

A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Orthodox Christian Church



Rev. Matthew P. Binkewicz, Pastor

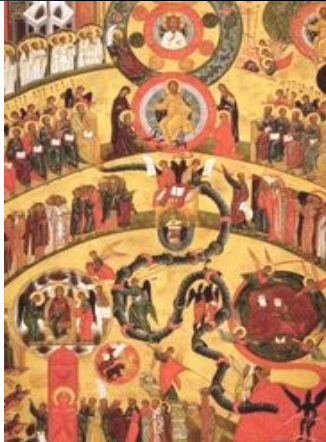
Glory be to Jesus Christ. Glory be forever.



Volume 9 Issue 400

36th Sunday after Pentecost—Sunday of the Last Judgment

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We live in a time when it is tempting to make everything about us. Even as we have the liberty to think, speak, and spend our money according to our desires, we are free to approach religion in the same way. Unfortunately, we are often so consumed with getting what we want for ourselves that we distort the Christian life into a self-centered enterprise of focusing only on

our own spiritual state. When that happens, we become slaves of our own pride even as we fool ourselves into thinking that we are on the fast track to the Kingdom of Heaven.

On this Sunday of the Last Judgment, the Church calls our attention to the ultimate destiny of our souls. As we begin this last week before Great Lent, the Lord's parable reminds us that the path to the fullness of eternal life in the Kingdom of God runs through our neighbors, especially those we are usually inclined to overlook, disregard, and perhaps even despise. How we treat the hungry and thirsty, the stranger and the naked, the sick and the prisoner reveals the true state of our souls. How we serve our suffering neighbors is how we serve our Lord.

Whether we truly share in His life is
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God's Great Love for Us, by Metropolitan Ioil of Edessa

The parable of the Prodigal Son, which is read today in church, has been called a pearl among the parables, and the Gospel within the Gospel. Some commentators have called it the Parable of the Elder Son. Indeed, the behavior of the elder son is striking. On his return home, he was told of the return of his younger brother. He refused to enter the house and accused his father of being unfair to him. The charge was based on the fact that he

worked day and night and wasn't properly rewarded, unlike the prodigal son who'd spent his substance on harlots but who, when he came back, was given a warm welcome. Let's look at the elder son in the parable.

Most commentators say that the elder son represents the Pharisees. They didn't like the fact that publicans and sinners went to Christ, listened to him and that some, no doubt, repented. 'The Scribes and Pharisees

murmured that he received sinners and ate with them' (Luke 15, 12). This charge against Christ was of long standing and abiding, which is why Christ sought to change their outlook with parables such as those of the lost sheep and the lost coin. St. John Chrysostom writes that everything can be borne if it's for the salvation of others. Each human soul is so precious to God that He sacrifices even His Son, the fatted calf, for
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**** 36th Sunday after Pentecost ****

Martyr Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 8:8-9:2

Gospel: Matthew 25: 31-46

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.

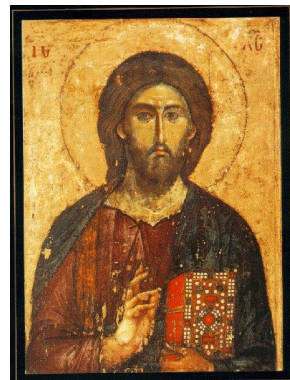
We worship God in Trinity -
Father+Son+Holy Spirit.

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.*

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 worshiping with us today and invite you down to the church hall for our social hour.

Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17)

We ask that you keep the following in your prayers: Esther, Clement John, Mother Onufria, Olga, Lillian, Meg, Larissa, Stephen, Louise, Marcia, George, Lorraine, Peg, Christopher, Jackie, Karoline, Evan, Ryan, Kathleen, Sandy, Samuel, Anatoly, Alexey, Abraham, Susan, Jenny, Deb, Dan, Bob, Catherine, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, and those persecuted for their faith in Christ.

