

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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2nd Sunday of Great Lent—St Gregory Palamas

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We've all heard the expression, "carpe diem (seize the day)." We feel good about ourselves when we get that project accomplished, get those tasks and errands done that we've been putting off—they're sometimes drudgery to do them, but once completed, like our taxes, we feel better for having gotten them behind us.

If you think about it, though, this

phrase, often translates into accomplishments that don't reach beyond the mundane, temporal things of our lives. When it comes to the urgency of our spiritual lives, our communion with God, we often think we've got all the time in the world.

The reality is, however, that our days are numbered. Our earthly lives will all come to an end—some sooner, some later. Christ God is coming back to judge the living and the dead. Each of us will prostrate ourselves before His judgment seat and give an account for how we've listened to and heeded the Gospel of Christ. In a single moment all our choices, all our sins, will be brought to the fore. Ask yourself, "how ready am I now to appear before that Judgment Seat of Christ?"

We'll be judged based on this personal knowledge and experience of
(continued p. 3)

++ 2nd Sunday of Great Lent ++
+ St. Gregory Palamas +

Epistle: Hebrews 1:10-2:3

Gospel: Mark 2: 1-12

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.*

"Why doesn't God destroy Hell?" by Fr. Eugene Murzin

First, in order to answer this question, we must understand what hell is. We have surprisingly very poor understanding of this. The widespread image of hell as an underground abode, where the demons subject sinners to sophisticated tortures: they put them in frying pans, boil them in huge cauldrons, hung them by their tongues.

This has nothing to do with the Church's idea of hell. Both the Kingdom of Heaven and Hell are a purely spiritual reality, not a physical one. This

is not so much a kind of space in which bad people stay after death, but rather the state of one's soul, consciously moving away from God.

And just as the Kingdom of Heaven begins for a person already during his earthly life, so does hell overtake a sinner, who does not want to repent, even before his physical death.

Man was created free by God. He is the very stone, from a well-known logical paradox, which was created by God and which the Creator cannot

lift. The human heart is probably the only place where the Lord limits His omnipotence.

The freedom given to us by God implies the possibility of any choice – either to be with God, or to resist Him. And if someone consciously chooses evil and sin, then hell is a natural consequence of such a choice. To take this person out of hell is nothing but the denial of his freedom and violence.

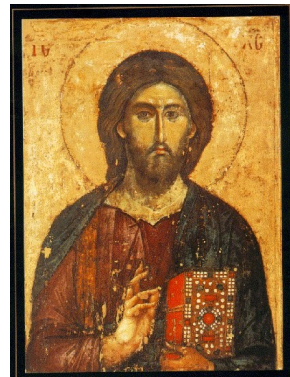
But if hell is the only possible state of the soul of an unrepentant sinner
(continued on p.2)

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 pas-

tor, 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

News and Notes

We welcome all who are worshipping with us today. We are also happy to announce that coffee social has resumed following the Divine Liturgy.

Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17)

Please keep the following in your prayers: Esther, Clement John, Mother Onufria, Meg, Larissa, Jack, Stephen, Louise, George, Evan, Ryan, Sandy, Samuel, Anatoly, Alexey, Susan, Jenny, Deb, Dan, Bob, Doug, Heidi, Laura, Elizabeth, Matthew, Corella, Ron, Daniel, Frankie, Pat, Bill, Carol, Pam, Loretta, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ

Wisdom for Life

How do we keep the gift of His grace? First, by not letting ourselves become complacent. Grace fills all things at Church – its sacraments, rites, traditions and offices. The Grace of the Holy Spirit illuminates every small detail at the church. But taking the right attitude is critical. We must have piety and the fear

of God.

It is easy for us to take for granted things we already have, and stop recognizing their value. We begin to see the gift of grace as a tradition, even a national tradition, as we do now. With this attitude, we lose the grace of the Holy Spirit even within the Church by forgetting about the fear of God, not giving him thanks, and losing our piety. We cannot remain true believers without the right attitude to the gift of God's grace. It is possible to be church-ed, but without grace.

The most telling sign of the presence of His grace is joy. We often despair, feel depressed or wrathful. These states of mind are both common and frequent for many of us. Our moods are subject to change, but feeling negative most of the time should suggest to us the need to repent. But our feeling of joy is the sign of our being in the Holy Spirit. We rejoice in meeting other people, attending worship services, participating in the sacraments and spiritual life. How can there be any place for sadness when we are with God? With God, how can we despair? –

Why doesn't God destroy hell?, cont'd from p.1

and the only place of its posthumous sojourn, then why does the soul suffer there? It seems that it should be comfortable there – after all, it managed to get used to this hellish state of immersion in sin during the life of the body.

