

A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Orthodox Christian Church



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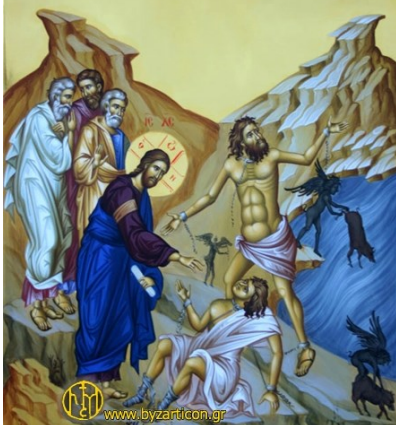


Glory be to Jesus Christ! Glory be Forever!

Volume 10 Issue 469

5th Sunday after Pentecost-Christ heals the Gergesene Demoniacs

June 27, 2021



We live in a time in which many people feel lonely and isolated, even if they are around others on a regular basis at home, work, and other settings. Sometimes we hold ourselves back emotionally from the possibility of being rejected or harmed. Such separation is a symptom of the estrangement from God and one another which Jesus Christ came to heal.

The demon-possessed men in today's gospel reading represent Gentiles who were enslaved to the worship of idols and false gods. Their deliverance shows that Christ's salvation is for all people, including those separated from others by the power of evil in their lives. When He set them free from their miserable isolation, the Lord required nothing of them in advance; instead, He graciously liberated them from the degrading forces of evil and restored them to a truly human existence.

Here we see an implication of St. Paul's instruction to the Romans: "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." At the very heart of our faith is not a requirement for meeting an objective standard; instead, the unlimited mercy of God is the very foundation.

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+ 5th Sunday after Pentecost +
+ St. Sampson the Hospitable +

Epistle: Romans 10: 1-10

Gospel: Matthew 8: 28-9:1

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.*

The Whole Secret is the Ardent Love for Christ, by St. Porfyrios

Christ wants to spread joy and is pleased by doing so, by enriching his faithful with joy. He wishes 'that your joy may be complete'. This is our religion. This is where we should go. Christ is our Paradise. What's Paradise? It's Christ. Paradise starts from here. It's exactly the same. Those who experience Christ here on earth, experience Paradise. It's just as I'm telling you.

This is right, it's true, believe me. Our task is to try and find a way to enter the light of Christ, not

merely to observe the formalities. What really matters is being with Christ. For our soul to wake up, to love Christ and to become holy. To give in to ardent love of God. Then he'll love us back. He'll be our joy that nobody can take from us.

This is what Christ wants more than anything: to fill us with joy, because he's the fount of joy. Ardent love of Christ is something else. There's no end to it and it's never satisfied. It gives life, it gives resili-

ence and health, it gives and gives and gives. And the more it gives, the more we want to love.

Human love can eat away at us, can drive us mad. When you love Christ, all other loves fade. Other loves have a saturation point. Love for Christ hasn't. Our inner disposition affects others. We have the power to be able to transmit good or evil to our surroundings.

These are very delicate matters. We need to be very careful with them. We have to see every-

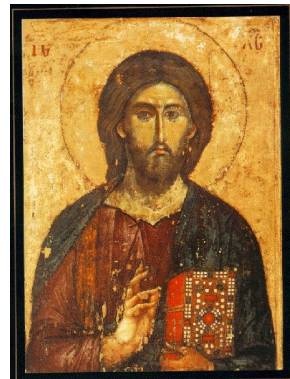
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We invite all to worship in our services. Sunday Divine Liturgy begins at 9:30 AM

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)

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, Michael, Bill, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ

*"He who trusts in the Lord is safe."
(Proverbs. 29:25)*

The righteous man is under the shelter of the Lord, under the shelter from on high. The water will not reach him nor will the flood drown him. Indeed, the flood did not drown Noah, for the Lord was a shelter

from on high for him.

However, brethren, there is a flood worse than a flood of water, that is, the flood of the passions. When the passions begin to burn, when they emit their stench and spread it all around--where will a man flee, and who will save him? Only under the hand of the Lord, only under His shelter, the shelter from on high. The flood of passions pursued David, but he fled and found shelter under the hand of the Lord; he saved himself from the smoke and the stench of the pursuing passions under the shelter from on high.

A man cannot save himself from the flood--only God can save him. God is the Tamer of the passions. Indeed, He is the Shelter from on high. We flee to Him and hide ourselves under the hem of His garment. A dog appears like a lion to a beggar but like an empty sack before the feet of his master.

O Lord Most-high, You are our Shelter from on high. Be merciful to us, O our Creator, and extend Your hand to raise us up to Your shelter. Save us from the turbulent passions which try to destroy us.

