

A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Orthodox Christian Church



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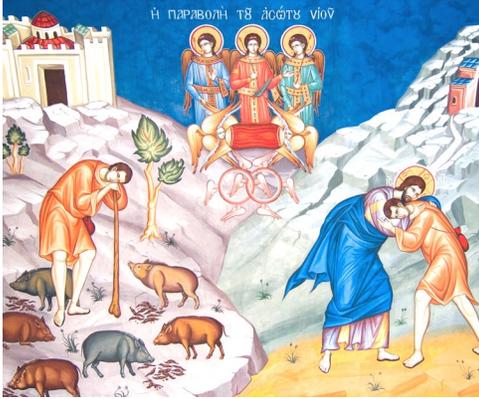
Glory be to Jesus Christ!

Glory be Forever!

Volume 13 Issue 603

34th Sunday after Pentecost-The Prodigal Son

January 28, 2024



In today's parable, the prodigal demands his share of the inheritance prematurely, as if it is his by right, rather than a gracious gift: as if he has it coming to him even while his father is still alive! He arrogantly commands his father, saying, "Give me the portion of goods that falls to me!" One question we may ask is: Why does the father give in to the son's command?

The answer, as we will see, is to save him in the end. You see, the son's heart is already in 'exile.' He's already given himself over to the estrangement of the far-off country roused by his sinful passions, life away from his true identity as his father's son. Only repentance can cure this sickness of soul.

So, he goes off to the "far country," squandering there the gracious gift of his inheritance—life with his father—on riotous living, carousing. He gives himself over to his passions, but in the end, finds himself barren, hungry, in want. Giving into his passions, leaves his soul empty. So it is for man: there's no sating the passions; there's no way to satisfy their greedy want. The more we give in to them, the more they demand—until our soul is vacuous... dead. Compromise with the
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++ 34th Sunday after Pentecost ++

++ St. Ephrem the Syrian ++

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Gospel: Luke 15: 11-32

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 Christ's commandment, *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.*

The Mystery of Obedience, by Archpriest Alexander Shargunov (part 2)

He modestly taught rhetoric, not aspiring to anything great. But after receiving Baptism, he diligently studied the alphabet of spiritual life. Soon afterwards, in order acquaint himself with the monastic life, he travels to Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, where he entered into close communion with a number of ascetics. This is where he learned the science of more perfect obedience, which could be talked about at length.

We'll mention only, that upon returning from his

journey, he distributed his possessions to the poor and retreated to the desert near Neocaesarea, engaging in ascetic struggles before entering into church service. This is one aspect of his life, the external one, which became increasingly significant due to its inseparable connection with love for God.

As St. Ephraim the Syrian testifies, when St. Basil preached, a white dove sang the words into his ear that he would pronounce. And when he celebrated Divine Litur-

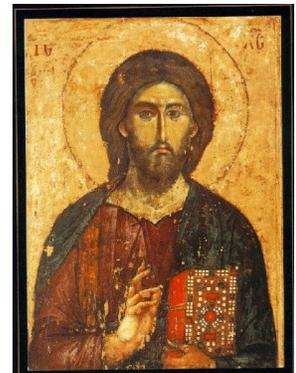
gy, he was like a pillar of fire rising from earth to heaven. Even to the present day, the Orthodox Church prays at our most important feasts using his words, filled to overflowing with lofty theological inspiration.

He took care to celebrate the memory of the martyrs and honor the holy relics with especial solemnity. He was the first of the Orthodox fathers to clearly and boldly announce that the Holy Spirit is true God, of one essence with the Father
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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.





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 that our souls
may be saved.

News and Notes

We welcome all who are with us today and invite you to join us at our coffee social following the Divine Liturgy.

Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17)

Please keep the following in your prayers: Mother Onufria, Larissa, Jack, Evan, Ryan, Anatoly, Alexey, Heidi, Mackenzie, Mike, Lisa, Jeff, Bonnalee, David, Carol, Norris, Debbie, Linda, Daniel, Michael, Abraham, George, Rochelle, Brianna, Tamam, Catherine, Chuck, Theresa, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ

From St. John Kronstadt

Watch yourselves--your passions especially--in your home life, where they appear freely, like moles in a safe place. Outside our own home, some of our passions are usually screened by other more decorous passions, whilst at home there is no possibility of driving away these black moles that undermine the integrity of our soul. For the soul of the pious, God-fearing man there is an invisible spiritual

intercourse with God. Like a father or a stern teacher, the Lord at one time approves, at another condemns our thoughts, desires and intentions; at one time He says that this is good, and that bad. He rewards us for the good and punishes us for the evil; and all this is at once evident to the soul.