First, it is because passion and sin never lead to happiness. Satisfying passion and sin can only bring relative comfort, but it is also temporary. No passion can be fully satiated. In hell, all the usual earthly means of satisfying sinful needs are absent. A person is left alone with the passions that devour him, from which it is already impossible to get rid of.

Secondly, if during earthly life a person tried not to notice God and His love for him, then in the afterlife this is impossible, just as it is impossible to deny the obvious. You can often find the opinion that hell is a place where there is no God. However, it contradicts such a characteristic of God as omnipresence. But God is love. So does the love of God penetrate into hell?

Saint Isaac the Syrian answers this question in the affirmative. He speaks of the scourge of Divine love: "I say that those who are punished in Ge-



henna are scourged by the scourge of love! And what is so bitter and vehement as the torment of love? But the power of love works in two ways. It torments sinners, even as happens here when a friend suffers from a friend. But it becomes a source of joy

for those who have observed its duties."

It is the love of God, which brings bliss to the righteous, which becomes unbearable for the sinner. In the age to come, when, according to the word of the Apostle Paul, God will be all in all (1 Cor 15:28), the love of God will embrace all people equally. However, it will bring joy to some, and torment others, depending on their perception.

As another well-known saint, St. John of Damascus, wrote, "In the age to come, God gives blessings to everyone — for He is the source of blessings, pouring out mercy on everyone, and everyone partakes of the good, as far as one has prepared oneself to receive it."

So the question why God does not destroy hell is identical to the question why God does not destroy a person or deprive him of his freedom. The existence of hell depends on us. It can be destroyed only by man himself, if he learns to live a heavenly life.

(Homily on the Sunday of St Gregory Palamas, cont'd from p.1)

Him—or, sadly, lack thereof. We're changeable, God is not; we're fickle, God is steadfast; He's the same yesterday, today, forever. Our culture and its values change constantly; the Truth of God remains the same.

Lent challenges us to do an inventory of our priorities, to evaluate where things are at between us and God, to seize the day and make use of it for our growth, healing, and salvation, so that when we die, or when Christ comes again, we'll not be found unprepared. Where are things at between you and God? Are you ready to be changed this Lent? Are you striving for life with God more than all else? Is your life with Him who is Life Eternal your priority?

Eternal life means communion with the Creator of all life—the One who was, and is, and is to come. Hell is a very real existence; it is rejection on our part of the life that God is. Our Epistle goes on to warn us, "There-fore, we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away." When the soul of an Orthodox Christian has departed, we sing "Memory Eternal." It is this desire, that we may be "remem-bered" by God in His Kingdom, that we not "drift away" from God's presence, that we live now with eternity before our eyes.

God created us in His great love for us that each of us should be with Him for eternity. But love and relationship (communion) can never be forced on anyone; otherwise, it's no longer love or commun-

ion. God the Holy Trinity is Himself a relationship and union of love—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God desires not a master-slave relationship with us, but a relationship of father to son, father to daughter. This is the God we worship and commune with, this is the God we call on for help, for love, for healing, for salvation. This is the God who feeds us with the medicine of immortality in the Eucharist. This is the God "who was, and is, and is to come" (Rev. 4:8).

Salvation is getting ourselves further up and further in the life that is only in Him, the life that He is as the creator of all life. Salvation is cooperating with the work of the Holy Spirit to change us and make us into the deified men and women of God He created us to be in the first place.

But are we open to the change in our lives that is necessary for us to find healing from our passions and rebellion against God's love? The ways that you and I "miss the mark," reject God's love and initiative to make us

into the men and women of God He's created us to be? This is the question posed to us today. The paralytic and his friends in today's Gospel desire change, healing; they desire more than anything to get into the near presence of Christ God, the Great Physician, the One who speaks the truth because He is the Truth. They desire this so much that they go so far as taking a section of the roof apart to get their friend, the paralytic, to Jesus.

Seeing their faith, Jesus gives the paralytic the greatest of gifts: his healing from his paralysis? No: forgiveness of sins, healing from his sin-sickness. That is the priority—that which is eternal. Having been forgiven and cleansed of his sins, there's nothing standing between him and God, between him and Eternal Life.

It's only after this miracle that Christ, to demonstrate to those who doubt and scoff that He is God, that He is Life, that He alone has the power of giving life, that He heals the paralytic.

Jesus prioritizes the soul over the body; we so often do the inverse. So, we fast so that we can bring balance back between our souls and bodies. When we fast, all is laid bare; we realize how utterly weak we are, how incapable we are of saving ourselves and how much we need God.