Words from St. Isaac of Syria

“In proportion to your humility you are given patience in your woes; and in proportion to your patience the burden of your afflictions is made lighter and you will find consolation; in proportion to your consolation, your love of God increases; and in proportion to your love, your joy in the Holy Spirit is magnified. Once men have truly become His sons, our tenderly

compassionate Father does not take away their temptations from them when it is His pleasure to ‘make for them a way to escape’ (1 Cor. 10:13), but instead He gives His sons patience in their trials. All these good things are given into the hand of their patience for the perfecting of their souls.”

* * *

“Do not be foolish in the requests you make to God, otherwise you will insult God through your ignorance. Act wisely in prayer, so that you may become worthy of glorious things. Ask for things that are honorable from Him Who will not hold back, so that you may receive honor from Him as a result of the wise choice your free will had made. Solomon asked for wisdom (3 Kg 3:8-14) – and along with it he also received the earthly kingdom, for he knew how to ask wisely of the heavenly King.

* * *

“Let them push you, but do not push; Let them crucify you, but do not crucify. Let them insult, but do not insult. Let them slander, but do not slander.

God’s Great Love for Us, (cont’d from p. 1)

our salvation.

Another interpretation of the elder son is that he represents the saints of the Church. Those saints who had borne the burden and the heat of the day, who had labored in the Lord’s vineyard from the first hour, who had obeyed God’s commandments, demanded that justice be served.

That God should reward the pious and condemn the impious. The saint were astonished at God’s great merciful kindness, since He immediately forgives those who return to Him in repentance. Indeed, He gives them the same gifts as He gives the saints. It’s as if the saints remonstrate (metaphorically, of course, not literally) with God for exhibiting such scandalous behavior of mercy and loving-kindness towards sinners. This demonstrates that human justice is very different from that of God.

People who work spiritually within the Church often feel superior to sinners and can’t accept that the latter might repent, change their life and, in the end, can be saved. They them-

selves have done good works and have never betrayed God’s trust. But then along comes the Lord, Who emphasizes that repentance is a greater act than our supposed good works.



Saint Cyril of Alexandria says that salvation is a gift from God to us and not the result of good works, be they many or few.

People judge and condemn on the basis of what they see, but human criteria are one thing; those of God another. By human measure, the rob-

ber, the harlot, the tax collector and any amount of other people shouldn’t be saved. In His boundless love, however, and by His own criteria, He saves them. Abba Isaac said: ‘God may be called just, but even more so is He good and kind’. He asks of us that we give ourselves. That we give Him all our spiritual vim and vigor. When it comes from the depths of our heart, a sigh is of greater weight than a potful of emotional tears, according to Saint Paisios. Let us approach God in humility and with the intention of shattering our egotism, so that we may be saved.

* * *

Knowing the commandments of the Lord, let us conduct our lives in this way:

Let us nourish the hungry, let us give drink to the thirsty; let us clothe the naked, let us welcome the strangers; let us visit the sick, the infirm, and those in prison.

From Vespers of the Last Judgment

is shown by whether His love and mercy are evident in our lives. If we truly participate in Him, the Savior's virtues will become characteristic of us, for He has united humanity and divinity in Himself. And what is more characteristic of Christ than His self-emptying love for all of us who suffer the degrading consequences of our sins, both personally and collectively? By offering Himself fully on the cross, the God-Man sets us free from bondage to corruption and unites us to Himself as members of His own Body, the Church. He makes it possible for us to enter by grace into the eternal communion of love shared by the Holy Trinity. The ultimate judgment of our souls is whether we will embrace this sublime vocation or refuse it.

