

# 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!*



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34<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost— The Publican and Pharisee

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The most dangerous temptations are usually the most subtle ones. Most people have the good sense to see that murder, for example, is obviously wrong and to avoid it. But when we do not sense the danger of falling into evil at all, we are more likely to let down our guard. That is usually when we are most susceptible to spiritual corruption.

The Pharisee in today's parable was apparently not aware of his most serious temptations. He was going into the temple to pray, and his prayers indicate that he lived an exemplary life. He was honest in his dealings with others, faithful to his wife, and obedient in fasting and tithing. His outward appearance was that of a righteous man. Probably in any time and place, most people would think that his standing before God was secure. That is obviously what the Pharisee thought.

Unfortunately, he not only thought about himself, he actually prayed to himself. When he thought that he was addressing God, he was simply praising himself for what he had accomplished. His prayer was so self-centered that it was a form of idolatry, of simply thanking himself for being  
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+ 34<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost +  
+ Feast of St. Stephen of Serbia +

Epistle: 2 Timothy 3:10-15

Gospel: Luke 18:10-14

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.*

## ***Who Experiences the Mystery of the Church, Fr. Chrysostomos Papadakis***

The Church of Christ on earth is preeminently a divine revelation. It wasn't revealed as a divine sign the aim of which would have been to pass on a message of salvation, but was founded as a revelation in order to function on earth and to be directly linked with the Church triumphant, together with which it constitutes the one Church of Christ, which saves eternally.

It is founded by God and is his living body. It's also the Church of revelation and supernatu-

ral signs which verify the truth of the whole of its teaching and its liturgical life. They make it an inheritance and people on earth. The first has the Apostolic succession and the pastoral care of souls. The latter has spiritual freedom and also the privilege of the blessing of divine providence so that it, too, is not deprived of leadership.

The whole of the Church is the mystery of mysteries. Those who live this mystery, really do experience the Church and acquire a spiritual

foretaste, sometimes even tangible, of paradise, depending on the measure of their Christian life. All the saints whose lives we know, especially the Fathers of the desert, spoke of a taste of paradise, especially Saint Paul, who describes the event so vividly (2 Cor., 12, 1-10).

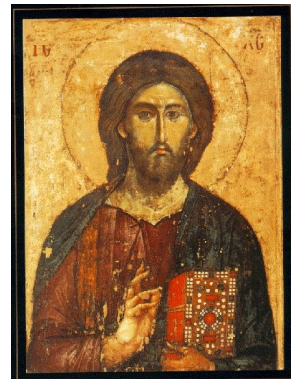
These divine experiences gave them the strength to continue their struggle and to live even more intensely the mystery of the Church, as time went by. Of course, they can't describe what they  
*(continued on p.2)*

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

**Wisdom for Life**

Alms is not only giving money out of your wallet. Alms is to accept a fellow human being to sit next to you, without alienate him/her with your thoughts. Do you have a colleague who is going through a tragedy in his life? You should know how to comfort him, how to soothe his pain. For the poor you can do a short

prayer: "Lord have mercy on so and so", if you cannot give them something, because you are on the bus and they on the street. The true question is in what state is our heart regarding the pain that is all around us. The largest sin that we will have to apologize during Judgement is this: "Why I did not give more attention to my fellow human beings?"

*(Elder Arsenios of Mt. Athos+2011)*

The fight to overcome pride over your own achievements, is not an easy one. You can only win by secretly working on virtues and frequent praying. A sign that you have been successful is that you do not harbor resentment against anyone that have accused you in the past or presently.

If you hate someone, you cannot have peace in God. Because He is the one who said: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you (Matthew 6, 14)." And if the other person is not making peace with you, you always keep yourself away from hate, and pray for him honestly and never say a bad thing to anyone else about him. *(St. Maximos the Confessor)*

**Who Experiences the Mystery of the Church , cont'd from p.1**

experience, because it's lived. It can't be described. There aren't words to describe it. This is why Paul said of his experience: 'And I know a man in Christ- who was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell.

The mystery of the Church is experienced only by those who are consistent in their Church life. Observance of the commandments, sobriety, ascetic effort, participation in the sacraments, and the unwavering attempt to keep to the triptych of purification, illumination and glorification. The mystery of the Church has been experienced by people of all classes and eras, all those who have made their way on the basis of the above genuine features of the life in Christ.

From Patriarchs and Emperors down to the last insignificant striver, whom God alone knows, whether they live in the desert or the world. This is what we're taught by the lives of the saints and holy tradition. Conclusion: neither high office nor obscurity nor

anonymity are a hindrance: 'so that every mouth may be silenced' (Rom. 3, 19). That is to stop every mouth on the day of judgment as being without defense.

