

# 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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Last Sunday, we focused on the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee. You will remember that the Pharisee was so filled with pride that he prayed to himself in praise of his virtues as he condemned the tax collector, who was so aware of his sins that the only prayer he could muster was a humble plea for God's mercy from the

depths of his heart. As we prepare for the intensified spiritual disciplines of Lent, it is clear whose example we must follow: that of the tax collector who returned to His house justified.

Today we turn our attention to our Lord's parable of the prodigal son. This young man was focused only on himself at the beginning of the story, which is certainly a form of pride. His father meant nothing to him at that point other than as a source of money which he could use to indulge himself in the pleasures of the flesh. That is why he asked for his inheritance and left his family and homeland.

Before long, the young man was humbled by the consequences of his way of living when the money ran out and he was simply a stranger in a strange land in the midst of a famine. He was so miserable that he

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*\* Sunday of the Prodigal Son \*  
Holy Healers Cosmas and Damian*

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Gospel: Luke 15: 11-32

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.*

## ***Time and Human Life, by George Mantzarides***

Time is interwoven with life and brings it to death. Just as passengers on a ship are brought to harbor, even if they're asleep and not aware of anything, so we're all brought to the end of our life, naturally, with the passage of time. 'You sleep and time runs away from you. You're awake and you have things to do, but life's being spent, even if you're not aware of it.

We're all running a particular path, each of us hastening towards our

end... Everything passes and is behind you... Such is life. Its joys aren't permanent and its sorrows are fleeting. The path isn't yours, nor are present things.'

Our age is nothing but the time of our life which has passed and become lost. Basil the Great says we're happy to grow older and add years to our age, as if we've earned something. We consider it pleasing when a boy becomes a man and the man becomes an elder.

But we forget that, each

time, we lose from our life exactly the amount we've lived. We don't feel that we're expending our life, even though we always measure it in terms of the part that has passed and been lost.

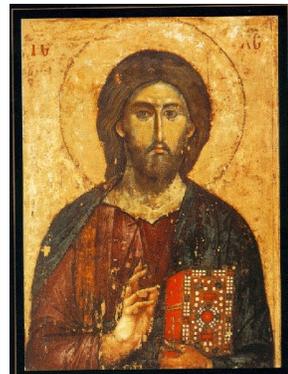
Since we usually do not think about the inexorable presence of time, we are indifferent to its existence, or we even cut ourselves off from it and objectify it. Each of us may talk, for example, about the impermanence of human life, but we

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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. Because of COVID-19, our social hour has been canceled until we receive further instructions from the Department of Health.

**Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17)**

We ask that you keep the following in your prayers: Esther, Clement John, Mother Onufria, Meg, Larissa, Jack, Stephen, Louise, George, Evan, Ryan, Sandy, Samuel, Anatoly, Alexey, Abraham, Susan, Jenny, Deb, Dan, Bob, Catherine, Skip, Doug, Heidi, Laura, Elizabeth Matthew, Corella, Ron, Daniel, Frankie, Dean, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ.

**Words of Wisdom-St Ephrem the Syrian**

Virtues are formed by prayer. Prayer preserves temperance. Prayer suppresses anger. Prayer prevents emotions of pride and envy. Prayer draws into the soul the Holy Spirit, and raises man to Heaven.

When you begin to read or listen to the Holy Scriptures, pray to God thus: "Lord

Jesus Christ, open the ears and eyes of my heart so that I may hear Thy words and understand them, and may fulfill Thy will." Always pray to God like this, that He might illumine your mind and open to you the power of His words. Many, having trusted in their own reason, have turned away into deception.

Blessed the one who continually humbles himself willingly; he will be crowned by the One who willingly humbled himself for our sake.

The word of God is a tree of life that offers us blessed fruit from each of its branches. It is like that rock which was struck open in the wilderness, from which all were offered spiritual drink. Be glad then that you are overwhelmed, and do not be saddened because he has overcome you. A thirsty person is happy when drinking, and not depressed, because the spring is inexhaustible. You can satisfy your thirst without exhausting the spring; then when you thirst again, you can drink from it once more.

*(St. Ephrem was deacon, theologian and prolific writer. He died on Jan. 28, 373.)*

**Time and Human Life, continued from p.1**

mean it as an objective observation which is not directly linked to ourselves. It is not difficult to conceive of the fact that our environment might alter or that others may, at some stage, cease to exist, but we rarely reflect that the very same thing is going to happen to us personally. We are accustomed to saying that everything passes and is lost, but we think it almost self-evident that we ourselves will be present to see the decline and the passing.

