

A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Orthodox Christian Church

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Christ is Risen! Al Maseeh Qam! Christos Voskrese!



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6th Sunday of Pascha-Man Born Blind

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Today, we're presented with two miracles in the Epistle and Gospel. The Apostles heal a woman with an unclean spirit in Christ's name and Christ God heals a man born blind who suffers for his witness to the truth of Christ.

The jailer in today's Epistle, seeing the miracle at the prison, humbled himself and came to the Apostles. He fell down before them, trembling, and

begging them, asking, "What must I do to be saved?" Through his humility and courage, the jailer gained the sight of faith; he found salvation in Christ, and through him, so did all his family. Irony isn't it: the jailer was afraid—scared out of his wits—but had the courage and humility to come to the Apostles seeking salvation, seeking to know their God, Jesus Christ.

We can fear like that with regard to our faith: fear rejection, ridicule, judgment. Our fear, our pride, can get in our way of courageously stepping forward in faith to witness to the truth. Today's Gospel gives us yet another example of courage and witness in the face of such fear. Jesus heals a man born blind who then witnesses to all Christ has done. The miracle is even more remarkable than it first seems: Not only has no one ever opened the

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+Sunday of the Man Born Blind +
+ Sts. Constantine and Helena +

Epistle: Acts 16: 16-34

Gospel: John: 9: 1-38

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.*

They Gathered in the Church, by Fr. Themistoklis Mourtzanos

'So, for a whole year they gathered in the church [assembly] and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.'

Throughout the Easter period, we read in church excerpts from the book of the *Acts of the Apostles*, in which we see how faith in the risen Lord was disseminated, how the first Church was constituted and the reasons why Christianity spread everywhere. One typical example is the evangelization of Antioch, in Syr-

ia, a great cultural center, situated near the River Orontes.

We may note three interesting points in this evangelization, which can also be seen in the context of our own time and reality. The first has to do with the fact that the message of the Gospels was spread to the Hellenists, the pagans, after the persecution of the Christians on the part of the Jews, following the martyrdom of Saint Stephen, the first deacon and first martyr.

This path didn't open

because the disciples were ready for anything like it. A martyr's death led to it. Great truths. From horrific and unpleasant events, paths to salvation open up for many people. God's dispensation provides that, through persecutions and sorrows, the faith can be proclaimed in other places, as can love, when those who believe find no response among their own people.

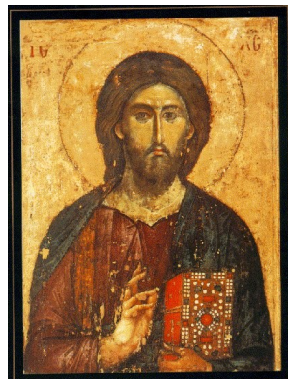
Any conclusions about God allowing and tolerating human wickedness,

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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.





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 that our souls
may be saved.

News and Notes

We welcome all who are with us today and invite you to join us at our coffee social following the Divine Liturgy.

Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17)

Please keep the following in your prayers: Mother Onufria, Meg, Larissa, Jack, Stephen, Evan, Ryan, Anatoly, Alexey, Heidi, Mackenzie, Mike, Jessica, Lisa, Jeff, Bonnalee, Skip, Colleen, Stan, David, Carol, Norris, Debbie, Linda, Daniel, Matthew, Tracy, Molly, Michael the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ

Oversimplification

The world and our life have become very complex. Most people can't bear it. As a result, we try to oversimplify things, formulating interpretations, proposals, and solutions that might make sense. On social media, on the internet, as well as the comments on the news by trolls, these come close to being 'magic'. Commentators show themselves to be absolutely convinced of the certainty of their truth.

They have the air of a know-all. They feel that they comprehend the issue they're dealing with so well that it can be resolved in ten words, nine of which are dismissive, demeaning or sarcastic. Even those who harbor ambitions as politicians formulate proposals and programs which, if implemented, would have little or nothing to do with the situation which they want to reshape.

The same's true in matters of faith. Veneration of the relics of saints or of icons of the Mother of God is considered by some to be an expression of great faith and by others to be great superstition. To avoid simplification, one must practice humility. It's the Socratic maxim: 'I know one thing: that I know nothing', in the face of a world full of complexity, and contradictions in the way it's structured. The oversimplification that fills you with certainties doesn't allow you to see your shortcomings. It'll always be the fault of others for not 'getting' your message or positions. Let us pursue faith with love and humility, seeing the image and likeness of God in all creation.

