patience, and His readiness to accept every person who returns to Him.

On this third Sunday we are powerfully reminded of several complementary truths: 1. Though God's patience and mercy are limitless, even He cannot forgive those who do not repent, seek reconciliation, and sincerely seek to change. 2. Eventually there will be a final judgement & reckoning. The God of Love and humility is also a God of righteousness, and Christ will come again; not in poverty and humility as He did the first time but this time in great glory and power. Then, it will be the last day of time, the last day of becoming, and the first day of eternity.

Every liturgy when we declare, in the last phrase of the Nicene Creed that, "I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come. Amen." We affirm our believe that at the time of Christ's second coming the dead will be resurrected and that the
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* Sunday of the Last Judgment *

** St. Parthenius of Lampsacus **

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 8:8-9:2

Gospel: Matthew 25:31-46

St. George Orthodox Christian Church is a community of believers who strive to live a life according to the Gospel of Christ and teachings of the Church.

We worship God in Trinity -
Father+Son+Holy Spirit.

We are dedicated to living out Christ's commandment to, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, ad with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.*

Abandonment by St. Isaac of Syria

St. Isaac points out as giving us the fiercest spiritual struggle is when we feel abandoned, abandoned by people, but most importantly, abandoned by God. Sometimes this feeling of abandonment is manifest as despondency or depression and is accompanied by a strong urge to give up, to just sit and do nothing, or not to get out of the bed in the morning.

However, sometimes the feeling of abandonment manifests itself as

an urge to cast off restraint, to give oneself over to wine, women and song; to eat, drink and be merry.

And while both of these symptoms or manifestations of the feeling of abandonment are dangerous, the most dangerous in my opinion is when the feeling of abandonment leads to cynicism. A depressed Christian or an unrestrained Christian are both spiritually ill, but they are both usually aware of their sickness and, if they are willing,

are relatively easy to help.

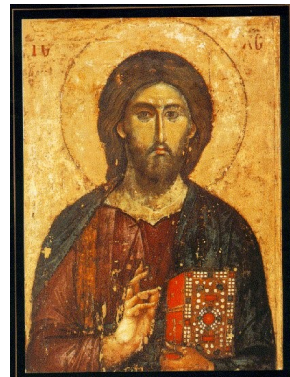
I say relatively easy because even though both depression and licentiousness can have many possible causes and take a long time to understand and overcome, people who have the spiritual disease of cynicism often do not even realize that they are sick.

A Christian who is cynical may consider him or herself to be in many ways a model Christian, a leader, someone who
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We invite all to worship in our services. Sunday Divine Liturgy begins at 9:30 AM

If you have any questions about the church or would like to speak with our pastor, please call Fr. Matthew at 607-280-1586

Glory be to
Jesus Christ.
Glory be
Forever.





Troparion to St. George

As the deliverer of captives and defender of the poor, healer of the infirm and champion of kings, victorious great martyr George intercede with Christ our God for our souls salvation.

News and Notes

We welcome all who are worshipping with us today. Because of COVID-19, our social hour has been canceled until we receive further instructions from the Department of Health.

Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17)

We ask that you keep the following in your prayers: Esther, Clement John, Mother Onufria, Meg, Larissa, Jack, Stephen, Louise, George, Evan, Ryan, Sandy, Samuel, Anatoly, Alexey, Abraham, Susan, Jenny, Deb, Dan, Bob, Catherine, Skip, Doug, Heidi, Laura, Elizabeth Matthew, Corella, Ron, Daniel, Frankie, Dean, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ.

Wisdom from St Theophan the Recluse

If you examine your life well, you will find many instances when God showed His unmistakable mercy to you. Trouble was brewing, but it passed you by for some reason. God delivered you. Acknowledge these and thank God, Who loves you.

The chief end of our life is to live in communion with God. To this end the Son of God became incarnate, in order to return us to this divine communion, which was lost by the fall into sin. Through Jesus Christ, the Son of God, we enter into communion with the Father and thus attain our purpose.

