

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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It has never been hard to find examples of people using religion to get what they want in this world. It is usually easy to see when others do that, but much harder to recognize when we fall prey to the temptation of trying to use God to fulfill our self-centered desires. The harsh truth is that doing so is simply a way of worshipping ourselves, no matter what we

say we believe.

In today's gospel lesson, James and John understood Christ's prediction of His death and resurrection so poorly that they asked for the places of highest honor in His Kingdom, which they surely imagined would be an earthly political realm. The Lord told them that they did not know what they were asking, for to be exalted in His Kingdom would require sharing in the cup and baptism of His great Self-offering for the salvation of the world. It would require "becoming the servant of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."

The Savior taught His confused disciples that His way is completely different from the path of earthly rulers who seek to exalt themselves by lording it over others. He suffered at the

(continued p. 3)

** St. Mary of Egypt **
* Deacon Martyr Agathpodes *

Epistle: Hebrews 9: 11-14

Gospel: Mark 10: 32-45

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.*

How to Survive the Pandemic and Remain Human, by Fr. Andrew Konanos

I haven't spoken with people for several days. I'm being open about this, yes, I live in silence and solitude for a fair number of days in a year. It seems to me that this does not look strange or unusual. (Some people look at my photos, selfies and conclude that I spend all day on the street and relax 24 hours a day! But that doesn't matter.)

Photos that someone took over 2-3 days can be uploaded within some time, several months. They give the impression

that you live with no restriction.

I think about how our life has changed. Everything stopped, closed, and froze. I think about you, who find it difficult to stay at home. You are not one of those who look inward your heart. You remained at home out of need, because this was ordered. Likewise, you remained out of love, because it should be so for the sake of people around you and the sake of yourself.

You also remained out

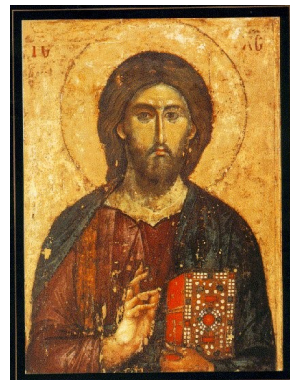
of fear and general insecurity.

I also think about those who carry the burden of psychological issues, about lonely people, the destitute, and orphans. I wake up these days and, although the sun tells me, "Smile! Look what a wonderful day it is today", I see a different reality reminding me of the threat, fear, and the black rider who will steal many from our planet. Everything that happened for the last couple of weeks

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 of Wisdom

Metropolitan Antony (Bloom) once wrote, “It seems to me, and I am personally convinced, that the Church must never speak from a position of strength. It ought not to be one of the forces influencing this or that state. The Church ought to be, if you will, just as powerless as God himself, which does not coerce but which calls and unveils the beauty and the truth of things without imposing them. As soon as the

Church begins to exercise power, it loses its most profound characteristic which is divine love [i.e.] the understanding of those it is called to save and not to smash...”

St. Mary of Egypt’s pilgrimage in the desert was the opposite of the call to worldly power and happiness. She left everything behind to reconstruct her life through absolute abstinence and self-denial. She sought not to master others, but to master herself. In fact, that is the rule we must follow: master yourself; love and serve your neighbor.

So, Christ tells us “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.” Don’t attach to things that are dying, but to things that are undying. Since the kingdom of heaven is within, that is where we must search. Matthew the Poor, the great Egyptian monk and ascetic, wrote that the only place we can meet God is within. When we turn within to discover what is there, after a while we discover a great secret: we discover that there is something within us that is also undying: the image of God and the Kingdom of heaven.

How to Survive the Pandemic and Remain Human, (cont’d from p. 1)

of weeks has made me think seriously about the temporality of this world, about our earthly life.

I thought (I’m not hiding it) about death. I often forget about it, plunging into all of my activities. I am so delighted with this life, its colors, music, aromas, successes, tastes, intoxicating drinks, people, that I feel as if I’m a permanent resident of this land. I have a feeling of being here forever.

Being here, in this excellent world, with an excellent neighborhood, in a beautiful country. Then one thing came near. It’s invisible and imperceptible. It’s a virus that reminded us of the fact that there is also an end. Maybe it is not an end to me or you now, but sooner or later life ends... I open the refrigerator: it is full. I bought enough of everything with a margin for the following days. I drink orange juice and eat three cookies with cinnamon, because it tastes so good.

