

A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Orthodox Christian Church

Rev. Matthew P. Binkewicz, Pastor

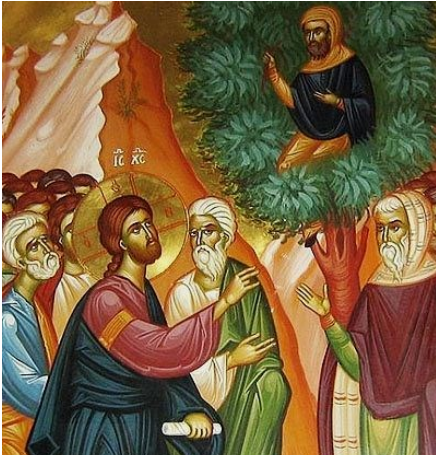
Glory be to Jesus Christ! Glory be Forever!



Volume 11 Issue 501

33rd Sunday after Pentecost—Zacchaeus Sunday

February 6, 2022



St. Luke's gospel portrays the story of Zacchaeus in memorable and distinctive ways. As a Jewish person who had become rich collecting taxes for the Romans from his own people, Zacchaeus was both a traitor and a thief, for he collected more than was required so that he could live in luxury from the oppression of his neighbors.

The Jews expected a Messiah who would bless the righteous, condemn the wicked, and destroy the Romans and their collaborators. Their religious leaders would have had nothing at all to do with someone like Zacchaeus, for he was the complete opposite of a righteous man.

We do not know why Zacchaeus wanted to see the Savior as He passed by. He was a short little fellow who could not see over the crowd, so he climbed a sycamore tree in order to get a better view. That must have looked very strange: a hated tax-collector up in a tree so that he could see a passing rabbi. Even more surprising was the Lord's response when He saw him: "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house." That was a completely different comment from what most

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+ 33rd Sunday after Pentecost +
+ Feast of St Bucolus of Smyrna +

Epistle: 1 Timothy 4:9-15

Gospel: Luke 19:1-10

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 Feast of the Lord's Entrance into the Temple, by Theodore Rokas

The feast of the Entrance of the Lord, is the feast which is celebrated exactly forty days after that of His Nativity. The name of the feast in Greek comes from a verb meaning 'to go out and meet or welcome someone' hence the depiction of Symeon in icons as being at or outside a door. As regards the determination of the celebration of the feast on 2 February, this was decided in the 6th century, at the time of Emperor Justinian. It was fixed on this day because it is

the fortieth after Christ's birth, which, it had been decided in the 4th century, was to be celebrated on December 25.

We draw our information regarding the event of the Lord's Entrance from the Gospel according to Saint Luke. In the narrative in chapter 2 of this Gospel, the Evangelist mentions two fundamental details: a) the circumcision of Jesus Christ exactly eight days after His birth (Luke 2, 21); and b) the entry of the divine infant into the temple in Jerusalem 40

days after His birth, as required by the ritual contained in the Mosaic Law (Luke 2, 22-39).

What Saint Luke relates in his Gospel are not random events, nor do they take place at the personal behest of some individual, but rather they occur in accordance with a certain ritual, which is described mainly in the book of Leviticus, the third in the series of the historical books of the Old Testament.

According to Leviticus, a woman who became

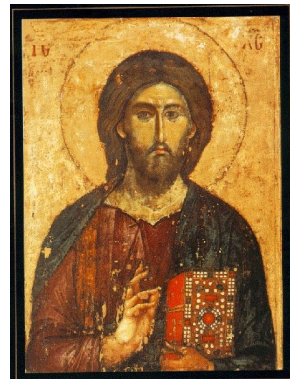
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We invite all to worship in our services. Sunday Divine Liturgy begins at 9:30 AM

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

News and Notes

We welcome all who are worshipping with us today. We are also happy to announce that coffee social has resumed following the Divine Liturgy.

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, Susan, Jenny, Deb, Dan, Bob, Doug, Heidi, Laura, Elizabeth, Matthew, Corella, Ron, Daniel, Frankie, Pat, Bill, Carol, Pam, Gladys, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ

Trust in God's Love

When fighting the good fight some souls seem to sail through. Their whole course is beautiful and heavenly. There seem to be no quakes or shakes there. Bear in mind, though, that this happens to a few souls only. Most souls will learn about spiritual life by dint of hard knocks and buffets, not for any other reason, but on

account of God's love. God knows that, not only in this life but also, definitely, in the other, these souls will speak to Him with such words, "My God, thank you for not sparing me. Thank you for intervening without asking me, thank you for allowing this or that to happen to me..."

Otherwise the idol in me would have never tumbled down".

