

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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33rd Sunday after Pentecost-Sunday of Zacchaeus

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Today, we will hear the story of the towering figure of Zacchaeus the publican [Luke 19:1-10]. This is one of the many wonderful paradoxes of the spiritual life that characterize the Holy Scriptures. The paradox is found in the fact that the “towering” figure of Zacchaeus was actually “small of stature” [v.3].

And if indeed he had defrauded his neighbors as he alluded to [v.8], then

he was “small” in even more essential matters. Through repentance, conversion, and right action Zacchaeus grew in stature right before the eyes of those who with faith could “see” this transformation.

Zacchaeus personifies the type of change that is possible through hearing the Good News and embracing it in thought, word and deed. This passage, unique to the Gospel according to Saint Luke, is thus perfectly placed as the first announcement of the approach of Great Lent, for in the Orthodox Church, this is always the prescribed Gospel reading for the fifth Sunday before the start of Great Lent.

The pre-Lenten Gospel readings to follow will then guide us to the first day of the Lenten journey that will lead us to Holy Week and then Pascha, the feast of the Resurrection.

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++ 33rd Sunday after Pentecost ++
+ Martyr St. Ignatius of Antioch +

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.*

A Talk on the Divine Liturgy, Metropolitan Athanasios of Limassol (part 16)

Thus, the church of God is holy. Therefore, we treat it with reverence, we cross ourselves when we pass by. We didn’t use to have this tradition of crossing ourselves when going by a church in Limassol, but this good tradition is becoming more and more of a habit lately, I’ve noticed, and especially among the youth.

Sometimes I stand here at the door, watching people pass by, and I see children, teenagers, and young people crossing themselves, while older

people are embarrassed to bless themselves with the Sign of the Cross. Once I witnessed the following: A young man was driving by, talking on the phone. When he saw the church, he wanted to cross himself, but he didn’t have any free hands, since with one he was driving, and with the other he was holding his phone.

What did he do? He crossed himself, while still holding his phone. “Well done!” I thought to myself, praising the young man. The church

reminds us of the presence of God, therefore, let us love the church of God and take care of it and pray for it. The church should be the most sacred thing in our lives.

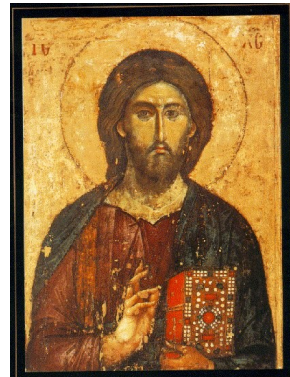
Note how our ancestors built churches. They would choose the best and most beautiful places to build. And although they themselves could live in a pitiful hovel with a dirt floor, like a barn or stable, nevertheless, two buildings in the village were beautiful-

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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 worshipping with us today. We invite you to join us at our coffee social following the Divine Liturgy. Please note that our yearly meeting will be on Sunday, February 5, 2023, during the coffee social.

Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17)

Please keep the following in your prayers: Mother Onufria, Fr. Michael, Meg, Larissa, Jack, Stephen, Evan, Ryan, Anatoly, Alexey, Heidi, Mackenzie, Mike, Jessica, Lisa, Jeff, Bonnalee, Joanne, Skip, Georgia, Colleen, Stan, David, Carol, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ

Abba Isaac on humility

People who are humble, don't have a tongue that makes observations about others who show neglect or who are living a casual life. They don't have eyes that look out for failings in others, nor ears to listen to something that doesn't benefit their soul. They're peaceable towards everyone, not because of friendship but be-

cause of God's command. Faithful brother and sisters: accustom your voice to saying 'Forgive me' and you'll acquire humility. Love humility and it'll protect you from your sins.

Never become wearied because of some effort, because labor, poverty, exile, harsh conditions and silence beget humility, and humility brings absolution of all sins. You should also know this: the more negligent people are in their life, the more they think they're friends of God. But if they're liberated from the passions, they're ashamed to lift their eyes to God in heaven, because they see how far away they are from him.

If you don't wound the conscience of other people, this engenders humility; humility begets discrimination; and discrimination nullifies all the passions, by separating each one from the others. Fasting and prayer bring tears and tears engender fear of God. Fear brings humility, which in turn brings discrimination. This, in turn, begets foresight and this brings love, which heals the soul from sicknesses and the passions.

A Talk on the Divine Liturgy, cont'd from p.1

—the church and the school. Go to Lofa and you'll see an amazing example of what I'm talking about.