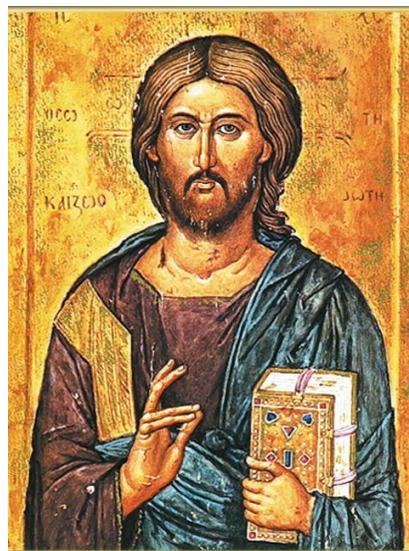
The Whole Secret is Ardent love for Christ, continued from p.1

thing in a good light. We shouldn't think anything bad about other people. Just a look or a sigh has an effect on them. Even the least show of disappointment does harm. We should have goodness and love in our soul. That's what we have to get across to others. We have to be careful not to be exasperated with people who injure us, and instead just pray for them with love. We shouldn't think badly of others, whatever they do. We should always pray lovingly. We should always think about what's good.

When we have bad thoughts, some sort of bad force emerges from us and is transmitted to the other person, in the same way as the voice is transmitted through sound waves, and the other person really does suffer something bad. It's not God who causes evil but the wickedness of people. God doesn't punish, but our own bad intentions are mysteriously transmitted to the soul of the other person and this is what does harm.

Christ never wants harm. On the

contrary, he commands us: 'bless those who curse you...'. There's a part of our soul within us which is 'moralistic'. When moralists catch



someone in a trespass, they're affronted, even though they themselves have committed the self-same trespass. They don't chastise themselves, however, just other people. This isn't what God wants. In the Gospel, Christ says: 'You teach others; do

you not then teach yourself? You preach against stealing; do you then steal?' [Rom. 2, 21]. We may not steal, but we still envy others. We condemn others, but not ourselves. When we think evil, then it really can occur.

Is it possible for people to think 'If so and so continues to behave like that, God will punish them', and to believe that they're saying it without badness? It's not immediately obvious. It's a very mysterious thing what's in our soul and how this can have an effect on people and things. There's an invisible life, the life of the soul. It's very powerful and can affect others, even if they're miles away. Without speaking, we can transmit good or bad, no matter how far away we are from our neighbor. If we see with Christ's love, everything will be transformed, transmogrified, transmuted, transfigured. Anger, rage, jealousy, envy, frustration, ingratitude, melancholy and depression will become love, joy, longing, and ardent divine love. Paradise!

(Homily on Christ healing the Gergesene Demoniacs, cont'd from p.1)

foundation of our life and extends even to demon-possessed Gentiles, as well as to you and me.

The Orthodox Church has many rules, many canons, traditions, and practices. But at the heart of our faith and common life is not the obedience of law, for we are not called to be like the Pharisees of old. Instead, we are called, as St. Paul teaches, to confess with our mouths the Lord Jesus and to believe in our hearts that God has raised him from the dead; if we do so, we will be saved. "For with the heart one believes unto righteousness and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."

Of course, there are no magic words that can heal our souls. Instead of creating a new law, St. Paul points to the deep truth of what it means to commend all our life to Christ our God. It means that we trust in Him as whole persons. As we offer our lives to Him, our words, deeds, and thoughts will come to embody the new life that He has brought to the world. That is how we open ourselves to receiving His transforming grace. That is how, like the demon-possessed men in today's reading, we too may become living icons of the mercy of Jesus Christ.

Remember that He did not require the Gergesene demoniacs to earn their deliverance; neither does He require that of us. Instead, the Savior has graciously taken upon Himself the consequences of all human corruption and sin to the point of death, burial and descent to Hades so that He could conquer them all in His glorious third-day resurrection. He has ascended into heaven with full, complete glorified humanity and sent the Holy Spirit to empower His Body, the Church, of which we are members. He lives within our hearts by the Holy Spirit, casting out our demons, forgiving our sins, and enabling us to share in His eternal life even now as healed and transformed persons in relationship with Him and one another. By His grace, Christ restores us to the dignity and freedom of those who bear the divine image and likeness.

Those particular men were set free from the control of demons, but that was surely only the beginning of their lives in Christ. Even though their deliverance was quite dramatic, it was only a start and they surely had to press on from there to resist temptation, to grow in holiness,

and to learn to love and serve Him in their neighbors. They certainly had old fears and habits to overcome. And the same is true of us. Our salvation is a process, an ongoing journey of sharing more fully in the new life that our Savior has brought to the world. We must confess Christ more fully each day as we find greater healing, as we more fully manifest His victory over sin and death in our own lives.

If our religion were about meeting the requirements of a law, we could meet the standard and not think about it anymore. We could check off a box and move on to something else; perhaps then it would make sense to condemn others who did not measure up. But Orthodox Christianity is not about rules and regulations, but instead about growing in relationship with a Person, our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ. It is about sharing in His blessedness, about partaking in His divine nature by grace. And because God is eternal and infinite and beyond even our best attempts to define and control Him, there is no upward limit on what it means to unite ourselves to Him.