If you want to attain salvation, learn and keep in your heart all that the holy Church teaches and, receiving heavenly power from the mysteries of the Church, walk the path of Christ's commandments, under the direction of lawful pastors, and you will undoubtedly attain the Heavenly Kingdom and be saved. All of this is naturally necessary in the matter of salvation, necessary in its entirety and for all. Whoever rejects or neglects any part of it has no salvation.

Every Christian is chosen-chosen for similar deeds, namely: to be with the Lord, through unceasing remembrance of Him and awareness of His omnipresence, through the preaching and fulfillment of His commandments, and through a readiness to confess one's faith in Him.

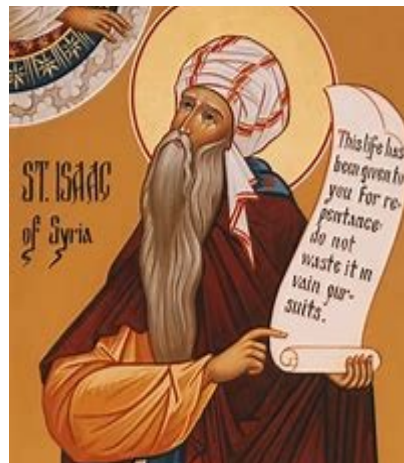
Abandonment continued from p.1

sees clearly and knows the dark side of every Christian leader, institution or tradition. Cynicism is very difficult to heal because it is very difficult for the cynical Christian to admit that he or she is very sick. But once recognized as a spiritual illness, cynicism can be healed.

Keep in mind that the root of cynicism, very often, is the feeling of abandonment. Christians, Orthodox Christians, become cynical often because the people or institutions they had relied on failed them in some serious ways. They then become cynical because God seems to have abandoned them, God seems far away, God does not seem to come to their aid, does not help them in the ways they thought He would. But because they do not want to give up faith completely, because they perhaps cannot give up faith, they cope with their pain and the incongruities of their religious experience through cynicism.

And so the cynical Christian is stuck in a kind of eddy at the side of the

River Life. He or she moves in little circles, making what she or he considers to be insightful, cynical comments on the River as it passes by. But the cynic is stuck, not going anywhere out of fear, fear which can be



seen only as they are willing to look deeply into themselves. The Christian cynic fears that the shadows he or she has focused on for so long are all that exist, that the Light has abandoned them.

So what do we do then? How do we

keep from being overcome by these struggles, these, "fiercest struggles" of the Christian journey, whether they be struggles to maintain chastity (in all of its various and possible forms) or struggles with abandonment issues (again, in any of its various forms or manifestations)?

According to St. Isaac, all of these struggles are won or lost through thoughts and habits, and it is the struggle not to give in to our perverse sexual thoughts and the thoughts generated by (and generating) feelings of abandonment that he calls "the unseen martyrdom." But how do we control our thoughts and habits? St. Isaac compares vice, be it depression, lack of restraint or cynicism that come from feelings of abandonment, to a potted plant or tree that one waters regularly. If you want the tree to die, you have to stop watering it. The more you water it by thinking about it, actively remembering it and doing it (in your mind, with your body or with your words), the stronger the tree becomes

(Homily on the Last Judgment, cont'd from p.1)

fundamental condition of both the world and of man will be radically changed. A “new heaven and a new earth” will be instituted, for the “Life of the Age to Come.” Today’s Gospel conveys part of that same eventually; there will be a judgment and we will appear before the Lord of Glory and be held accountable for what we have done and who we have become in this life.

Now, it is important to remember that unlike some of the contemporary Christian ideas of The Judgement, and Heaven & Hell where God somehow personally and directly intervenes or actively decides the fate of each person; the Orthodox belief of The Judgement is described markedly different and very well stated by St. Symeon the New Theologian who writes: *“God is truth and light. God’s judgment is nothing else than our coming into contact with truth and light. In the day of the Great Judgment all men will appear naked before this penetrating light of truth. The ‘books’ will be opened.” What are these ‘books’?*

They are our hearts. Our hearts will be opened by the penetrating light of God, and what is in these hearts will be revealed. If in those hearts there is love for God, those hearts will rejoice in seeing God’s light. If, on the contrary, there is hatred for God in those hearts, these will suffer by receiving on their opened hearts this penetrating light of truth which they detested all their life.