This village still has these shacks they used to live in, which no one has built for a long time now. The locals grazed cattle; they were very poor people. They lived in huts with earthen floors, but they built a stone church so beautiful that few could build it now. And their school is no less magnificent than the church. Look at this school and you'll feel like you're standing before a building of Athens University. Why did our ancestors need such beautiful churches and schools? Being wise people, they knew that it's thanks to the church and school that their children would become people. Otherwise, they would have built something else: a discotheque, restaurant, fast food, or something like that.

The condition of churches, their external appearance and interior decoration testify to the culture of each people, since the church is in a certain sense a place of public use, like a

hospital, school, institute, gym, or theater. I think that our era is in need of churches more than ever. Why? Because this age can be characterized as a time of general fatigue. Everyone's tired today. I'm talking not



about physical, but spiritual fatigue. Our souls are tired by many things that we see and hear and come into contact with every day. But most importantly, we're tired because God is absent from our souls.

There is grace in the church of God. This place is sanctified by many Divine Liturgies and other Sacraments,

the presence of the holy icons, and the prayer of all those who come here. You go to church and immediately feel something different there, some other atmosphere, some other energy. We priests must take care that our churches preserve this atmosphere of the presence of God, of His grace.

How many people come to church every day just to sit there for a few minutes, to pray, calm down, and find some peace. Places where people can calm down and rest their souls are extremely necessary today. The churches of God are like quiet harbors. Just as boats and ships are overtaken by waves out at sea and need quiet harbors to toss anchor, stock up on all the necessities, and repair any damage, so modern people need churches. A church is a harbor, where people can rest; it's a hospital where they find spiritual and bodily health. Here, in church, they find what they can't find anywhere else.

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

Returning to the Gospel passage, we find the story of Zacchaeus evenly divided into two parts—an outdoor scene [vs. 1-5] and an indoor scene [vs. 6-10]. Outdoors, and in full view of the gathered inhabitants of ancient Jericho, the despised “chief tax collector,” the rich Zacchaeus, risks the humiliation of being laughed at because he makes the socially unconventional choice of climbing up into a “sycamore tree” in order “see who Jesus was.” What may have been acceptable behavior among children, would only have drawn the surprised and scornful stares of Zacchaeus’ over-taxed neighbors.

I always remember that in a meditation on Zacchaeus, the late Metropolitan Anthony Bloom wrote that the equivalent act today would be that of a renowned corporate executive scrambling up a light pole in a downtown area in order to see someone passing by. (For those with a “boss” that you may not be too fond of, perhaps there may be minor consolation in fantasizing such a scenario and its reaction in your own mind). There then occurs that life-changing encounter between Zacchaeus and Jesus. For Jesus looks up at the strange figure of this man “small of stature” eagerly looking down upon Him, and says to him in response: “Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today” [v. 5].

The transition to the indoor setting is now made when Zacchaeus “made haste and came down, and received him joyfully” [verse 6]. Yet one can sense the oriental custom of a crowd hovering at the entrance or even coming and going with a certain freedom. The raised eyebrows and clucking tongues of an undescribed “they” who look on and articulate their stern disapproval—“He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner” [v. 7]—is a reaction encountered elsewhere in the Gospels when Jesus freely chose to sit at table with sinners and tax collectors [Mark 3:15-17]. This disapprobation on the part of the scribes and Pharisees then evoked his memorable (and ironic?) saying: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” [Mark 3:17].

The Messiah is not bound by religiously sanctioned social convention that divides people into the convenient categories of the “righteous” and “sinners,” “saved” and

“lost,” the “pure” and “impure.” Or rather, by making clear that He has come to bring salvation to everyone, beginning with the marginalized and distressed members of His own society, Jesus reveals the inclusive love of God that tears down all such former barriers. Zacchaeus is a striking and personalized example of this inclusive love of God for “the lost.”

Never a distributor of “cheap grace” though, Jesus demands repentance and conversion. And this comes dramatically from Zacchaeus when he publicly declares: “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold” [verse 8]. In this, Zacchaeus goes beyond what the Law required for such an act of restitution [Exodus 21:37; Numbers 5:5-7]. The Lord then signifies or “seals” the truth of this conversion when He solemnly pronounces the joyful declaration: “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” [verses 9-10]. It is interesting to note that the blessing of Jesus is given to the entire household.