They Gathered in the Church, cont'd from p.1

shouldn't be made hastily or categorically. Over time, the presence of God is revealed, often through crosses and sorrows. But the resurrection always comes in the manner which God judges to be best. We need to trust him.

The second has to do with the assembly of people in the church and the ministry of God's word. The apostles Paul and Barnabas had no qualms about staying in Antioch for a full year. But the center of their life, as is the case of all those who are interested in believing, and in strengthening their faith, is the church. The Christian faith isn't an ideology or a philosophical topic, but is the mystery of thanksgiving, the Eucharist, the divine liturgy, communion with the body and blood of Christ, which makes people one with God and with other people.

That's where the word of God is taught. It's from there that the faithful start to live their lives with Christ in their hearts, with love as their compass and with the hope and the light

of the resurrection as their expectation. In church, they all listen to the Gospel, resolve their questions, experience the beginning of their spiritual journey, renew their repentance, rejoice in connecting with the persons



of their brothers and sisters, decide to forgive, learn obedience from the words of the apostles and fathers, strive to transform their passions into life, celebrate the faith through tradition, and start and end their earthly course.

This is of great importance today,

when we've turned everything into an individual need, even the worship of God, and try to find support in ideologies for what we believe.

The third has to do with the name 'Christians'. The word has a triple root. It expresses the custom of anointing the king in Jewish tradition; the ending '-an' is from Latin; and the 'Christ' is a Greek word. Christianity grew beyond its Jewish background, spoke Greek and entered the Roman world and, hence, the whole commonwealth of nations of the time. Ever since, the name 'Christian' has continued the tradition of the early Church; it gives us the identity of trust in God and in his will, even during sorrows. At the same time, in the person of Christ, it expresses our hope of eternity in time. It's the most honorable name we could have and we should be proud of it, in Christ. May these three points help us to look afresh at our progress in these times, so that we may pore over the life of our faith in the light of the resurrection.

eyes of one born blind before, but as the Holy Fathers tell us, this man was born without eyes. Not only did Christ God, the Word of God through Whom all things were made, open the blind man's eyes, He made eyes for the blind man, which He then opened. Just as our first parent, Adam, was taken from the clay and made alive, so Jesus takes clay and makes eyes for the blind man.

There is a clear parallel here to the first creation of man, but here there is even more: Christ God not only gives the blind man physical eyes, not only does He then open those eyes so the blind man can see, but even more importantly, He gives him the sight within—He awakens and illumines the blind man's immortal soul, giving Him a living encounter with God, revealing Himself to him, and bringing him to the knowledge and love of Him, that is, He brings him salvation. The blind man comes to

faith in the living God; he receives spiritual sight and worships God, his Creator, the only Lover of mankind.

The Pharisees, for their part, witness the healing of this man, a man known to all and seen regularly begging—but in their pridefulness and lack of faith, they do won't believe, they choose not to believe. Jesus heals the blind man on the Sabbath and reveals Himself as the long-awaited Messiah, but they cannot 'see' the miracle; they're blinded by their pride, blinded by their lack of faith in God's love and power to fulfill the Law, let alone, to heal as the God He is.

The Pharisees question the blind man, searching for a 'reasonable' explanation for the miracle, a reason not to believe. They don't want their eyes opened; they want to remain unchanged. The blind man doesn't stop with his own encounter with God, his own salvation. No, he testifies boldly to the truth of Christ and His life-giving power, not fearing their wrath.

In the end, the uneducated blind man must teach the learned Pharisees, what faith really means. He says, "Since the world began it has been unheard of that anyone opened the eyes of one who was born blind. 'If this man were not from God, He could do nothing.'" For this true and courageous statement, the Pharisees cast him out of the Synagogue.

As the world rejected the blind man, casting him out, so too the world often rejects us as we proclaim our faith

in the living God, as we live out and testify to the miracle of the life of faith, of doing real battle with our passions, of bringing our struggles and sin-sickness before the Lord in confession in our desire for healing from them, of professing our belief in miracles and the Doer of those wonders, in vocally giving God the glory, the credit, for our blessings. Jesus says, "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you" (John 15:18).

The blind man not only receives his physical sight: Even more importantly, "he recovered the sight of the eyes within," as St. John Chrysostom puts it. He comes to Christ God, and finding Jesus Christ, He finds healing, not only from his biological blindness, but from the spiritual 'blindness' of sin. Sin alone is evil; blindness is no evil. In this case, the man's infirmity, his 'sickness' if

you will, his blindness, brings him to the Master, to Him who is Life itself, and through this encounter, through his courage, his fear of God, his humility before God, he is spiritually illumined, spiritually healed and given true life.