Begin to fulfil the commandments relating to small things, and you will come to fulfil the commandments relating to great things: small things everywhere lead to great ones. Continue by fulfilling the commandment of fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays, or the tenth commandment relating to evil thoughts and desires, and you will eventually learn to fulfil all the commandments. "He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much."

Truth is the foundation of everything that has been created. Let truth be also the foundation of all your works (both inward and outward), and especially the foundation of your prayers. Let all your life, all your works, all your thoughts, and all your desires be founded upon truth

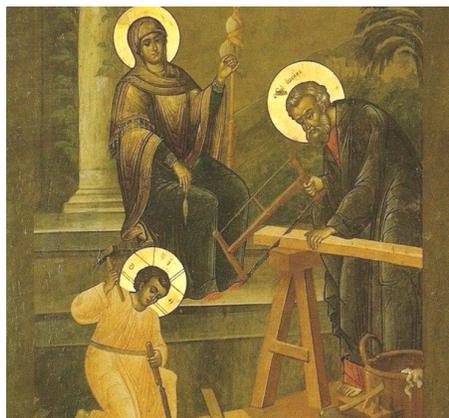
The Mystery of Obedience, cont'd from p.1

and the Son. Inspired by the very Spirit of God, being in communication with the Holy Trinity by the gift of grace, St. Basil with incomparable clarity and precision formulated such main theological concepts as *essence* and *hypostasis*, never separating them from the mystery of our salvation and man's deification.

His entire life was a battle against heretics who sowed confusion in the Church. He was a perfect bishop, a living image of Christ, all things unto all, and at the same time, as a human being, he continuously suffered defeats amidst various church divisions and storms. Today the Church leads us to the mysterious relationship between Christ and His Heavenly Father. It is no coincidence that the Gospel reading at the Liturgy is about how after the feast of the Passover, Christ remains in the Jerusalem temple with the teachers of the Law, who are amazed at his wisdom and answers.

The most important thing here is this mystery of His love for God the

Father. His parents find Him after searching for three days, and His mother says to Him, *Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing. And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I*



must be about my Father's business? (Lk. 2:48-49).

This is what Christ says. He is human in everything, a Child, but He is with His Father. *And they understood not, says the Gospel, the saying which he spake unto them* (Lk. 2:50).

They couldn't yet fathom it. Christ

has a God-man consciousness, thanks to which He lives in constant communion with His Father. "Don't you know, that I must be about my Father's business?"

Christ is twelve years old; He witnesses His independence from his Mother and Righteous Joseph, and also of His obedience to them. Because further on, we hear: *And he went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them* (Lk. 2:51). But in order to hide His perfect, special service, He was absent for three days, and His Mother with Righteous Joseph are not able to understand this. We are invited to penetrate into these relationships of hidden mystery, the infinite mutual love between the Heavenly Father and Christ.

I must be about my Father's business. This is a revelation of Christ, which we should heed. This extraordinary testimony passes through the entire Gospel. Christ is always with His Father and is always with Him.

(continued next issue)

Homily on the Prodigal Son, (cont'd from p.1)

priorities and values of this culture: humanism, secularism and nihilism, obsession with material 'security,' will not save us or lead us to healing, deification, or salvation. Instead, it will lead our souls step by step further into exile away from our Heavenly Father, our true identity in Him, and the inheritance of the Saints we hope for in Christ.

St. Gregory Palamas rightly says, that the devil beguiles us little by little, whispering to us, "even if you live independently without going to God's Church or listening to the Church teacher, you will still be able to see for yourself what your duty is and not depart from what is good" (Homily Three, On the Parable of the Prodigal). This is the lie he whispers to us to this day.