How wonderful it is to live, to rejoice, to be in good health, to feel the

constant breath of God near you.

Only praying is easy these days, that is, I speak with God and I tell Him all of this. About my doubts, my relatives and friends, our insecurity, and about those who are sick or will soon get sick, or maybe die. I say that this is inevitable. I can’t believe it yet and don’t even want to do it.

There are also screams and quarrels about Christ at this time from all sides, it’s hard to figure it out. It’s a wild thirst for something that sometimes doesn’t even resemble Him. It’s an insatiable thirst for self-justification: I am right, everything I do is right, I am better than you, I am real, and you are lying, you are wrong, you are in the dark.

The only logical action these days is to stay at home and pray. I am talking about inner prayer of the heart, silence, love and sincerity. Politicians, doctors, nurses, priests, teachers, psychologists, psychiatrists, policemen, traders, athletes, artists, intellectuals, critics, writers, poets, those who are praying, and simple workers are all

called to become “miracle workers” now. They are all called to get through this miracle of love and unity with each other, to pay attention to the most important thing: to the deadly enemy, the virus, while waiting for the Immortality of Love. It is important to testify about Christ not only in our statements, but also in our loving heart.

In practice: let’s stay at home, via the Internet we can “travel” anywhere, buy, talk, exchange opinions, our pain, dreams and hopes.

Let’s become somewhat ascetics these days, let’s be filled with love for everything. Then this fast will be the most wonderful in our life.



the hands of precisely such authorities who could not tolerate any threat to their power. By ascending the Cross, descending to Hades, and rising from the tomb, Christ revealed the pathetic weakness of those who use the fear of death to serve their own fleeting glory upon the earth. To attempt to use His Kingdom to fulfill self-centered desires for power, pleasure, or any other worldly goal is to miss the point entirely of why our Great High Priest offered Himself as the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world. By uniting ourselves to Him in holiness, we become participants by grace in the eternal life of the Holy Trinity, not people who are successful in making the world their god.

Today we commemorate St. Mary of Egypt, who found healing in Christ from notorious addiction to sexual pleasure, which is another form of the idolatry of making the world our god. Through decades of intense asceticism in the desert, she found healing from domination by lust and became a glorious saint. She did so not by pursuing the false glory of the world, but by becoming radiant with the glory of God through humble repentance.

Addiction to gratifying our self-centered desires, no matter what they are, distorts the beauty of our souls as those who bear God's image and likeness. We must remember, however, that Christ's mercy extends to even the most corrupt sinner who comes to Him in humble repentance. Zacchaeus turned from his love of money by returning more than what he had stolen and by giving generously to the poor. In contrast to the self-righteous Pharisee in the parable, the tax collector humbly begged for God's mercy and found it. The prodigal son came to himself and was restored beyond his expectations.

The disciples ultimately abandoned their desire for worldly power and became martyrs, including St. Peter, who had denied the Savior three times. St. Paul went from being a fierce persecutor of Christians to the apostle to the Gentiles. St. Mary of Egypt, who began as a horribly depraved person, ended up as such a model of sanctity that we celebrate her memory each Lent without shame or embarrassment. We learn from these examples that there is always hope for the healing of our souls, regardless of the mess we have made of our lives. Our faith is not in a simple moralism in which the good suc-

ceed and the bad fail, but in a Lord Who has conquered the enslaving power of sin and death. He came to call not the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

The healing of human persons in such remarkable ways is not accomplished by the conventional politics or ethics of this world, regardless of whether religion is somehow invoked to support them. Such transformation is, instead, a sign of Christ's victory through His Passion. His selfless service for our sake knew no bounds and stopped at nothing, not even Hades and the tomb, in order to deliver us from the despair to which we had enslaved ourselves. He freely entered into the full consequences of our corruption in order to heal and triumph over them. He did so not for His own sake, but for

ours. "For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."

As we begin the last week of Great Lent, let us be on guard against the temptation to use any aspect of our faith for self-glorification. If our prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and other spiritual disciplines become means of merely accomplishing our goals or of making us think that we have achieved some level of righteousness, they will do us more spiritual harm than good. They are, instead, simply ways of opening ourselves to the healing mercy of Christ so that we will become more like Him. The more that His life becomes ours, the more we will find strength to take up our crosses as we follow Him into a Kingdom not of this world. The more that we take our eyes off ourselves and serve our neigh-

bors in humility, the more we will find the healing of our souls.