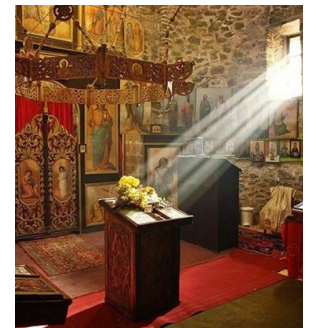
A high official in the Church may, because of his office, celebrate the sacraments, but may not be at peace in his heart because of a lack of divine grace. He himself might have a painful void within himself. He may not have an inner spiritual life, essentially dying and going to his punishment. Had he not been completely taken up with vanities and administration, but had lived an inner spiritual life, he'd have been full of gifts, and grace would have imbued his every liturgical, educational and administrative action. Then, as a result of his office his spiritual harvest would be great for all his flock, and he himself would experience the mystery of the Church without a void in his soul.

Or again, there may be an ordinary person, whom nobody pays any attention to, who lives their life in Christ

simply and humbly. They submit to the commandments of the Church, honor the bishops, even the unworthy ones; they receive an abundance of grace and in the end are sanctified.

God follows the life of each of us and, as a righteous judge renders to each according to their works. This 'each of us' indicates something to be expected in our personal life during our time on earth. It has to do with the divine judgment, the premises for

each of us for the struggle and the harvest. Those who are constantly involved on a daily basis with divine matters, but remain without fruit will be judged differently from those who don't have this opportunity, but who have shown practical love for God and their neighbor and have striven against sin.



*(Homily on the Publican and Pharisee, cont'd from p.1)*

so good. That there is nothing of true prayer going on here is shown when the Pharisee judges others in order to make clear his own virtue. To thank God that he is “not like other men, extortionists, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector” is to fall into the prideful self-righteousness that our Savior so strongly condemned throughout His ministry. It is a form of spiritual blindness that shuts our eyes to the truth about where we stand before God.

What a shocking contrast the parable gives us with the prayer of the publican, the tax collector whom the Pharisee condemned. Remember that tax collectors in that setting were Jews who worked for the occupying Roman government and made their living by charging more than was required. They were traitors and thieves, and certainly not among the righteous of Israel. This tax collector also went to the temple to pray, but in an entirely different way from the Pharisee. He had such a strong sense of his own sinfulness that “standing far off, [he] would not even lift up his eyes to Heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’”

This despised, wretched man truly opened his heart before the God Who is Holy, Holy, Holy. And he knew that before such a Lord, all that he could do was to call for mercy as he acknowledged the disaster that he had made of his life. That his approach to prayer is superior to that of the Pharisee is shown by Christ’s comment at the end of the parable: “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Today we begin the Lenten Triodion, which means that Great Lent, the year’s most intense period of spiritual discipline, will begin in a few weeks. During the coming season of Lent, we will prepare to follow our Lord to His cross and glorious resurrection at Pascha. The kind of prayer that we need in Lent, and every day of our lives, is that of the tax collector. The kind of prayer that we must avoid in Lent, and every day of our lives, is that of the Pharisee.

If we pray like the Pharisee, we will never enter into the deep mystery of salvation through our Lord’s death and resurrection. If it were possible to make ourselves

so righteous by our own actions that our prayers would be nothing more than self-congratulation as we condemned others, then we ourselves would have already conquered sin and death. Indeed, we would be gods worthy of our own worship. Whatever religion that would be, it is certainly not Orthodox Christianity.

Such attitudes clearly have no place in our prayers at any time. A key lesson to learn from the bad example of the Pharisee is that we must be careful to direct prayer to God, not to ourselves. Our prayers must not be offered to a false god we have made up in our minds in order to feel better about ourselves or help us get what we want.

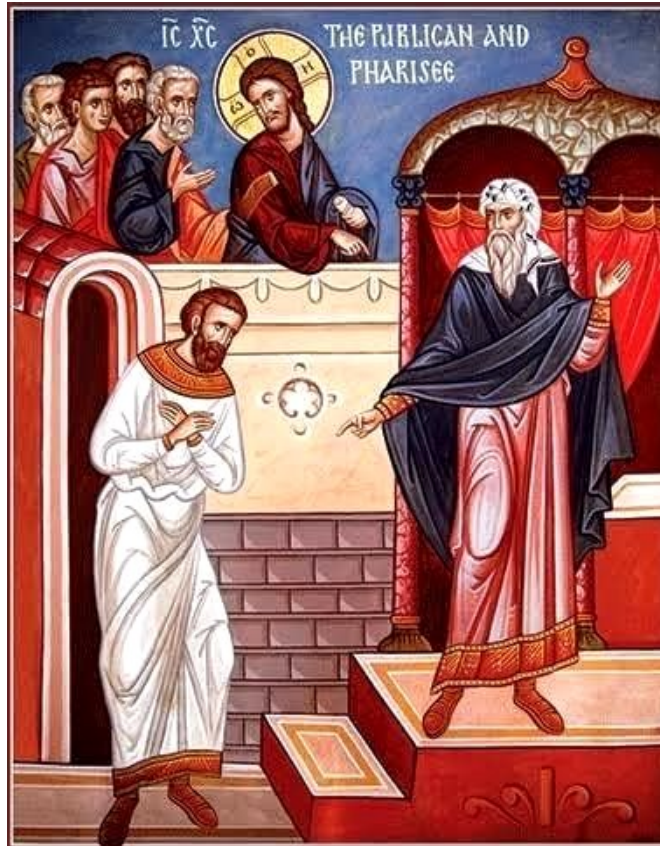
No, the Lord is infinitely holy and “a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29) As God spoke through the prophet Isaiah, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.” (Isa. 55:8) We must never make the mistake of thinking that whatever is pleasing to us is necessarily pleasing to Him.