Objectification often creates serious misconceptions. In particular, objectifying time alters the meaning of life and leads to confusion and self-delusion. For us, time is not merely an objective process but a profound existential reality. Besides, time has less to do with objects and more with our personal existence. This is why only existential experience of time liberates us from the delusion created when we objectify it. A proper attitude to time is the fundamental requirement for a proper *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi* within the world.

Another basic misconception regarding the way we experience time is the following: people usually forget the meaning of their life in the present and seek it in an ever-awaited future. Unsatisfied with what they have, they nourish themselves on hopes for the future. 'For thus is the



whole of human life: not content with what has gone before, and nourished not so much on the past as on the future.'

This is how we act and behave in the world: as if we are going to live

eternally. And most often we complete the course of our earthly life while we are still at the stage of preparing for the future. In this way, the future becomes our oppressor, whereas the present is no more than the means to achieve our future goals and ambitions. It is treated as being merely a bridge leading to the future. And since what we experience is not the future, but the present, we are forever moving along the bridge, without ever reaching our goal.

This phenomenon assumed a more acute form from the end of the 20th century, with the surge in scientific advances, particularly information technology. People were faced with world-changing developments which surpassed their wildest dreams and intensify their expectations for the future even further. A global web of communication, with limitless locations, facilitates communication and transactions, but which, at the same time, undermines our spiritual calm and our personal life.

*(continued on p.4 column 1)*

*(Homily on the Prodigal Son, cont'd from p.1)*

actually envied the food of the pigs which he was hired to tend there. Truthfully, he had lived like a pig and now he ended up with them in their filth.

At that point, the young man came to himself, recognizing that even the hired servants of his father were well fed. By suffering the consequences of his actions, his eyes were opened to how he had treated his father; he knew he was no longer worthy to be his son. He wanted only to become a servant in his family's home and rehearsed his apology to the old man as he undertook the long journey home. The prodigal son certainly grew in humility through that process. He made no excuses for his behavior and knew that he would be lucky to be taken back into the household as a servant.

His father's reaction was, of course, entirely different than he had anticipated. The old man must have scanned the horizon for him every day, for he saw his son when he was still a long distance away. The father then ran out to greet the son. Before the young man could finish his rehearsed apology, the father did what was unthinkable: He fully restored this miserable wretch of a son. He threw a party and celebrated because "this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."

Pride takes different forms. Some like the Pharisee think that they are so much better than anyone else and become blind to their own sins. Others insist on being so self-reliant that they would rather remain isolated in misery than to ask for mercy that they do not deserve and cannot control. Some would prefer to continue suffering the consequences of their actions than to risk exposing themselves to the healing grace that is beyond their power. Some who are quite well aware of how miserable they are prefer simply to wallow in the corruption of their sins than to acknowledge that they need help well beyond what they themselves can provide.

In contrast to that form of pride, there is the courageous humility of the prodigal son. Think for a moment how he must have felt. He had no idea how his father would react to him. By taking the long journey home, he might have been setting himself up for final rejection and condemnation. Thankfully, he was not so enslaved to being in control or completely self-reliant that he chose the isolation of perpetual suffering over the possi-

bility of even a low level of reconciliation with his father.

He was no longer the self-centered fool who had insulted and abandoned his father in order to waste his inheritance on prostitutes. No, he had developed the eyes to see the gravity of what he had done to himself and to those who loved him. He risked what little shred of dignity he had left by going home, apologizing, and facing the consequences of actions. His only hope was in his father's mercy. It took courage for him to face the old man under those circumstances.

By taking that difficult trip home, the prodigal son put himself in the place to receive the father's overwhelming love, forgiveness, and restoration. The father was not interested in exacting justice or requiring the son to pay a penalty. He did not condemn or embarrass him or even remind him of the bad things he had done. No, he simply welcomed his son back into the family with joy beyond what anyone would have expected.

If we take the spiritual disciplines of Lent at all seriously, we will gain a deeper level of insight into how we have used our Heavenly Father's blessings selfishly for the satisfaction of our own distorted desires. We will see how we have weakened and diminished ourselves to the point that we have become slaves to pride, anger, lust, gluttony, and many other passions. We will know that we have debased ourselves to the

point that we deserve the full consequences of our actions, hardly being recognizable as those called to become like God in holiness.

