

A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Orthodox Christian Church



Rev. Matthew P. Binkewicz, Pastor

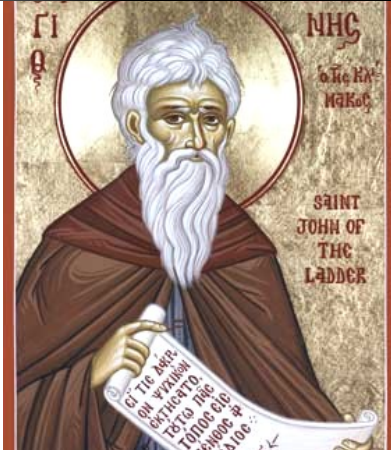


Glory be to Jesus Christ. Glory be forever.

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

March 29, 2020



Self-reliance has its place, but also its limits. Deep problems that we cannot overcome by our own abilities show us that we are not as powerful as we had imagined. The father in today's gospel reading had learned through bitter experience that he could not relieve his son's suffering, which was why he asked Jesus Christ to cast out the demon. The man was apparent-

ly not sure that the Savior could do so either, for he said "if you can do anything, have pity on us and help us."

When Christ responded, "If you can believe, all things are possible for him who believes," the father was brutally honest, saying "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" Not only did the man know that he could not relieve his own son's suffering, but also that his faith was far from perfect and mixed with doubt. When the Savior cast out the demon, the scene was so disturbing that most people who saw it thought that the boy had died. Imagine how terrified the father must have been.

The disciples' concern in that moment seems to have been only for themselves, for they wondered why they had not been able to deliver the young man. When Christ told them it was because "This kind cannot be
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** St. John of the Ladder **
Bishop Martyr Mark of Arethusa

Epistle: Hebrews 6: 13-20

Gospel: Mark 9: 17-31

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.*

On St. John of the Ladder, by Archimandrite George

Great Lent is a time of renewal when everything, as is the case every spring, makes a new beginning and our sunless lives are again brightened by all the intensity that God can give us, making us His confidants, through the Holy Sacraments and His costly gifts. This reconciliation is a joy; for both us and for God – a new beginning.

The fourth Sunday of Lent is dedicated to Saint John of the Ladder and I'd like to present a few

of his sayings which are related to the period we're going through now.

"Repentance, that is the return to God, is the renewal of our baptism, the renewal of our pact with God, our promise to reform our lives. It's a time during which we can acquire humility, which is peace, peace with God, with ourselves, with the whole of the created world. Repentance is born of hope, that is when we reject despair. And those who repent

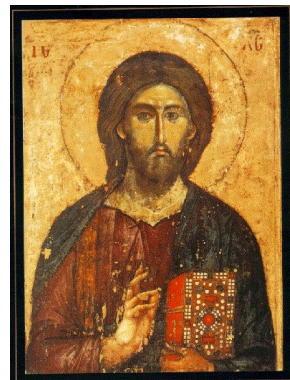
are the very people who deserve a guilty verdict and yet leave the court without shame, since repentance is our peace with God. And this is achieved through a life which is worthy of us, far removed from the sins which we committed in the past. Repentance is the cleansing of our conscience. It involves a complete liberation from sorrow and pain".

It's worth listening to these few words on prayer if we wonder how we
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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
for our souls
salvation.

News and Notes

We welcome all who are worshipping 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, Evan, Ryan, Kathleen, Sandy, Samuel, Anatoly, Alexey, Abraham, Susan, Jenny, Deb, Dan, Bob, Catherine, Skip, Doug, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & the persecuted for their faith in Christ.

Words from St. John of the Ladder

Remembrance of wrongs is the consumption of anger, the keeper of sins, hatred of righteousness, ruin of virtues, poison of the soul, worm of the mind, shame of prayer, stopping of supplication, estrangement of love, a nail stuck in the soul, pleasureless feeling beloved in the sweetness of bitterness, continuous sin, unsleeping transgression, hourly malice. This dark and hateful passion, I mean remembrance

of wrongs, is one of those that are produced but have no offspring. That is why we do not intend to say much about it. He who has put a stop to anger has also destroyed remembrance of wrongs; because childbirth continues only while the father is alive. *Step 9.2-4*

Fire and water are incompatible; and so is judging others in one who wants to repent. If you see someone falling into sin at the very moment of his death, even then do not judge him, because the Divine judgment is hidden from men. Some have fallen openly into great sins, but they have done greater good deeds in secret; so their critics were tricked, getting smoke instead of the sun.” *Step 10.8*

“The one who requests less than he deserves from God will surely obtain more than he deserves. This is clearly shown by the tax-collector who requested forgiveness but obtained justification. And the thief merely requested to be remembered in His Kingdom, but he inherited Paradise.”