Lent gives us the opportunity to relinquish our hold on these "souvenirs," these passions, habits, coldness of heart, indifference to the things of God, that keep us from experiencing and submitting ourselves to the

love of God and the life that is only in Him. If Christ began His earthly ministry fasting and overthrowing the devil during His forty days in the wilderness, how much more important is it for us to worship, pray, and fast during these forty days if we want to make progress in attaining to God's Kingdom?

Is there anything holding you back from the fullness of the life in Christ offered through His Church, which He desires to give each of us? Is there any spiritual sickness or disease of the soul that you need to bring before Your Creator and ask to have healed through Confession? If the spirit is willing, God will take care of the rest; He will use this holy season to lead us further up and further in His Kingdom.

St. Gregory Palamas, whose Sunday we celebrate on this Second Sunday of Lent, reminds us of this truth, saying, "Since the Kingdom of God is at hand and within us and will soon arrive, let us make ourselves worthy of it by works of repentance."



It's a distressing observation but our era has forgotten God. Or rather, because it suits it, it's turned its back on him, particularly in those places where technological progress, that is better tools or economic prosperity- usually made possible by the exploitation of the weakest- have led people to believe that they've become all-powerful. It's clear that people are doing whatever they can to get God out of their lives, by deifying themselves, depending exclusively on reason and being guided solely by their desires. The mere mention of God is enough to cause, in the best scenario, a condescending, if not sarcastic smile, though it may also provoke strong reactions from those who refuse to even consider the possibility of the existence of God.

On the other hand, excessive self-confidence, trust in our abilities and an erroneous sense of independence have given rise to the idea among some people that they're capable of discovering God by themselves. In this way, they contrive their personal dogmas and theories, so that they believe not what God has revealed but whatever their own imagination and deluded reason proposes to them. The result of this approach is just as catastrophic and demonstrates the struggle the Church is facing on two fronts: against atheism; and also against false piety, heresy and 'personal religion'.

The Church, however, insists on continuing to celebrate the triumph of the faith 'against all heresies'. And, moreover, not only those that arose in the past, but also those which continue to exist today and any that may make their appearance in the future. The Church believes firmly in the words of the Lord that 'the gates of hell shall not prevail against it' (*Matth.* 16, 18). No matter how many antagonists arise, not matter what the ploys they devise, to the end of the age the Church will remain the safe haven for people, a harbor of salvation and a ladder to heaven. History has shown this to be the case.

The Gospel reading concerning the call of Nathaniel highlights experience as the best way to find faith. It presents the example of the Apostle Philip who, although he was ready and willing to be numbered among Christ's disciples, was reticent to do so. The Lord made it easier for him and called him to be his disciple. Once he'd agreed whole-heartedly, he thought about his friend, Na-

thanael. As soon as Philip had had personal experience of Christ, he lost no time in becoming an advocate for him.

In this way, we, too, learn that we can't keep something beneficial to ourselves, but have an obligation to pass it on to others, so that they can share in the benefit. Nathaniel, in good faith, doubted what Philip told him, because he wanted to confirm it from what he'd been taught in the faith of his fathers. Philip then gave him the best possible answer: 'Come and see for yourself'. Come and experience. Come and look into it and you'll see. So it's clear that an apprenticeship in the faith is the start of our real spiritual life. How many people have begun to read Holy Scriptures with the aim of finding fault with them have ended up as their most active proponents?

When Nathaniel arrived at his meeting with Christ, the Lord addressed him by saying: 'Behold, a true Israelite in whom there's no guile'. Nathaniel was at a loss to know how Christ knew him and the Lord answered that, before Philip had called him, he'd seen Nathaniel sitting under a fig tree. This was enough for Nathaniel to confess: 'You're the Son of God, the king of Israel' and to become thereafter one of the most ardent of the Lord's disciples.

What, then, are we to understand from this pastoral example of the Lord's? That even though he knew the reservations and objections of Nathaniel, he didn't become angry, he didn't act as though he wanted to rebuke or punish him. He simply waited... He waited for experience and prayer to mature in the man's soul in order to illumine it and kindle the flame of faith, so that Nathaniel would be able boldly to pass on the Gospel message to those willing to receive it, wherever they were.

This is the way God acts. It's the art by which he brings our souls into his net: by enabling us to escape the world so that he can bring us into his heavenly kingdom. Many people are angered by the apostasy of people and the distortion of the faith which seem so prevalent today. But the Church is Christ's and he governs both it and the world. He knows when people are ready to confess him as their Lord and God. He doesn't pressure, doesn't compel, doesn't force. As our Father, he waits, asking us to continue to work with him in effecting the return of our brothers and sisters and avoiding any action on our part that might jeopardize their progress towards him.