In short the Orthodox belief is simply this: the judgement will be our natural and automatic response to the fullness of the unveiled presence of Christ our God. As the Gospel of St. John tells us “God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.”

As I have mentioned before, at present (because of God’s mercy) there is a veil between us and the fullness of the Glory of God; though sometimes we are graced to have brief glimpses of that Brightness. St. Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians, *‘now we see through a*

glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.’ So, when the brightness and fullness of His Glory are revealed, some will rejoice in that brightness and warmth because they have struggled to become like God; while others who have consistently rejected the things of God, will experience this light and glory as caustic.

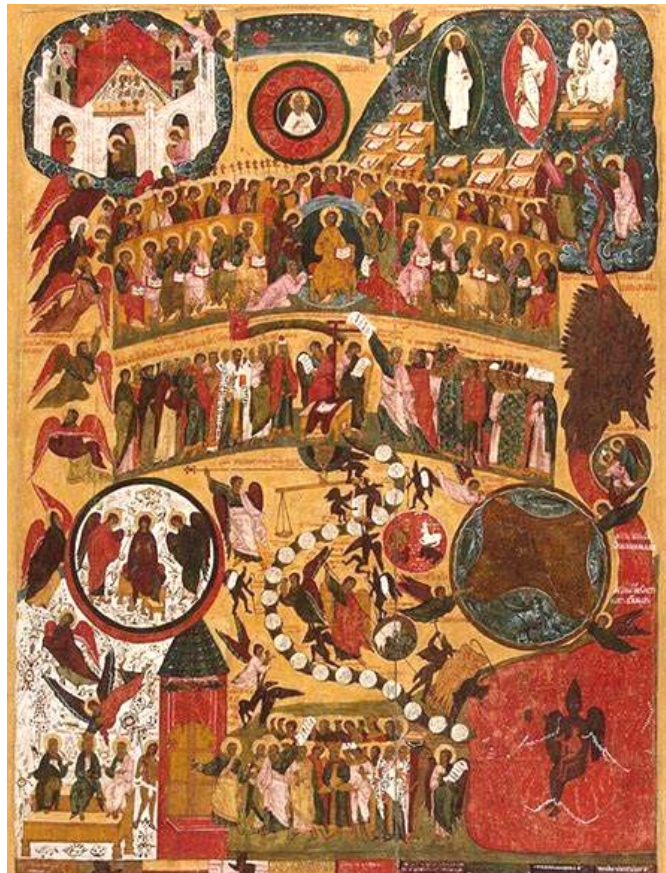
So, if this is what we believe about the final judgement, then it behooves us to sincerely ask how are we to be and how can we prepare ourselves? Jesus tells us in many ways and gives us His example throughout the Gospels, but in Matthew 22:35-46 (on the 15th Sunday after Pentecost) when a lawyer asked; which is the greatest commandment; Jesus pointedly said to him, *‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’*

So, ask yourself honestly, how often am I aware of the condition of my Christian brothers and sisters who may be standing right next to me here in Church that I see every week; or how sensitive am I to the needs of those in my immediate family or those where I work whom I see every day? And if I find myself lacking in

that awareness, is it because I am only concerned about the things that affect me personally, right now? Of course, we can make the excuse that we do not really know the needs of those near us because it is hidden and everyone deserves their privacy, which is indeed true. But too often I think, it is simply that our self-absorption has blinded us to almost anything that does not affect us directly and immediately.