On St. John of the Ladder, (cont'd from p. 1)

are to achieve this, how we can respond to God, Who receives us like the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son, to God Who awaits us with longing and Who, though we've rejected Him, has never left our side: “Don't us fancy words when you pray, because it's often the simple and plain murmuring of children that delights our heavenly Father.

When you speak to God, don't try to say much, because otherwise your mind will be looking for words and will get lost in them. The few words spoken by the Publican brought him the mercy of God; a few words, full of faith, saved the robber on the cross. Varying the words when we pray scatters the mind and inflames the imagination. One word addressed directly to God harnesses the mind to His presence. And if, while you're praying, this one word touches you on the inside, if you feel it deeply, stay within it.

Stay, because at moments such as that, our guardian angel's praying

with us, because we're truly ourselves and are with God”.

Let's not forget those words by Saint John of the Ladder. Rather remember his words because he was a person who knew what it means to



turn to God, to be God's joy and to exult in Him. This period is offered to us, as we proceed towards the days of the Passion, as an example of what the grace of God can achieve in trans-

forming an ordinary and normal person into a light for the world.

Let's learn that, let's follow his example, let's rejoice at seeing how the power of God can work within people and, with faith, with confidence, with triumphant and also peaceful joy, let's follow his example, let's listen to God imploring us to find the path of life and telling us that with Him and in Him we shall truly live, since He is the way, the Truth and Eternal Life

“Do not be surprised that you fall every day; do not give up, but stand your ground courageously. And assuredly the angel who guards you will honor your patience. While a wound is still fresh and warm it is easy to heal, but old, neglected and festering ones are hard to cure, and require for their care much treatment, cutting, plastering and cauterization. Many from long neglect become incurable. But with God all things are possible [Matthew 19:26].” (*St. John of the Ladder, Step 5, 30*)

driven out by anything but prayer and fasting,” He made clear that they lacked the spiritual health to do so. They had neglected the most basic practices for the healing of their souls and consequently were powerless in the face of such great evil. As the Lord said, they were part of a “faithless generation.”

The disciples, who had the benefit of literally following Christ in His ministry and hearing His teaching daily, had not yet embraced genuine faith in Him. However, the Lord delivered a child from the deadly clutches of evil through the honest, imperfect faith of his father. The deep pain and challenge presented by his son’s suffering over the years had humbled the man. He knew that no version of self-reliance could help in this situation. He had faith, but was not ashamed to admit that it left much to be desired.

If we are making use of the disciplines of Great Lent with integrity, we will develop at least a bit of the spiritual clarity shown by the father in our gospel lesson. The constant struggle to pray, whether at home, church, or elsewhere, reveals our weakness in controlling our own thoughts and turning away from distractions as we open our hearts to God. The more that we open our hearts and see our true spiritual state, the more we know our own need for healing beyond what we can accomplish by our own power. Our difficulty in fasting shows how little control we have over our desires for pleasure and getting our own way. The more that we seek to orient our lives to God, the more aware we will become of the weakness of our faith and of how devoted we remain to the false gods of this world, including especially our own will.

The irony is that the only way to find strength is by acknowledging our weakness. The greater our spiritual clarity, the more we will know the infinite distance between the present health of our souls and the fullness of our calling to become like God in holiness. The only way to climb *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, as described by St. John Climacus in his advice to monks, is to embrace the brutally honest humility of the father who was not ashamed to acknowledge the brokenness of his faith

even as he cried out with tears on behalf of his demon-possessed son.

As we continue the Lenten journey, we must remember that this season is not about us and what we think we can achieve spiritually by relying on our own willpower or virtue to perform acts of religious devotion. Spiritual disciplines are not exercises in self-reliance, as though we earn something from God by being diligent in performing them. Instead, they are simply ways of helping us share more fully in the life of Christ as we grow in recognizing our sinfulness and opening ourselves to receive His healing mercy.

No amount of piety could conquer the power of death and make a path for us to participate personally in the eternal life of God by grace. Only the God-Man, in His full Self-offering on the Cross, could do that. Lent is preparation to unite ourselves to Christ in His Passion, for “The Son of man will be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and after He is killed, He will rise on the third day.” He is the eternal High Priest Who “has gone as a forerunner on our behalf” into the Heavenly Tabernacle where He intercedes for us eternally (Rom. 8:34).

The healing of our souls is found by sharing in the life of Christ. We will be able to unite ourselves to Him in holiness only when we know the weakness of our faith as we turn away from self-

reliance and receive His mercy from the depths of our souls. The disciplines of Lent are teachers of humility that should help us “commend ourselves and one another, and all our life, unto Christ our God.” He accepted the imperfect faith of the father of the demon-possessed boy, and He will do the same with us if we come to Him in the same humble spirit. Doing so is really the only way to prepare to follow the Savior to His Cross and empty tomb.

