

A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Orthodox Christian Church



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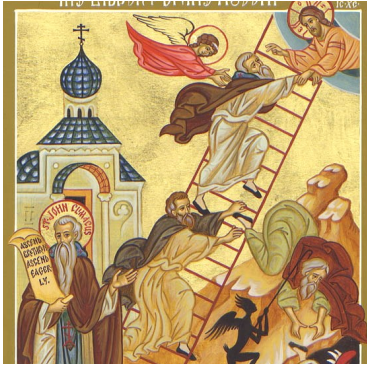


Glory be to Jesus Christ! Glory be Forever!

Volume 12 Issue 559

4th Sunday of Great Lent—St. John of the Ladder

March 26, 2023



We hear in the Holy Gospel of St. Mark today, “Then one of the crowd answered and said, “Teacher, I brought You my son, who has a mute spirit. And wherever it seizes him, it throws him down; he foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid. So I spoke to Your disciples, that they should cast it out, but they could not.”

If God desires to give us everything we need, why then does it seem that

our prayers sometimes go unanswered, that healing remains such a mystery, that some who beseech the Lord for healing, don’t receive it? Today’s Gospel is instructive in this regard: A despairing father comes before the Lord, beseeching Him on behalf of His mute and demon-possessed son. The father describes a heart-breaking image of the evident pain the demon is causing his son as it seizes him, throws him down, and leaves him barely alive.

Those of us who are parents can especially identify with the father’s anguish at his son’s ailment. The father confesses to Christ that he brought his son to the disciplines but they couldn’t cast out the demon. In utter desperation, the father comes to Jesus himself when all other avenues for his son’s healing have been exhausted.

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++ 4th Sunday of Great Lent ++
+Martyrs Chrysanthus and Daria+

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.*

Prayer, by St. John of the Ladder

Prayer is by its very nature a dialogue and a union with God. Its effect is to hold the world together and to achieve a reconciliation with God. Prayer is the mother and daughter of tears. It is expiation of sin, a bridge over temptation, a barrier against affliction. It wipes out conflict, is the work of Angels and the nourishment of all bodiless beings.

Prayer is the future gladness, an endless work, a wellspring of virtues, a source of grace, hidden progress, food for

the soul, an illumination of the mind, an axe against despair, a proof of hope, sorrow done away with, the wealth of monks, the treasure of hesychasts, the reduction of anger, the mirror of progress, a demonstration of one’s condition, the future revealed, and a sign of glory. For him who truly prays, prayer is the court, the judgment hall and the tribunal of the Lord before the judgment to come.

Let us rise and listen to what the holy queen of

the virtues cries with a loud voice and says to us: Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and you shall find rest for your souls and healing for your wounds. For my yoke is easy and is sovereign remedy for great sins.

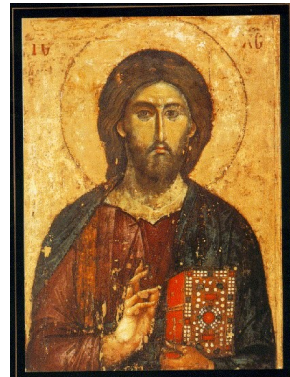
Those of us about to stand before our King and God in order to speak with Him should not move into this without preparation, lest seeing us from afar without

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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 with us today and invite you to join us at our coffee social following the Divine Liturgy.

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, Joann, Skip, Georgia, Colleen, Stan, David, Carol, Norris, Debbie, Linda, Grace the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ

The Feast of the Annunciation

The angel told her not to be afraid, for she had found favor with God. He said, "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary responded to the angel by asking how this could happen since she had no husband. The angel told her that the Holy

Spirit and the power of God would come upon her, and that the child to be born of her would be called holy, the "Son of God."

The angel then proceeded to tell the Virgin Mary that her cousin Elizabeth had conceived a son in her old age (John the Baptist), and affirmed that with God nothing is impossible. In faith and obedience to the will of God, Mary replied to the angel, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be according to your word." Upon her response, the angel departed.