There are so many opportunities that we have to serve each other, far beyond the few mentioned. Maybe someone needs a word of encouragement, or seems lonely and could use a bit of attention. Maybe someone is sad since life has thrown more disappointments than they can handle and they are in need of some comfort. Maybe someone needs a break from all their never ending duties at home, Church, or work, and you can step in to offer a helping, cheerful hand. Or as St. Paul mentions in the

(continued p.4, column 1)



(Homily on the Last Judgment)

Epistle reading today, maybe there is something we should NOT do in order to help someone avoid temptation – not necessarily for us but for our brother or sister. I am sure that you can think of many more on your own.

As Christians we have chosen to be Christ's friend. And you all know what friendship means; it means solidarity, it means loyalty, it means faithfulness, it means being as one in soul, heart, in action with the one who is our friend. This is the choice Christ made for us, and we have all made to Him - though too often we forget.

Let us then all take this time of Lent that is given to us to increase our sensitivity through fasting, prayer, and almsgiving not only to the

Divine inwardly but also to increase our sensitivity to the Divine in each other. For as Christ tells us in today's Gospel, *'assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me'*.

* * * *

According to legend, Princess Elizabeth Feodorovna was then healed of a serious illness through her prayers to the Mother of God in front of that icon. The grateful Grand Duchess gave a part of her dress and jewellery to decorate the plating of the Bethlehem icon of the Mother of God. The future great martyr personally handed the finished miraculous icon over to the Church of the Nativity. The Elisabeth-Sergius Educational Society, however, provides no confirmation of this version.

Some Famous Miracles Known Today

The Bethlehem icon of the Mother of God became regarded as miraculous after testimonies began to appear bearing witness to various miracles happening after prayers before it and also to the icon itself. People pray in front of the image of the Most Pure One asking for healing, family well-being and fertility. The large quantities of jewelry that, by tradition, the faithful leave near the icon frame, serve as a sign that the "smiling image" of the Mother of God really does help many. Unfortunately, only a few miracles connected with the Bethlehem image are recorded.

In the 1920s the holy image of the Mother of God warned Christians of the earthquake that was about to strike the Israeli lands. The oil-lamp burning in front of the icon had then been pendulating by itself for several days until the powerful blows shook the earth. Contempo-

The Bethlehem Theotokos Icon (Part 2)

raries also testify to repeated cases when tears appeared in the eyes of the Infant Savior depicted on the Bethlehem Icon of the Mother of God.

It is noteworthy that in Bethlehem this icon of the Theotokos is revered not only by Christians, but also by Muslims. A story has been preserved (albeit without exact dating), which happened to certain Greek Orthodox monks. It happened on Great Monday, as they were standing at the Bethlehem Church of the Nativity of Christ. An agitated Muslim suddenly approached them and shared that the day before in a dream he was honored with the vision of the "Holy Mother". The Mother of God invited him to

visit the place where She gave birth to Her Son. She showed him the way into that very cave through a low passage and told him where to find Her miraculous image.

With tears in his eyes, he was lighting candles in front of the Bethlehem icon of the Mother of God, saying that the icon of the Most Pure Virgin and everything else in the cave was exactly as it had appeared in his dream. After fulfilling the order of the Mother of God, the Muslim said goodbye to the monks and left. He did not know how much of a consolation his message from the Queen of Heaven was to these fathers, strengthening them in faith that "Her Son will come again and gather all who are close to Him."

The Icon Composition

The Bethlehem icon belongs to the Hodegetria type (from the Greek "Guide" or "Pointing the way"). The image depicts the Most Holy Theotokos holding the Infant Christ at Her left arm and pointing to Him with Her right hand, as the Way of salvation for Christians. The Divine Infant has an orb in His left hand, symbolizing royal power. With his right hand He blesses those who pray before the icon of His Most Pure Mother.

A distinctive feature of the holy image is undoubtedly the soft, smiling face of the Virgin, emanating infinite radiance. This is the only image showing the Queen of Heaven in a state other than appeasement, austerity or sorrow. The smile on Her face comforts us and shows that there is no contradiction between holiness and the joy of life. The affection and warmth flowing from the gentle, kind glance of the Mother of God give every believer hope for Her help and intercession before the throne of the Most High.