What's left then? To have a lot of trust in God's love, to be grateful to Him for everything and accept all without complaints in the course of our daily life. Love does not fail, because you always direct the rudder of your soul towards it. If something happens to you, call out these words, "For the sake of Your love, O Christ, the Sweet Love, I am enduring the scolding of insults, injustice, labors and all sorts of sorrows that had to happen to me". As soon as you think about this, your burden will become lighter. Nothing can help calm anger and all passions as much as love for God and every fellow human being. Love conquers passions easily compared to any other ascetic deeds.

The Meeting of the Lord in the Temple, cont'd from p.1

pregnant and gave birth to a male child would be unclean until the eighth day after the birth, the day on which the circumcision would take place. She would then remain unclean until the fortieth day after giving birth, when she would be cleansed of her blood. Until then, she was forbidden to touch anything sacred or to enter the temple before the time of her cleansing had passed.

If a woman gave birth to a daughter, however, the number of days for her purification numbered 80 (Lev. 12, 1-5). On the one hand, this excerpt from Leviticus ordains what the woman is to observe during the period of her lying-in and, on the other, makes clear that, however harsh the Law was towards her, it also protected her from sickness and made her rest, in order to recover from the pains of birth.

Thereafter Leviticus mentions the ceremonies which take place during the purification. It provided that, as soon as the proper number of days had been completed, the requisite ani-

mals without blemish should be brought to be sacrificed to the Lord and to purify the woman (Lev. 12, 6-8). Despite what many and varied people thought, these sacrifices had absolutely no magical meaning. Their aim was the restoration of relations



between the woman and God, as regards [her ability to enter] the sacred place.

Naturally, this ceremony could hardly be divorced from the whole of

the rest of the Law of the Old Testament. On the contrary, it is indissolubly linked to the Lord's command regarding the offering of the first-born in the narrative of the book of Exodus. This book presents God as giving the commandment to Moses that every Israelite should dedicate to God every male first-born, man or beast (Ex. 13, 1-2).

This dedication demanded by God was required as an indication of gratitude and recognition on the part of the Israelite people towards God, Who redeemed His people from slavery in Egypt. It was also a reminder of the time when the angel of death passed over the first-born children of the Israelites but destroyed those of the Egyptians. Regarding the offering of the first-born animals, the Law of Moses is clear and makes a distinction between clean and unclean species. The first-born of donkeys are not suitable for sacrifice, so they were replaced with an agreed sum of money.

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(Homily on Zacchaeus, cont'd from p.1)

would have expected from a conventional Messiah. Instead of condemning him, the Savior took the initiative in inviting Himself to Zacchaeus' home, where the tax-collector received Him joyfully.

This outrageous scene shocked people, for no Jew with any integrity would be a guest in the home of such a traitor and thief. He would become unclean by going into his house and eating with him. He would identify Himself publicly with Zacchaeus' wicked ways. But before the Savior said anything to the critics, Zacchaeus did something even less expected, for he actually repented. He openly confessed the truth about himself as a criminal exploiter of his neighbors. He pledged to give half of his possessions to the poor and to restore four-fold what he had stolen from others. He pledged to do more than any standard of justice or law required in making right the wrongs he had committed.

In that astounding moment, this notorious sinner did what was necessary to reorient His life toward God and away from slavery to the love of money. As a sign of His great mercy, Jesus Christ accepted Zacchaeus' sincere repentance, proclaiming that salvation has come even to this son of Abraham, for He came to seek and to save the lost.

The overwhelming grace of God shines through this memorable story. Notice that we do not read of Zacchaeus asking explicitly for the forgiveness and mercy of the Lord. He climbed up a tree out of curiosity about Christ, but that was somehow enough to begin to open himself to the healing divine energies of the Savior. Zacchaeus apparently already knew how corrupt he was. The Lord did not denounce him, but instead took the initiative to establish a healing relationship with someone who was surely considered a lost cause by conventional religious standards. When people complained that Christ had associated Himself with such a sinner, the Lord did not argue with them, but instead let Zacchaeus use that uncomfortable moment to bear witness to His gracious healing, which extends even to the most miserable wretches who receive Him in humble repentance.

Zacchaeus was so transformed by the mercy of Christ that he became an epiphany, a living icon of the restoration of the human person in God's image and like-

ness. This formerly corrupt and money-hungry man resolved to show his neighbors a measure of the grace that he had received, for he gave half of what he owned to the poor and restored all that he had stolen four-fold. No, he did not hire a lawyer and try to figure out how little he could pay in making things right with those he had abused. In response to the gracious blessing he had received from Christ, he blessed others extravagantly in a way that revealed the healing of his soul. He was so profoundly transformed by the mercy of the Lord that he went on to become a companion of the apostles and the first bishop of Caesarea in Palestine.

