

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!



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3rd Sunday of Great Lent-Veneration of the Cross

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Today we venerate the precious and life-giving Cross upon which Jesus Christ offered Himself for the salvation of the world. The God-Man conquered death by death through a public, torturous execution that was intended to strike fear in the hearts of any who would dare challenge the authority of the Roman empire.

He is our great High Priest who

“sympathizes with our weaknesses,” for He entered personally into the grave in order to liberate all of us who were held captive to the fear of death through His glorious resurrection on the third day.

Today we adore His Cross in the midst of a global pandemic that has changed the social fabric of our lives for over a year. Social distancing, sheltering in place, closing of businesses and schools, cancellations of all kinds of events and activities, and economic uncertainty are now daily realities. The current crisis clarifies our condition as those who remain subject to disease, death, and all the problems common to the children of Adam and Eve in this world.

In ways that we cannot fully understand, the Savior became part of the same world we inhabit while remain-
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** 3rd Sunday-Cross Veneration **

** St. Paul the Simple of Egypt **

Epistle: Hebrews 4:14-5:6

Gospel: Mark 8:34-9:1

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.

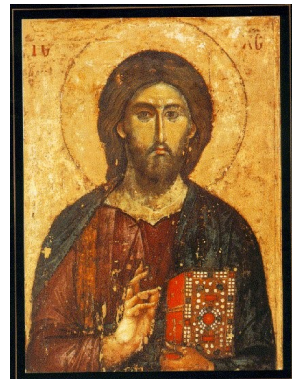
We worship God in Trinity -
Father+Son+Holy Spirit.

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.*

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.



To Judge or Not.

“Judge not, that you be not judged”, Christ commanded his disciples (Matt 7:1). But what are we to make of that statement? We make judgments every day. We judge how good the fruit is for purchase. We judge how well our children are doing in school. We judge the quality of the service that we receive from a repairman.

To complicate matters, Christ also said, “Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right

judgment” (Jn 7:24). To understand the nature of Christ’s apparently contradictory statements, we have to understand the language in which Christ spoke and we have to understand the nature of judgment.

In everyday usage, Christ spoke Aramaic, which is a Semitic language, much like Hebrew or Arabic. Semitic languages are famous for exaggerated language as a figure of speech. For example, Saddam Hussein of Iraq, speaking

Arabic, used to speak of the “mother of all battles”, a colorful exaggerated term for his war.

Quite often, Christ used exaggerated Aramaic language to address his audience. They, being used to it, had to carefully discern the context in order to determine the nature of the exaggeration and its extent. For example, Christ said, “Call no man your father upon the earth” (Matt 23:9). This was exaggerated language. He did
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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)

Please 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, Pat, Kathleen, Terena, Loretta, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ.

On the Power of the Holy Cross

Let us not then be ashamed to confess the Crucified. Be the Cross our seal made with boldness by our fingers on our brow, and on everything; over the bread we eat, and the cups we drink; in our comings in, and goings out; before our sleep, when we lie down and when we rise up; when we

are in the way, and when we are still. Great is that preservative; it is without price, for the sake of the poor; without toil, for the sick; since also its grace is from God.

It is the Sign of the faithful, and the dread of devils: for He triumphed over them in it, having made a shew of them openly; for when they see the Cross they are reminded of the Crucified; they are afraid of Him, who bruised the heads of the dragon. Despise not the Seal, because of the freeness of the gift; out for this the rather honor thy Benefactor.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem

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Them he quickly heard, though he had not given a thought to the demons, and coming to the door he besought them to depart and not to be afraid, 'for thus,' said he, 'the demons make their seeming onslaughts against those who are cowardly. Sign yourselves therefore with the cross, and depart boldly, and let these make sport for themselves.' So they departed fortified with the sign of the Cross.

St. Athanasius the Great

To Judge or Not, continued from p.1

not mean that one should address his father by, "I know you are my father, Jack, but I can't call you father." Christ meant it in a specific context.

Thus, if you read the context of Matt 23, you will find that Christ was referring to the Pharisees who wanted to be honored by men in the use of honorific titles such as rabbi (meaning teacher) or "father". It was this kind of title, which men used to inflate their importance over other men, that Christ said we should avoid.

Christ also said, "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." The term "hate" is an exaggeration and means "love less." Christ did not literally ask people to hate their families.