Lent is almost over. Let us use the coming week to follow the example of St. Mary of Egypt, and of all the saints, in becoming more truly human in God's image and likeness. Christ did not reject them and He will not reject us, if we come to Him as they did in humble repentance.

The Kontakion for St. Mary of Egypt (tone 3)

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Having been a sinful woman,
you became through repentance a bride of Christ.
Having attained the angelic life,
you defeated demons with the weapon of the Cross.
Therefore O most glorious Mary,
you are a bride of the Kingdom.



St. Mary of Egypt: A Woman of Great Courage and Spiritual Strength

Each of us must ask this question: How do we resemble St. Mary of Egypt? Week after week we feel that we are coming closer and closer to the glorious Resurrection of Christ. And it seems to us that we are moving fast, from Sunday to Sunday as it were, to the day when all horrors, all terrors, will have disappeared.

And yet so easily do we forget that before we reach the day of the Resurrection we must, together with Christ, together with His apostles, tread the road of the Crucifixion. 'So we are ascending to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men, and they shall crucify Him, and the third day He will rise'. All we notice is that He will rise. But do we ever think of the way in which the disciples went to Jerusalem, knowing that the Crucifixion was at hand?

They were moving in fear. They were not yet mature enough to be those who would give their lives for the message to be spread. They were moving in fear. When Christ told them that they would go now to Jerusalem, return to the city which had then renounced Christ, put Him into danger of His life, they said to Him, 'Let us not go.' And only one disciple, Thomas, said, 'No. Let us go with Him, and die with Him.'

This disciple is the one whom, foolishly I believe, we call the Doubter: the one who was not prepared to give his trust to God, his faith, his life, his blood, without certainty. But his heart was unreservedly given to Christ. How wonderful to be such a man! But the other disciples would not desert Christ. They walked towards Jerusalem.

And we have today another example of one who went through a tragedy before they met Christ. It is Mary of

Egypt. She was a sinner. She was a harlot. She was unfaithful to God in her soul and in her body. She had no reverence for this body which God had created and this soul. And yet she was tragically confronted with the fact that there was no way for her into the temple of God unless she rejected evil and chose purity, repentance, newness of life.

Let us reflect on the disciples who almost begged Christ not to return to Jerusalem, because Jerusalem was a city where all prophets had died; and they did not want Christ

to die, and they were afraid. Let us ask ourselves how much we resemble them. And let us ask ourselves freely today how do we resemble, or not, Mary of Egypt – Mary who had lived her life according to her own ways and desires, followed all temptations of her body and soul; and one day realized that as she was, she could not enter the temple of God.

So easily do we enter the divine temple, forgetting so easily that the church into which we come is a small part of a world that has chosen to be alien to God, that has rejected God, lost interest in Him; and that the few believers have created for God a place of refuge – yes, the church is the fullness of Heaven, and at the same time a tragic place of refuge, the only place where God has a right to be because He is wanted. And when we come here, we enter into the divine realm. We should come into it with a sense of awe, not just walk into it as into a space but walk into it as a space which is already the divine Kingdom.

If we were in that mood we would, when we come to the doors of the church, be, however little, like Mary of Egypt. We would stop and say, 'How can I come in?' And if we did that with our whole heart, broken-heartedly, with a sense of horror of the fact that we are so distant from God, so alien, so unfaithful to Him, then the doors would open and we would see that we are not simply in a big space surrounded with walls but we are in a space which is God's Heaven come to earth.

Let us therefore learn from this experience what it means to go step by step towards the Resurrection, because in order to reach the Resurrection we must go through Calvary, we must go through the tragedy of Holy Week and make it our own, partaking with Christ and His disciples and the crowds

around in the horror, the terror of it; and also experience it as a scorching fire that will burn in us all that is unworthy of God and make us clean.

And perhaps one day, when the fire will have burnt everything which is not worthy of God, each of us may become an image of the burning bush, aflame with divine fire and not consumed, because only that which could survive the fire of God would have remained is us.

To God be the Glory. Amen.