It is on the Feast of the Annunciation, that we commemorate both the divine initiative of God, whereby He took on flesh from the Virgin for our salvation, and the human response, whereby Mary freely accepted the vocation offered to her. He elected to become man, and He desired to do this with the willing agreement of her whom He chose as His mother.

Mary could have refused, for she was not a passive instrument, but an active participant with a free and positive part to play in God's plan for our salvation. Thus Mary chose to follow God's Will.

Prayer, cont'd from p.1

weapons and clothing suitable for those who stand before the King, He should order his servants and slaves to bind us, to drive us out of His sight and to tear up our petitions and throw them in our face.

When you are going to stand before the Lord. let the garment of your soul be woven throughout with the thread of wrongs suffered but forgotten. Otherwise, prayer will be of no benefit to you. Pray in all simplicity. For both the tax collector and the prodigal son were reconciled to God by a single phrase.

The work of prayer is one and the same for all, but there are various and many different kinds of prayer. Some converse with God as with a friend and master, interceding with praise and petition, not for themselves but for others. Some strive for greater [spiritual] treasures and glory and for confidence in prayer.

Others ask for complete deliverance from their adversary. Some beg to receive some kind of rank; others for complete forgiveness of debts. Some

ask to be released from prison; others for remission from offences.

Before all else, list sincere thanksgiving first on the scroll of our prayer. On the second line, we should put confession and heartfelt contrition of soul. Then let us present our petition to



King of all. This is the best way of prayer, as it was shown to one of the monks by an angel of the Lord...

Do not be over-complicated in the words you use when praying, because the simple and unadorned lisping of the children has often won the heart

of their Heavenly Father.

Try not to talk excessively when you pray, lest your mind be distracted in searching for words. One word of the tax collector appeased God, and one cry of faith saved the thief. Talkative prayer often distracts the mind and leads to phantasy, whereas brevity makes for concentration.

After as long spell of prayer, do not say that nothing has been gained, for you have already achieved something. After all, what higher good is there than to cling to the Lord and to persevere in unceasing union with Him?... Prepare yourself for your set times of prayer by unceasing prayer in your soul, and you will soon make progress... Your prayer shows where you stand. Indeed, theologians say that prayer is one's mirror...

Do not refuse a request to pray for the soul of another, even when you yourself lack the gift of prayer. For often the faith of the person making the request will evoke the saving contrition of the one who is offering the prayer.

(Homily on Prayer and Fasting, (cont'd from p.1)

So how does Christ respond? First, Christ isn't indifferent to the child and his father. Rather, He is saddened by the state of the son even as He laments the faithlessness He sees around him, saying, "O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you?" Not only could the disciples not cast the demon out, but the child's father, pleading with Christ, says, "If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." *If?* If Christ can do *anything*? If the Creator of all, the Giver of Life can do anything?

Christ tests the father's faith so that He can push him toward greater faith. This is one of the keys in terms of our own requests for healing in soul and body, as well as for answered prayer in other regards. Faith in God is necessary for our answered prayer. It is in drawing closer to God, availing ourselves of Him, His truth, His healing, that we see and are open to God's work in our lives.

Christ God indicates to us here that the father, through his mustering of greater faith, has a part to play in whether or how his child is healed. The Lord responds to the father pointedly, "If *you* can believe, all things are possible to him who believes." And it's at that point, that the father understands and gives an answer that bespeaks the humility indicative of a deeper understanding and faith, saying, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief!" Christ heals the boy at that very moment, casting out the demon.