So we are constantly as much in need of Christ's mercy as were those demon-possessed fellows. We say the Jesus Prayer precisely because we are sinners in need of Him. The more we are healed by His grace, the more aware we will be of our brokenness and weakness. The more we open our lives to Christ, the more clearly we will see how far we have yet to go, how undeserving we are, how grateful we must be before an infinitely holy God Who will stop at nothing—not even the cross—in order to bring us into His blessed kingdom.

The formerly demon-possessed men could claim no credit for their deliverance. They could only marvel at their great blessing and do their best to live lives worthy of what Christ had done for them. We all face the same challenge: to live in ways that reflect what our Lord has done for us, to bear witness to the healing and fulfillment that He has brought to our lives, and to continue to open ourselves more fully to His salvation.

That means that we must all continue to struggle against whatever evil thoughts, habits, words, and deeds threaten to separate us from the Lord and one another. We will not do that perfectly, for we get side-tracked and distracted from fulfilling our vocation each day.

(continued p.4, column 1)



Homily on Gergesene Demoniacs, cont'd p.3)

That is precisely why we need to build holy habits—like attending services, praying daily, fasting regularly, and giving generously to the needy-- into our lives. We need to wake up and stay alert, for the ultimate choice of our lives is an ongoing challenge. At stake is whether we will grow in relationship with Christ by faith, repentance, and humility: by a life that confesses what He has done and is doing for us. The other alternative is to return to the graveyard, to the isolation and slavery of worshiping the false gods of our own will. Our choice is not whether to obey a law, but whether we will embrace deliverance and healing. If we turn away from Christ, we do so as isolated individuals who prefer our own will to His, who would rather decay in the loneliness of a cemetery—of a dark tomb-- than share in the blessed banquet of the Kingdom.

But if we offer ourselves to the Lord, we enter into eternal joy through His Body, the Church; we become members of Him through our life together. The standards and practices of the Church help us to grow in relationship with Him and with one another. They sustain our faith, and help us grow in freedom from our slavery to the power of sin in our lives. They enable us to do what we cannot do alone as isolated individuals who hide in fear from God and one another.

So like those Gergesene demoniacs, it is time for us to leave behind the graveyard of evil and instead become who we are called to be in Jesus Christ. It is time to embrace our true identity as those created in God's image and likeness and called to become partakers of the divine nature. By sincere faith, honest confession, and genuine repentance, let us accept the infinite mercy of the One who loves us so much that He conquered sin and death in order to bring us from the despair of the tomb into the joy of the Kingdom. Now is the time to turn our backs on the degrading delusions of idolatry and to enter into the unspeakable blessedness to which He calls us. Now is the time to confess and believe in Christ as we offer every dimension of our lives to Him for deliverance and transformation that know no bounds. Now is the time to turn from the isolated misery of sin for the joyful communion of those who have been set free through the mercy of Jesus Christ.

Come back to Church and Worship God!

Before the pandemic interrupted our lives and changed our patterns of behavior, there were a growing number of statistics that showed the impact of our secular society on religious life and belief. For the first time in 80 years, a Gallup Poll revealed that a majority of Americans (53%) no longer are members of any faith community. And for those who still claim membership in a Church, their commitment to regularly attending worship services is changing. Where it was once expected that a faithful member of the Church would reserve Sunday dedicated as the “Day of the Lord” and commit to worshipping God in Church every Sunday, today many people who consider themselves faithful feel that it is OK and normal to go to church once a month or even less frequently.

The third of the Ten Commandments states, “**Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day.**” In Jewish tradition, respecting and keeping the Sabbath, which is Saturday, holy has always been a central tenant of a godly life. One day out of seven is dedicated to the Lord in a special manner. Of course, every day we should turn to God in prayer and strive to “seek first the kingdom of God.” To help us keep our focus and not give in to the temptations of the world, though, one out of seven days was dedicated in a special way. The early Church, from the first century, adjusted honoring the Sabbath to Sunday, which is the day of our Lord Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead. This “Day of the Lord,” this “Day of Resurrection,” is the day the community of faith gathers together to worship God through the Divine Liturgy and to unite with God in the mystical way of Holy Communion. It is the first

day of the week and we begin each week by receiving Christ and being filled with His Presence so that we can be blessed for the remainder of the week!

Distractions and nominalism in our faith have led many to simply dismiss this discipline of worshipping God every Sunday as a community. Maybe we also just don't understand or experience the value of the Divine Liturgy. This decision to not “honor the Sabbath” is another way the devil simply deceives us by *anesthetizing* us to the value of spiritual disciplines. Be careful of your spiritual health. Be on guard against spiritual apathy and laziness. Be vigilant and feed your soul every week by “honoring the Sabbath” and uniting to God through the Eucharist