There are many examples for exaggerated language in the New Testament. Thus, one should not simply take the statement at face value without this understanding. When one reads the context of "Judge not" in

Matt 7, it becomes apparent that Christ meant it to refer to people judging without properly judging themselves.

He did not mean that we are not to judge at all. "How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." (Matt 7:4-5). In other words, we are to let the detailed judgment begin with us, before we can begin to judge our brother. Christ did not deny that we are to eventually address the "speck in our brother's eye".

But how are we to judge our brother? To answer, we need to clarify the word judgment. One can judge by observation that something is right or wrong *without* condemnation, or one can judge *with* condemnation. Condemnation is final (James 5:6). For example, we judge our children but we should not condemn them. If our child lies, we should judge that they

have lied. But if we are a good parent, we should not condemn them in a final dismissal. Rather, we should try to help them not to lie.

St. Paul expected Christian to judge their fellow Christians without condemnation. "Do you not know that we [Christians] are to judge angels? How much more, matters pertaining to this life!". St. Paul expected the Corinthian church to judge contentious issues between themselves. Christ expected the same thing (Mat 18:15-17). Specifically, St. Paul was addressing the fact that the Corinthian church had failed to



judge a brother who was sinning seriously and continuing without correction in their midst (I Cor 5:1-2). Later, when this brother had repented, St. Paul admonished the Corinthians to forgive and comfort him (II Cor 2:5-8). Judgement without condemnation is to lead to repentance.

(Homily on the Veneration of the Cross, cont'd from p.1)

ing divine. As One Who is fully human, He suffered and died on the Cross. He is not a Lord Who causes evil, but One Who takes the full consequences of our corruption upon Himself in order to heal us and bring us into His blessed eternal life. That is also what Christ did through His ministry of healing the sick, restoring sight to the blind, and casting out demons. In His humanity, the Lord suffers with us such that no dimension of our life or death is foreign to Him. He offered Himself as the great High Priest for the restoration of every bit of our personhood in the divine image and likeness.

No matter what challenges we face, including sickness and death and inconvenience, we may use them as points of entry into the blessedness of His Kingdom. Our present situation provides many opportunities to deny ourselves out of concern for protecting the health of our vulnerable neighbors. It calls us to die to our addiction to pleasure and self-interest for the sake of others. It reminds us that saving our lives in this world is an impossible goal, for the common ravages of disease and death will be with us until the coming fullness of the Reign of God.

The current global pandemic reminds us that governments, healthcare systems, and economies, even at their best, are not our saviors and cannot work the fulfillment of the human person in God's image and likeness. They cannot conquer the grave or bring us back to Paradise. Only our great High Priest, the God-Man, Who embraced personally the full consequences of our brokenness, could do that. His Kingdom remains not of this world, and we will not enter it unless we take up our own crosses as we die to the power of sin in our lives.

This unusual Lent provides us all with many opportunities to do precisely that. When we sacrifice our usual routines and social interactions to protect the lives of others, we take up our crosses. The same is true when we donate to ministries and organizations that help people through the economic challenges of these times. The same is true when we fast from obsessive worry about the future as we entrust our lives and the well-being of

our loved ones to the Lord. It may be tempting today to cope with the present crisis by numbing ourselves with mindless entertainment, rich food, and strong drink.

Fasting from such self-indulgence enables us to recognize and offer our fears and weaknesses to the Lord for His healing and strength, instead of covering them over with self-gratification. It is only by fighting our passions in ways that redirect our deepest desires for fulfillment to God that we will gain the spiritual clarity to discern how to take up our crosses in this new and unsettling environment.



A good way of coping with social isolation is to establish new routines. Many of us have more time for prayer and spiritual reading this season than we had anticipated, and we should open our hearts to God and fill our minds with the teachings of the Scriptures, the lives of the Saints, and other beneficial resources as much as we can. Instead of being discouraged by the limited liturgical and sacramental life of the Church this Lent, we should focus on the profound opportunities that we have for cultivating the prayer of the heart in quiet and stillness. And if the present circumstances have given us anything but quiet and stillness due to the demands of caring for children or others for whom we are responsible, we should embrace this path to grow in love for oth-

ers as we serve those in whom we encounter our Lord.