The point is not that we can somehow impress God or earn a reward by doing enough good deeds for others. It is not that we calculate in our minds that by serving our neighbors we are serving Him. It is, instead, that we embrace His healing of our self-centeredness to the point that we become radiant with His selfless love. The more that is true of us, the more we will offer ourselves to our neighbors and to Him. The more that is true of us, the more we will share a common life of love with our neighbors and with Him. That is what it means to be able to say, "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." (Gal. 2:20)

St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that the key issue in the question of whether to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols was how doing so impacted others. He writes that "food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. Only take care, lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." To cause another to fall would be to "sin against Christ." We read this passage on the last day when, according to the fasting discipline of the Church, we eat meat before Pascha. His words remind us that what is truly at stake in fasting is not merely a change in diet, but whether we use food in a way that enables us to grow in the selfless love of our Lord.

When we abstain from the richest and most satisfying foods, we have an opportunity to gain strength to redirect our desires for self-centered pleasure to blessing our neighbors. That is because eating a humble diet should

free up resources to give to the needy. It should not take long to prepare and the leftovers will keep for future meals, thus freeing up time and energy to be directed toward the good of our neighbors in so many ways. It should also teach us that we can live without getting what we want; contrary to popular opinion, it will not kill us to say "no" to our own preferences about what we eat.

Fasting is not an end in itself. It is merely a tool for shifting our focus away from ourselves and toward our Lord and our brothers and sisters. If we distort it into a private religious accomplishment that we use to show ourselves, others, and even the Lord how holy we are,

we would be better off not fasting at all. This spiritual discipline invites us to share more fully in the self-emptying love of Christ as we turn from addiction to satisfying ourselves to freely serving others. That kind of love is essential for us to grow in union with them and with Him. It is a crucial dimension of what it means to participate in the deified humanity of the Savior Who offered up Himself in order to draw all people into the eternal life that He shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Many false substitutes exist for uniting ourselves to Christ such that we serve others as He has served us. Some may approach the fasting guidelines and other dimensions of Lent as legalistic acts the performance of which would satisfy God's requirements. Others might in-

sist that the height of the Christian life is making ourselves feel a certain way or following a code of behavior that justifies us in condemning others. As well, Christians of every generation have fallen prey to the temptation to use the faith to gain earthly power in one form or another. These distractions from true faithfulness all make the mistake of focusing on trying to get something for ourselves from God. They fail to see that our focus must be on Christ and those in whom we encounter Him each day of our lives, not on us. They do not recognize that the fundamental calling of the Christian life is to become like our Lord, Who offered Himself up for the salvation of the world. If we want to approach Lent in a spiritually healthy way that will enable us to participate already in life eternal, we must offer ourselves for the sake of other people.

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The particular form of that self-offering will vary according to the needs of the people we encounter and our particular gifts and calling in life. Discerning the particular actions we should take will not be a matter of cold-blooded rational calculation, but of being so conformed to Christ's character that we make our lives a "living sacrifice" (Rom. 12:1) through which the Savior's healing of fallen humanity becomes active and evident in our lives. Instead of living as isolated individuals who define themselves over against one another, we will become persons in communion with Christ and all those who bear His image and likeness.

According to today's gospel reading, this is the path to the eternal life of the Kingdom. Whether we pursue it will determine whether we have the spiritual health to behold the glory of the

Lord as joyful, brilliant light or instead are so weak that we perceive only the burning torment of our own refusal to be transformed by His love. The difference will not be in our Lord, but in how we have responded to Him. During the coming season of Great Lent, we will all have the opportunity to unite ourselves to Christ in holiness through prayer, fasting, almsgiving, forgiveness, and other forms of re-



pentance. We must not pursue them, however, as our own individual religious accomplishments, but instead as humble steps to open ourselves to the grace necessary to become the kind of people who share so fully in the life of Christ that we spontaneously convey His merciful love to all His living icons, especially those we are most inclined to disregard.

Since we are all a long way from fulfilling this calling, we all need the coming blessed weeks to grow closer to the Savior Who emptied Himself for our salvation on the cross in order to rise in glory on the third day. If we want to know the joy of His resurrection, we must offer ourselves to Him in the neighbors through whom we encounter Him each day. There is no way around this truth: How we serve them is how we serve Him.