From Vespers for the 4th Sunday of Great Lent

O holy Father, hearing the Lord’s voice in the Gospel, you spurned the riches and glory of the world. You cry out to all: “Love God and find eternal grace! Set nothing higher than His love; thus, you will find rest with all the saints, when He comes in glory!” Through His prayers guard and save our souls, O Christ!



Thoughts on the Covid-19 Pandemic by Bishop Alexander of Bethesda, MD

Faith is expressed in the certainty that our Lord can always be in our midst, that He can always be by our side, for the Psalmist proclaims, “If I ascend up into heaven, Thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, Thou art there” (Psalm 139:8). And if I am shut up in my home away from Church, “Thou art there,” even as the Lord was there for and with the Apostle Peter when he was locked up in prison, so He is there for and with us.

During times of uncertainty, anxiety, and fear, we naturally turn to God for refuge, peace, and courage. This is our birthright as baptized Orthodox Christians. Indeed, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear though the earth should change” (Psalm 46:1-2). With the corona virus, the earth has changed, but we do not fear. The faithful are isolated in their homes, physically separated from loved ones, and even unable to gather together as the Church for the celebration of the mysteries, but we do not fear, for God remains our refuge, our peace, and source of courage.

Many are understandably discouraged and downcast about the decision to ban eucharistic gatherings in Church for the sake of the health of our neighbor whom we love. Yet, God remains our refuge, our peace, and our source of courage. Within this trial, this threat to so much that we hold so very dear, there is a call that is given and a promise that beckons. But to hear that call and see the fulfilment of that promise, we need to approach our Savior as His faithful children have always approached Him, not with self-righteous indignation or self-pitying despondency, but with humble, patient hope.

The call is to prayer of the heart. The promise is the purifying and illumining grace of the Holy Spirit. In the emphasis on more frequent communion over the past forty years, we might be tempted to neglect the necessary ongoing moment-to-moment inner communion with Christ by prayer, that talking with Him and walking with Him that characterized most of the lives of the Apostles before and after the institution of the Mystical Supper. Many of our greatest saints were deprived of Holy Communion for periods of time that for us would be unbearable to contemplate, but that for them were periods of continued growth from glory to glory, because they were never without Holy Communion with Christ through prayer. Prayer is not easy; it requires concentration, dedication, and love, but through the gates of prayer, we can touch Christ, Christ can touch us, and we can be healed. It is imperative for us all to learn to serve Liturgy at the Altar of the heart and the time is now at hand.



During this crisis of the corona virus, we are given the opportunity to become men and women of deep prayer. We are given the occasion to “enter into our closet, and when we have shut the door, pray to our Father which is in secret” (Matthew 6:6), offering Him our repentance, our gratitude, and our love. We can come to understand that “prayer is a safe fortress, a sheltered harbor, a protector of the virtues, a destroyer of passions. It brings vigor to the soul, purifies the mind, gives rest to those who suffer, consoles those who mourn. Prayer is converse with God, contemplation of the invisible, the angelic mode of life, a stimulus towards the divine, the assurance of things longed for, ‘making real the things for which we hope,’ (Theodore, the Great Ascetic,). As Saint Sophrony of Essex puts it, “prayer is infinite creation, far superior to any form of art or science. Through prayer we enter into communion with Him that was before all worlds...Prayer is delight for the Spirit.” (On Prayer, 9).

The Elder Emilianos whose love for the Divine Liturgy was incomparable once said, “It is pointless to go to Church, unnecessary to attend Liturgy, and useless to commune, when I am not constantly praying” (The Church at Prayer, 14). A spiritual life of private prayer is not a monastic prerogative, but the common inheritance of all the faithful. The saintly elder further notes, “The harm that befalls us if we do not know how to pray is incalculable. Incalculable? It is the only harm from which we suffer. There is no catastrophe that can compare to it. If all the stars and all the planets were to collide with one another, and the universe to shatter into smithereens, the damage would be far less than that which befalls us if we don’t know how to pray” (The Church at Prayer, 10). The threat of the virus perhaps can open our eyes to the threat of not knowing how to pray to God in our heart.

The threat of the virus may turn into a blessing that can enliven our spiritual life.

The temptation before us is to deafen our ears to this call to active, arduous prayer to approach God and instead to prefer more passive, easier ways for God to approach us. Now is not the time to try to devise any means to avoid this prayer in private, but it is the time to heed the call to prayer in our heart to the God of our heart. There is a rich, inner world beckoning to us, a world where God is all in God. Let’s take the gift of this time to enter into that world. And if we do so, when we come together for the Divine Liturgy with a yearning magnified by distance apart, that Liturgy will be more radiant and more angelic than anything we have known before. Through a deep life of inner prayer, we will indeed learn how to set aside all earthly cares, that we may receive the King of all.