The reality is, if we're too busy for church, daily prayer, regular confession, and the preparation to rightly receive the Sacraments, and still think our soul is healthy, we're deceiving ourselves. If we compare ourselves to others who take and leave what they want from holy Church and pattern our lives the same way, thinking that's all we need, then we're deceiving ourselves. Luke-warmness will not grow us in Christ, will not grow our church, but will keep us in exile.

If such is our thinking, then only one thing will save us: repentance! The heart of the parable, the 'turning point,' is when we hear the words, "when he came to himself", that is, his right and sober mind and heart returns to him—and he realizes the

depth of the mire—the pigs slop—that's he's spiritually sunk himself into. His physical hunger (he longs to fill his stomach with the pig's slop), pales in comparison to the starvation of his soul, the hunger for the identity he gave up for sin, saying, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

This is a true image of repentance, metanoia, which means "a change of heart and mind." Repentance is a returning, a remembering, of who we really are, of who we're called to be in Christ, of how unworthy we are to be God the Father's adopted sons and daughters, but how great is His mercy and love for us that He so desires our communion with Him.

After the prodigal's right spiritual mind is restored, he remembers who he is—one of his father's sons, but he knows now that he cannot take that identity for granted;

he's squandered it, thrown it all away. In recognition of this greatest of sins, he repents with vigor, turning from his sins to his father, who is in this parable an image of God and His love and forgiveness for the penitent.

It's in this repentant spirit that the prodigal goes to beseech his father for forgiveness, prostrating himself before him. There's no self-legitimizing pride left, no 'rights': the son has gained humility in his exile. He returns a repentant man with a willingness to be a true son—even a servant of his father—grateful for the forgiveness and mercy his father gives. The father, for his part, receives him, not as the prodigal who selfishly demanded his right to abuse his inheritance, to selfishly forsake his identity, but as the son who was lost but has

now returned to his true self, his true identity, chastened through humility and fasting to be the true son he was not before.

And this person—the repentant son with the humble heart, who realizes that the world cannot sate him, that his temporal lusts and exiled mind cannot satisfy, this son who has "come to himself", returned from self-imposed exile, is re-established in the blessed life and inheritance with his father, that is his and our true identity—the truth of who we are and of who we are called to be as God's adopted sons and daughters in Christ, vivified by the Holy Spirit.

It's with this repentant, contrite and humble spirit, that we come to possess our inheritance in Christ and learn to prefer the joy of the Kingdom, in the near presence of Christ God over life in the temporal and passing world.

Now is the time we repent of our exiled minds and hearts, of whatever passions still hold us in exile. Now is the time to purge ourselves of whatever degree of enslavement we have to this culture's godlessness, secularism, and vainglory.

Christ God desires so much more for us: He runs to meet us in our repentance as the father in the parable does as he first sees the son return. He runs to embrace us just as soon as we start to repent, to return to our divine calling, our true identity in Him: striving to glorify God the Father and live for Him, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to be the adopted sons and daughters He's created us to be. God showers us with His forgiveness and mercy even before we can prostrate ourselves before Him or muster anything close to a response to His graciousness and love.



Saint Ephraim the Syrian, a teacher of repentance, was born at the beginning of the fourth century in the city of Nisibis (Mesopotamia) into the family of impoverished toilers of the soil. His parents raised their son in piety, but from his childhood he was known for his quick temper and impetuous character. He often had fights, acted thoughtlessly, and even doubted God's Providence. He finally recovered his senses by the grace of God, and embarked on the path of repentance and salvation.

After the capture of Nisibis by the Persians in 363, Saint Ephraim went to a monastery near the city of Edessa. Here he saw many great ascetics, passing their lives in prayer and psalmody. Their caves were solitary shelters, and they fed themselves with simple plants. Saint Ephraim combined asceticism with a ceaseless study of the Word of God, taking from it both solace and wisdom for his soul.

The Lord gave him a gift of teaching, and people began to come to him, wanting to hear his counsel, which produced compunction in the soul, since he began with self-accusation. Both verbally and in writing, Saint Ephraim instructed everyone in repentance, faith and piety, and he denounced the Arian heresy, which at that time was causing great turmoil. Pagans who heard the preaching of the saint were converted to Christianity.