Regardless of the particulars of our life circumstances, let us use the challenges posed by the global pandemic as reminders of the folly of making life in this world our false god. By His Cross and glorious resurrection, the Savior has conquered the power of death. He is not a remote or disengaged deity, but the God-Man Who used His own death to make even the grave an entryway to the glory of the Kingdom. Let us look to His Cross as the ultimate sign of hope for a world still held captive by fear of the grave. That is how we will show that we are not ashamed of our great High Priest, Who offered up Himself to the point of death, burial, and descent into Hades in order to triumph over them all. Let us use this unusual Lent to prepare to follow Him into the joy of the empty tomb through His precious and life-giving Cross.

The Feast of the Veneration of the Holy Cross

Many a time we have heard the Scriptural passage that says, 'Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends'. We can view this passage in a new light: Greater love has no one more than God who became man, Who laid down His life for His creation, and Who left behind a symbol of hope as a result of this sacrifice (the Holy Cross). Today we commemorate the middle of the season of Lent with the celebration known as 'the veneration of the Cross'. It is on this day that we have reached a mountain of hope after travelling along the long hard road of Lent. It is this mountain of hope that offers us strength to carry on until the feast of feasts finally arrives. It is this mountain of hope upon which we can climb up and see the coming of Pascha in the distance. This mountain of hope is the Cross.

Today we venerate the Cross of Christ to not only remind ourselves of the coming of His crucifixion **and** Resurrection, but to gather strength from it and to thank Jesus Christ for what He did for us on the wood of the Cross. Let's ponder on the symbol of the Cross for a moment. What a profound paradox this symbol is. An instrument that was used to kill people on becomes the instrument of salvation. It was through this instrument that Christ died, but it was also because of this instrument that Christ was able to defeat death, to rise on that first Pascha, and to open for us the gates of paradise.

On the topic of crucifixion it is a well-known fact amongst historical and medical circles that Roman crucifixion was the most cruel and painful form of execution. If you were caught on charges ranging from theft to insurrection and were crucified for it, you would be fortunate if you were dead within a few hours. This was the case with Jesus, and the two thieves who likely died by asphyxiation considering the type of crucifixion that they underwent. Sometimes the unfortunate ones hung on a cross for up to a week before death finally came. Not only would these victims starve and become exhausted but they would also attract a variety of animals and insects from the area that would slowly pick at the victims.

Yet, our God was willing to undergo this cruel and humiliating form of execution for our sakes. Holy tradition relates to us that many of our Saints died by crucifixion. For example, St. Andrew the First Called was crucified on a cross that resembled the letter X, and St. Peter was crucified upside down because he did not consider himself

worthy to be crucified in the same manner as his master.

The instrument of death that becomes the symbol of life is everywhere. It is around our necks, on top of the church, behind the altar, on top of the iconostasis, on the priest's vestments, in our homes, in our cars, on flags and coats of arms. Its even on the koliva and above grave sites as a reminder to us that because of the death on the Cross, the dearly departed can now enjoy everlasting life.

Jesus tells us that if we wish to go after Him we too must take up our cross and follow. This means that we must suffer with Him in truth and love, that we've got to live through the trials and tribulations that this world brings to us, and that we must endure the rejection of this world. We are rejected for being Christians, for living a Christian life, for standing before the world and saying "I believe in Jesus and follow his teachings". This means that we must put into practice the life that Christ Himself lived, the life that Christ Himself is, the life which is given to us in Christ's name in the Church. Then will we gain the life that awaits us.

This is why we venerate the Cross of Christ, which tells us of God's coming to us and of our return to Him, both accomplished by the way of the Cross. This is what we venerate and contemplate in the middle of great lent, the wisdom and the power of God as Christ crucified on the Cross. This symbol tells us the truth about life. It tells us of the truth and love of God for the world, and it tells us what we must do to be alive for eternal life in God's kingdom.

Furthermore, Jesus chose this symbol so that he could outstretch his arms and embrace the whole of humanity with his love even in pain

and death. If you can see the image of Christ crucified standing behind the altar you will notice that Christ is not withering in pain with a look of despair on His face as you see so often in Western religious art. However, He has a look of peace and serenity on His face exactly because he is embracing us with His love. He is triumphing over death through His death. He is saying to us 'I did this because I love you and I want you to be with me for eternity'. There is no greater love than this.

As we witness the procession with the Cross on this day and we go forth to venerate it let's think to ourselves 'thank you Jesus for dying on this symbol for our sakes. Thank you Jesus for leaving us this symbol of hope. Thank you Jesus for opening the gates of paradise for us with the Holy Cross'.