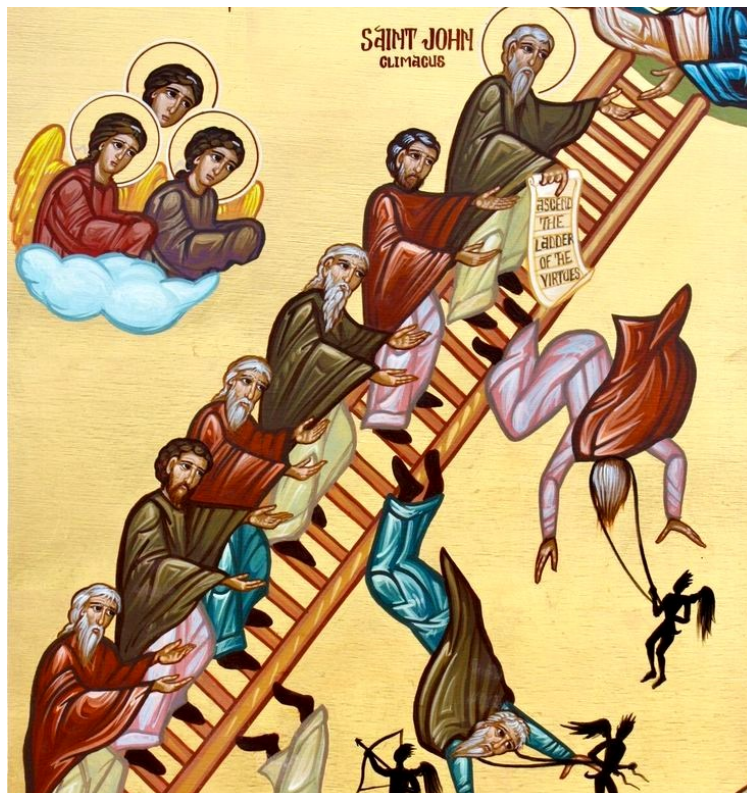
Learning to give ourselves, our physical and spiritual needs, over to the Lord is indeed a journey of faith, of greater trust in God. This trust is certainly needed with regard to our material provision and physical needs, but also, certainly, for our spiritual provision and needs also. God works through such persevering prayers, which deepen our faith and trust in the living God.

But how else do we come to possess such faith? Jesus Himself gives us the answer: The disciples are bewildered as to why *they* could not cast out the demon. They come before Him to ask, "Why, Lord, could we not cast him out?" Christ answers, "This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting." It is evident by our Lord's response that the disciples did neither.

Lent is the season of prayer and fasting, meaning, that it is also the season of great potential progress in open-

ing ourselves up to repentance and growth in faith, communion with the God of all who became incarnate to save us, and yes, heal our souls. When we fast, we're more vulnerable, open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit for change, growth, and yes, healing.

Just as our fasting needs to be prolonged and consistent during the 40 days and Holy Week, so too our prayers need to be strong and consistent as we cry out to the Lord for the change He would work in us, for the faith we need to heal and grow. This act of contrition, humility, patience, perseverance, is precisely the door through which our faith is strengthened as we cooperate with the Lord in His response to our prayers, our pleading. For this reason, the virtues we need to gain and the vices we need to expunge, are repeatedly prayed through the Prayer of St. Ephraim and repeated in the Old Testa-



ment readings provided throughout the Fast.

The fact is that this cooperation, this humbling of ourselves as we come before the Lord to beseech Him for what we need, opens our hearts to Him, to His gracious work in us, pushes us to faith, without which no mountains—either physical or spiritual—can be moved.

This is true for all that we need in Christ for our healing and salvation: God can take the stingy person, and with faith, can make him generous; God can take the prideful person, and with faith, can give him a humble heart; God can take the obstinate and self-willed person, and with faith, can make him obedient, implanting in him a teachable spirit; God can take the lustful person, and with faith, give him purity and whole-mindedness. God can take the most hopeless situations and infuse them with fresh hope for nothing is impossible with God.