He also wrote the first Syriac commentary on the Pentateuch (i.e. "Five Books") of Moses. He wrote many prayers and hymns, thereby enriching the Church's liturgical services. Famous prayers of Saint Ephraim are to the Most Holy Trinity, to the Son of God, and to the Most Holy Theotokos. He composed hymns for the Twelve Great Feasts of the Lord (the Nativity of Christ, the Baptism, the Resurrection), and funeral hymns. Saint Ephraim's Prayer of Repentance, "O Lord and Master of my life...", is recited during Great Lent, and it summons Christians to spiritual renewal.

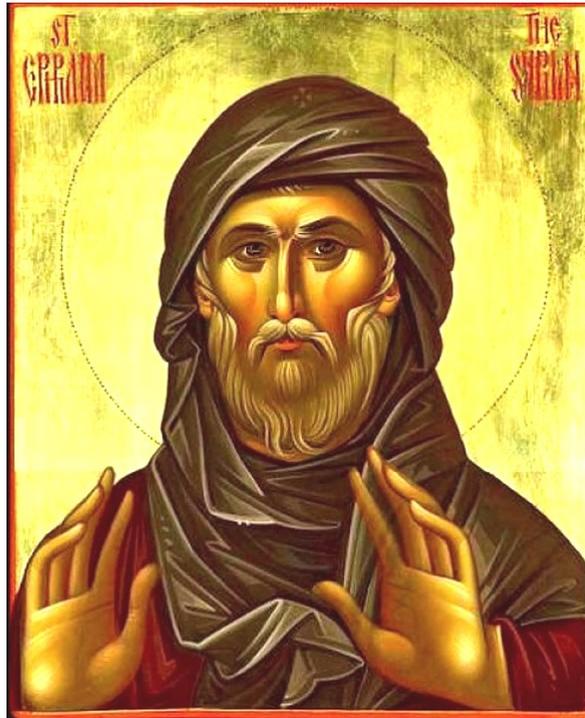
In many of Saint Ephraim's works we catch glimpses of the life of the Syrian ascetics, which was centered on prayer and working in various obediences for the common good of the brethren. The outlook of all the Syrian ascetics was the same. The monks believed that the goal of their efforts was communion with God and the acquisition of divine grace. For them, the present life was a time of tears, fasting and toil.

"If the Son of God is within you, then His Kingdom is also within you. Thus, the Kingdom of God is within you, a sinner. Enter into yourself, search diligently and without toil you shall find it. Outside of you is death, and the door to it is sin. Enter into yourself, dwell within your heart, for God is there."

To attain to life eternal, in the teachings of Saint Ephraim, does not mean to pass over from one realm of being into another, but rather to discover "the heavenly," spiritual condition of being. Eternal life is not bestowed on man through God's one-sided efforts, but rather, it constantly grows like a seed within him by his efforts, toils and struggles.

The pledge within us of "theosis" (or "deification") is

the Baptism of Christ, and the main force that drives the Christian life is repentance. Saint Ephraim was a great teacher of repentance. The forgiveness of sins in the Mystery of Repentance, according to his teaching, is not an external exoneration, not a forgetting of the sins, but rather their complete undoing, their annihilation. The tears of repentance wash away and burn away the sin. Moreover, they (i.e. the tears) enliven, they transfigure sinful nature, they give the strength "to walk in the way of the the Lord's commandments," encouraging hope in God. In the fiery font of repentance, the saint wrote, "you sail yourself across, O sinner, you resurrect yourself from the dead." Saint Ephraim, accounting himself as the least and worst of all,



went to Egypt at the end of his life to see the efforts of the great ascetics. He was accepted there as a welcome guest and received great solace from conversing with them. On his return journey he visited at Caesarea in Cappadocia with Saint Basil the Great (January 1), who wanted to ordain him a priest, but he considered himself unworthy of the priesthood. At the insistence of Saint Basil, he consented only to be ordained as a deacon, in which rank he remained until his death.

After his return to his own Edessa wilderness, Saint Ephraim hoped to spend the rest of his life in solitude, but divine Providence again summoned him to serve his neighbor. The inhabitants of Edessa were suffering from a devastating famine. By the influence of his word, the saint persuaded the wealthy to render aid to those in need. From the offerings of believers he built a poor-house for the poor and sick. Saint Ephraim then withdrew to a cave near Edessa, where he remained to the end of his days.