The household of Zacchaeus, in turn, becomes a microcosm of the entire design of salvation: The Son of Man came to seek and save the entire cosmos groaning inwardly and subject to futility as it awaits redemption [cf. Romans 8:19-23]. In this, we and our households resemble that of Zacchaeus, regardless of how “righteous” we may consider ourselves, as we will hear in two weeks in the Parable of the Publican and the

Pharisee!

We can never afford to allow our supposed familiarity with a Gospel passage to blunt its sharp edge. I believe that no matter how well we know the story about Zacchaeus, the only familiarity that we could claim with him is the familiarity of having an equally profound “Zacchaeus moment” in our own lives. Such a “moment” would initially be characterized by an equal desire to “see Jesus”—above all else. Then we would need to be willing to overcome our own “smallness of stature” by perhaps first overcoming the tyranny of social convention and respectability before we get to our actual sinfulness. There may yet be a sycamore tree that we need to climb.



One of the most beautiful modern examples of our Church's precepts says that we can't speak drily on this sensitive issue and not empathize]. It might be we think that, given our own state of good health, we don't empathize with sickness, but if we have even a grain of Christian self-awareness, we can't claim that we don't empathize with sin. There's an underlying danger and fear for those who wish to see the connection between sin and sickness from the theological perspective: that of confining this burning issue to harsh stereotypes which all too often can be heard even in sermons and which show theology and the Church as being strict and inhumane in the two ultimate and detrimental conditions for the human person: sickness and sin. Yet this is precisely where the wounded person, the sinner and the patient, have greatest need of the priest, the Church, of the theologian and every Christian.

It therefore needs genuine spiritual experience and great discernment to approach this close-knit pair, sin and sickness, with the truth of the faith and theology, but without overlooking the core of the faith and theology, which is love and kindness. Saint Gregory Palamas says that for us who lack the immediacy of this experience, the surest path is to have recourse to the experience of the holy Fathers and discerning Elders, who were guided by the Holy Spirit. Our starting-point should always be the certainty of our Biblical texts



which, according to Saint Sophrony in Essex, are a safeguard for us against gauche speculation.

We'll therefore attempt to place this issue within the framework of Biblical narratives, with brief historical references, and, thereafter, to highlight certain facets which we believe are of particular importance not only because of their theological gravity, but more as regards their pastoral implications. Sickness and pain have posed a fundamental problem for people throughout the ages, in particular one of rationale. In ancient times, people did not wish merely to cure pain and sickness, but to explain them. It may be that, in earliest times, when the tools for treatment were few and often ineffectual, people necessarily sought a metaphysical interpretation for pain and sickness, rather than a biological cause.

In the ancient East, both Far and Near, people saw

sickness as a scourge unleashed by spirits or the gods because of some oversight in religious observance or some hubristic act. The spirits or gods were enraged and, as a consequence of their anger, visited sickness upon people, who then tried to repel it with exorcisms, supplications or sacrifices. It is no coincidence that, in most ancient religious systems, the role of doctor was assigned to the priest or shaman, as an intermediary between the material and spiritual world.

Things changed greatly once the ancient Greeks founded and developed medicine into a natural science and art through systematic observation. The continuum through history from Hippocrates and the Christian Galen down to the present day is familiar to many people. It may be worth emphasizing at this point, however, that medicine not only first saw the light of day in Greek

culture, but continued to flourish there for many centuries. According to the sources, Greek doctors were far superior to those of Rome. The Byzantines always had exceptional doctors. At the time of the Turkish occupation of Greece, the Greek diaspora produced doctors of significant stature. Even the murdered first governor of Greece after the revolution, Ioannis Kapodistrias had studied to be a doctor. To this day, Greeks excel at medicine, both at home and abroad, to the extent that, in the developed countries of the European Union, Greeks are the most sought-after doctors. If we ignore the urban myths about professional

recognition, it may be that, behind this general acknowledgement there lies a truth, another expression of Greek tradition, which wants people to be healed of their wounds and restored to health. We'll close this parenthesis here, having offered it as food for thought and reflection as regards the discussion which will follow.

We now come to the way in which holy scripture treats the issue of sickness. The Biblical revelation continues the ancient tradition of the East and Mesopotamia, to which we referred above. Its attention is centered almost exclusively on the religious aspect of sickness and cure, within the context of the divine plan of salvation. Besides, the power of death over humankind is expressed by sickness (*I Cor. 11, 28-32*).

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