If we want to see the Lord at work in our lives, giving us healing, hearing the cries of our hearts, then we also need to make use of prayer, fasting, worship, and alms to defeat the evil one's influence over us and find freedom from the passions, the materialism of this world, and our reliance on all that's temporal. The power that Christ gives to the one who believes, *the one who desires the faith to believe*, is more powerful than the one who tempts us, deceives us, and wars against us. "Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world."

By the rivers of Babylon there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. We hung our instruments on the willows, for there our captors asked us for songs, and our abductors asked for mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion'. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand wither. May my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you; if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. (Psalm 136: 1-6)

This psalm deals with the Israelites who were captives in Babylon about the year 587 B.C. The Israelites were no strangers to captivity, having been taken prisoners at times by the Egyptians, the Assyrians or the Babylonians, and always as a result of their disobedience to God and estrangement from him. In these instances, the captive population suffered harsh conditions of slavery and cruel behavior on the part of their captors. We're familiar with the hardships at the time of Moses who, at God's command, liberated them and saved them from their misery.

Now, in Babylon, the issue wasn't harsh torture, but the bitterness and home-sickness felt by the Jewish people for their own land. Apart from the freedom and material goods they'd enjoyed there, they'd also had the one and only Temple, where they worshipped the one God.

Now they no longer had these opportunities but were also deprived of even the most elementary expressions of joy- song and dance. They'd also had instruments back in their own country. They played them and praised God 'with tambourine and dance; with strings and pipe and clashing cymbals'. Once there, they had no appetite for playing. They were dispirited, despairing, embittered and longing for their homeland.

The psalm describes a most beautiful scene in the open air, under willow trees, where they'd hung their instruments, choosing not to touch them. The reason for their reluctance to do so was that they remembered Zion, i.e. their homeland of Jerusalem, with all its advantages. Not only were they not playing their instruments, but, seated on the ground, were bemoaning their wretched fate at being in a foreign land, captives and slaves to the Babylonian oppressors.

And as if this weren't enough, their captors mocked them, saying: 'What's the matter? Why aren't you singing those songs about your homeland in Zion?'. The

answer was full of bitterness and grievance: 'How can we sing in a foreign land?'. And in order to confirm that they'd never forget, they promised, they took an oath and said: 'If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my hand wither so that I can't play an instrument and may my tongue stick in my throat so that I become mute and can't sing. All this, if I don't put the memory of you, Jerusalem, above any joy I have'. Plain speaking and a somber oath, demonstrating, on the one hand, their utter despair and, on the other, their longing for home. It's as if they wanted to say: 'I'll never forget, come what may'.

These verses call to mind Adam's lament and longing, after his disobedience, as described vividly in this hymn: 'Adam sat before paradise and, lamenting his nakedness he wept: 'Woe is me, for by evil deceit I was persuaded and led astray. I am an exile from glory. Oh, paradise, no more shall I take pleasure in your joy, no more shall I look upon the Lord, my God and Maker, for I shall return to the earth from which I was taken. Merciful and compassionate Lord, I cry aloud to you: I have fallen, take pity on me'. [Vespers, Forgiveness Sunday].

The expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise is a departure and exile similar to that of the prodigal son, far from his father's house. Since then, we're all wayfarers and exiles with no inclination to be close to God and sing to him as the holy angels do. On the contrary, we do have an appetite for singing about our pain, our sorrow, our separation, abandonment and despair, all of which are forms of expressing

the fact that we remain in this place of exile and sing of our unhappiness.

All of these unpleasant feelings are described in any amount of 'dirges' with lyrics such as 'There's only one reality; there's no immortality'; and 'Paradise is here and so is hell'. Even in the best case scenario, such as 'love me, love me today', we're asking that other people should love us, whereas the actual essence of happiness is that we should love others. There are many descriptions of pain and unhappiness in literature, ancient and modern. We might mention the prisoners in the cave described by Plato in his Republic. Bound by the fetters of the passions, they're unable to move at all or undertake any initiative whatsoever. They're unable to leave the darkness and see things as they really are outside, with the sun of righteousness, that is, God.

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