Through our struggle to pray, fast, give to the needy, confess and repent of our sins, and heal broken relationships with our neighbors this Lent, we will open our eyes at least a bit to what we have done to ourselves in turning away from the blessed life for which our Lord made us in His image and likeness. That is how we will begin the long journey home to a Father Whose love is not a matter of mere justice in the sense of giving us what we deserve. If that were the case, there would be no hope for any of us. Christ used this parable to encourage those who know their guilt and brokenness not to give up hope. Repentance is precisely the long journey home that the prodigal took in order to return to his father. It is the journey that we all must take this Lent.

*(continued p.4, column 1)*



*(Prodigal Son, continued from p.3)*

If we have any doubt about the mercy of our Heavenly Father, we need only remember that Lent is preparation for following our Lord to His cross and empty tomb. What greater expression of the infinite mercy of God for sinners could we possibly want? Christ has taken the full consequences of all human sin upon Himself in order to deliver us from them in His glorious resurrection. By normal human standards, that is far more outrageous than the response of the father in today's parable. We are not speaking here merely of exceptional human kindness, but of the One Who spoke the universe into existence submitting to death at the hands of those He came to save, descending to Hades, and then rising in glory in order bring us into the fullness of the holy joy for which He created us.

In Lent, we prepare to journey in Him from death to life, from suffering the consequences of our self-centered addictions to our passions to full restoration as the beloved sons and daughters of the Lord through His glorious resurrection. So like the prodigal son, let us come to ourselves and return to our Father with true humility.

\* \* \* \*

*(Time and Human Life)*

There is already talk of a new illness, information excess, which is caused by overloading the mind with information. And while we are being overlaid with information, we are becoming poorer in terms of real edification. Our anxiety increases and our ability to concentrate, memorize and make decisions is eroded.

What we have said here regarding time and our life within it reveals a series of contradictions:

- a) Although our life within time is dominated by it, it also manifests the possibility of transcending it.
- b) While the time we live is presented as a measure of our life, it is simultaneously a measure of our demise.
- c) Whereas we recognize that time is also the measure of our demise, we avoid recognizing the consequences of this for us, although we see them for other people or our surroundings, where, again, we are able to see its objective verification.
- d) Finally, though what we experience is always the present, we consciously cultivate a temporal lack of focus. We have relocated all our interests into a future which recently has started to become chaotic.

*The Bethlehem Theotokos Icon*

The icons of the Most Holy Theotokos have always been revered by the Orthodox Christians. There are many different images of the Mother of God, located in various parts of the world. Each of them has its own history and its own iconographic particularities. However, among all images of the Blessed Virgin Mary, one stands out with a truly unique detail — the smile on Her Most Holy Face. What do we know about this icon today?

*Origin*

One legend suggests that St. Luke the Evangelist painted the Bethlehem Mother of God during her life. Having completed the icon, the Apostle brought to the Theotokos the image showing Her smiling as She was holding the Divine Baby in her arms. The Queen of Heaven blessed

the icon and said that everyone who sincerely prayed before it would receive the grace of God.

Historians are unsure of the origins of this holy icon. They suggest that the icon presently located in Bethlehem was painted at the end of the 18th century and somewhere in the Balkans. Tradition states that the present Bethlehem image was kept in the altar of the Holy Sepulcher Church in Jerusalem until 1808, when a severe fire hit the temple, causing two of the rescued shrines (the Great Crucifix and the “smiling image” of the Mother of God) to be transferred to Bethlehem. After the damaged areas were restored, the Crucifixion returned to its original dwelling place, while the icon of the Mother of God remained in the Church of the Nativity of Christ.



The Bethlehem icon has left the

Holy Land only once since the 19th century. It happened in 2010, when the shrine was brought to Kiev for the festive Easter service, together with the Holy Flame. Undoubtedly, such a miraculous event could only happen by the will of the Mother of God and the mercy of God Himself shown to the Orthodox believing Christians of Ukraine, wishing to pray and bow before the Queen of Heaven.

*The Modern Miraculous Image*

According to the most widespread version, the modern Bethlehem icon of the Mother of God comes from Russia. The image of the Most Holy Theotokos was ordered by the family of Emperor Nicholas II as a Christmas present for the Basilica Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

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