We remember Zacchaeus simply as a wonderful example of repentance because he spontaneously and freely

united himself to Christ as he took practical steps to bless others beyond any rational measure of what they deserved from him. He shines brightly with the merciful generosity of the Lord, like an iron left in the fire of the divine glory. His amazing transformation had nothing at all to do with what he deserved. We should be thankful for that, for our healing comes from the boundless mercy and grace of the Lord Who conquered death itself in order to make us participants in His eternal life. Zacchaeus' example reminds us that the more clearly we see the gravity of our sins and the sickness of our souls, the better position we are in to be transformed by our Lord's abundant mercy and to convey



vey that same mercy to others.

Let us contemplate to the depths of our souls by the way of humble repentance manifested by Zacchaeus. Those who respond to Christ as he did will find salvation not as a reward they have earned, but as an extension of mercy to be received with the joy of a corrupt tax-collector visited unexpectedly by the Messiah. As those who receive such grace, let us extend His mercy to our neighbors, refusing to be limited by minimal standards of justice or accounts of who is worthy of what. Because none of us shares in the life of Christ on the basis of our worthiness, we must follow Zacchaeus in taking practical, tangible steps that convey to our neighbors the same mercy that we have received from the Lord. In doing so, we provide signs of hope for healing from even the worst self-inflicted wounds of sin.

This dedication demanded by God was required as an indication of gratitude and recognition on the part of the Israelite people towards God, Who redeemed His people from slavery in Egypt. It was also a reminder of the time when the angel of death passed over the first-born children of the Israelites but destroyed those of the Egyptians. Regarding the offering of the first-born animals, the Law of Moses is clear and makes a distinction between clean and unclean species. The first-born of donkeys are not suitable for sacrifice, so they were replaced with an agreed sum of money.

The same monetary exchange was also true for people, since God did not accept human sacrifice. Cyril of Alexandria notes that 'He Who created all things in incorruption, had no desire for human sacrifice'. This is why, in the thirteenth chapter of the book of Exodus, where the sacrifice of the first-born is discussed, the following is mentioned: 'You shall set apart every [offspring] opening the womb, the males, to the Lord. Every one that opens the womb out of the herds or among your cattle, as many as shall be born to you, you shall sanctify the males to the Lord. Every [offspring] opening the womb of the ass you shall change for a sheep; and if you will not change it, you shall redeem it. You shall redeem every first-born of one of your sons'. (Ex.13, 12-13).

So the divine infant was also offered to God, as the first-born son of the Virgin, as had others in the past of the Israelite people. The judge and prophet, Samuel, Jacob and other personalities in the Old Testament had opened the sterile and barren wombs of holy women and the fruits thereof were offered to the Lord and were also declared to be 'holy because of the Lord'.

* * *

'Do not become accustomed to being defeated in the spiritual war, because habit becomes second nature' (Saint Efraim the Syrian). The great Saint Efraim the Syrian makes a profound psychological and also spiritual observation, the truth of which we can all confirm from our daily experience. Who doubts the power of habit? If we do something once and then repeat it, it becomes difficult to stop. So much so, that repetition of what we've become used to ends up as second nature. Any effort to stop a habit is often experienced as tearing up roots. This is where the importance of habit in spiritual warfare be-

comes clear, in the struggle waged by the faithful in their efforts to follow the path of God's will rather than their own, sinful one. If the faithful are spiritually lax and are continually or frequently defeated in their Christian efforts- we're not talking about the kind of occasional defeat which happens to everyone and can soon be repented- then, unfortunately, the habit of defeat puts them almost permanently at odds with God, which means that their passions and weaknesses have almost enslaved them.

This is confirmed by the words of Saint Paul: 'Do not let sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions' (Rom. 6, 12). It's rather like uprooting

a plant: while it's young, it can be pulled up easily, but the more it puts down deep roots and grows, the worse the problem becomes, until it's impossible to deal with. That's when we understand the words of Saint Efraim: don't become accustomed to falling into sin, because if you then want to overcome it, you'll be hard pressed, as if you're struggling against your deepest self.

On the other hand, there's a positive aspect: when you persist in doing God's will, however hard it is for you, then your persistence and patience enable you to overcome your problem, which means that your spiritual life becomes ever easier. It may be that, by divine dispensation, the cunning devil will fight all the harder against such Christians, but the grace of God will support them in due measure, now reinforced by their self-control. The habit of a positive approach to God

builds our path 'from glory to glory', that is, an ascent without end.

Another factor which contributes to the unrelenting good habit of 'thy will be done' rather than a superficial, relaxed approach to the spiritual life, is if we bear in mind the fact that there are no 'time-outs' or breathing spaces- you either continue on your path with Christ, or you abandon him, at which point the descent into bondage to the evil one begins. The words of Christ ring out and are confirmed daily for each and every believer: 'Those who are not with me are against me, and those who do not gather with me, scatter'.

And there's also the comfort that, even in the case of the worst habits, there's hope, when people repent from their hearts. Then, if they really and truly seek God's help, his power will achieve the impossible: the people concerned will be freed from their wickedness and will turn to him who is good. Because 'what is impossible for people is possible for God'.