The Pharisee made a false god in his own image who would never hold him accountable to the truth and who could never heal his soul. The tax collector did something far more challenging and quite scary, for he exposed his soul to the true God. When Isaiah had a vision of the Lord in His heavenly temple, he said “Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.” (Isa. 6:5) The tax collector responded in the same

way as he prayed that day, for he knew the infinite distance between God’s holiness and his own sinfulness. He was not praying to an idol of his own imagination who told him what he wanted to hear. In that moment, he allowed everything about his life to be called into question by encountering the One Who is Holy.

We should never be surprised when it is a struggle to pray, especially when our minds wander in our private prayers or in services. There is much of us that does not want to be fully exposed to the infinite holiness of the Lord. It is much easier to stay wrapped up in our own thoughts and obsessed with our preferred pastimes and daily cares than to encounter God. But to do so is to risk ending up in the same place as the Pharisee. For if we neglect genuine prayer, we are essentially telling God

*(continued p.4, column 1)*



and ourselves that we are fine as we are. That, of course, is exactly what the Pharisee did when he gave thanks that he was so much better than his neighbors, especially the tax collector. It is a form of spiritual pride that inevitably leads to judging others, which further weakens us spiritually.

Instead of turning away from prayer because it is difficult, we must use our struggle to pray for growth in humility. When we do not want to pray, when our minds wander, and especially if we start to judge or recount the wrongs of others in our thoughts, we should cry out like the tax collector "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" as we turn our attention back to the Lord. It is really impossible to pray without humility, for to be fully present before God requires us to accept the truth that we are in constant need of the divine mercy and healing. The more fully we open our hearts to the Lord in prayer, the more we will see the absurdity of setting ourselves up as the self-righteous judges of others. Remember what He taught about taking the huge plank out of our own eye before being concerned with the tiny speck in someone else's. (Matt. 7:3-5)

No matter how outwardly upright our lives may appear to be, the words of the Jesus Prayer always state the truth about how we stand before God: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." This is a prayer to the Savior, not simply a mantra or phrase to help us become mindful or reduce stress. When we focus on those words as we open our hearts to Christ in humility, we follow the example of the tax collector in today's parable. He knew that he deserved nothing from God except the misery and brokenness that resulted from his many sins. But by exposing himself as a sinner, with no excuses or distractions, he opened himself to the infinite mercy of the One Who died and rose again for our salvation. That is how we must learn to pray this Lent, and every day of our lives, if want to return to our homes justified, "for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

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**Making the sign of the cross**

In the 2nd century, Tertullian clearly writes about the significance of the sign of the cross in the life of the ancient Christians, "At every forward step and movement, at every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and

shoes, when we bathe, when we sit at table, when we light the lamps, on couch, on seat, in all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign (De corona, ch. 3). This article discusses the history of the sign of the cross, focusing on why the ancient Christians adhered to this practice and in what manner.

It is impossible to say exactly when and where the tradition of making the sign of the cross came from. Mentioning it as early as in the 4th century, among those, whose origin is unknown, St Basil the Great said that no one had left us a written instruction on making the sign of the cross. According to St Basil, such practices have been secretly received from apostolic tradition and are as important for piety as those that have been explicitly left by Scripture or the saints. Rejection of such traditions is tantamount to distorting the Gospel (On the Holy Spirit, ch. 27).

We can nonetheless try to trace the origins of this tradition. In the time of Christ, in synagogue worship, there was a rite of inscribing the name of God on the forehead, originating from the book of the prophet Ezekiel. Ezek. 9 speaks of a vision of God's visitation of Jerusalem. Punishment was supposed to befall everyone, except those on whose foreheads the angel of God would depict a certain sign. "(The Lord) said to him, "Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of those who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it"" (Ezekiel 9:4).

Mentions of similar inscriptions can be found in the Revelation of John the Theologian. "Then I looked, and there was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion! And with him were one hundred forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads" (Rev. 14:1); "Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads" (Rev. 22:3-4).

The Jews symbolically inscribed the name of God with the first (Aleph) and last (Tav) letters of the alphabet, to signify the Infinity and Omnipotence of God, containing in Himself the fullness of perfection. Similarly, the Lord will say of Himself in Revelation: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end" (Rev. 21:6).

*(continued next issue)*