As important as the healing of the blind man is and the regaining of his physical sight, even more vital than this is his finding Christ and His witness to his faith in Him as the Messiah and his willingness to pay the price for such witness to the truth.

You and I have the opportunity to courageously embrace the faith of the blind man this day. We ask Christ to continue to open our spiritual eyes, to make us more faithful witnesses to His truth—the truth of a changed life, of freedom from enslavement to this world—which our friends, our relatives,

our co-workers and neighbors, who are all in such great need of a life-changing encounter with Christ as well.

We live out our faith, we do battle with our passions, so that cooperating more and more with the work of the Holy Spirit in us, we too may see Christ, the Light of the world, the Savior of our souls. And we overcome our pride, our fear, with love, which compels us to bear witness of Him and His truth to this world. With gratitude, we thank God for the spiritual eyes to see and discern good from evil we gain from life in the Church, and for the opportunities He gives us to be a martyr, a witness (literally), testifying to the reality of life in Him, to the hope of eternal life.



Almost everyone has doubts about the faith at one time or another. It's possible to dispel them, however, with opposing arguments which confirm the truth of the divine revelation regarding the world and humankind: the order and harmony of the universe; the miracle of life; all the other supernatural and magnificent wonders of God and his saints; and, above all, the testimony of the conscience of well-disposed and pure souls.

God's works, which are evidence of his providential care, are multi-faceted. One side is blindingly obvious.

Another is merely luminescent and discreet. Another is opaque and hard to make out. Yet another is dark and, hence, invisible. It's this last aspect which gives rise to doubts. But this is a result of the fact that the Lord arranged things thus in order to test how far our soul's search for him is genuine and whether we're humble. You see, God and his works can be approached and known only through humility.

You believe that where God and his truth are, i.e. everywhere, everything should be inundated with light, should be palpable to the senses, that souls should be inspired powerfully and should proclaim their divinity aloud. Don't you see that, by thinking in this way, you're trying to define the way in which God should act? And, as I'm sure you'll agree, this is unthinkable, because, were it to happen, the whole of the natural order of things would crumble. God's works are in themselves divine, but their divinity is hidden by an invisible curtain.

Why? I'll say no more than this- that's what God wanted. The counsels of divine love and wisdom can't be discerned. There is, however, no doubt that there's inexpressible beauty and abundant light behind this curtain which prevents non-believers from seeing the truth. Saint Paul says: 'For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made' (*Rom. 1, 20*). But by whom? Only those who believe and are well-disposed. And, of course, not those who believe in a formal way, but those who live in a way that pleases God.

You have to break a nut to eat the kernel, that which is tasty and nutritious. The Lord doesn't reveal his mysteries to everyone and doesn't cast pearls before swine. This is why, when he spoke to people about his kingdom, he told them parables. Those who had the spiritual

wherewithal understood them and were illumined by the truth. When seeds fall into the ground, you think they rot and are lost. But, through the force that God's put into them, they sprout and grow and produce in large quantities. The same's true of the seeds of the divine word. They're sown in all human hearts, but sprout only in those which are fertile.

Faith isn't diminished in the least by the fact that not everyone believes. Don't concern yourself with non-believers. Look at those who truly believe and you'll see what they enjoy through their faith. The Christian faith isn't a philosophical system but a way for Christ, as God and human person, to reform fallen people through the grace of the Holy Spirit. So look carefully at those who follow in the footsteps of Christ. And

you'll see how they gradually grow, how they mature spiritually and how great they become, even if they're insignificant to the rest of the world.

Take St Seraphim of Sarov, for example, who was a simple, unlettered man. And how high did he reach? With a word he stopped the mouths of the widely-read non-believers: 'But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are' (*1 Cor. 27-28*). This is how divine grace transfigures all those who surrender to it.

So, the Lord calls you to faith. He wants your salvation. And

you will be saved if you listen to his voice and follow him steadfastly, without wavering. For the sake of him who loves you so much, trample down every doubt. In this way you'll offer him the greatest sacrifice and will be richly rewarded. Doubts are weeds sown by the enemy in the field of your soul, among the ears of corn. Why do you allow him to wreak your destruction? Expel him and draw near to the Savior, who stretches out his hand to you in tenderness. Humble yourself, because, as I said, God reveals himself only to the humble. Pray, because your prayer fences you about and protects you from the assaults of the enemy. And take a firm decision: never entertain thoughts of doubt. As soon as they appear, cast them from your mind without further ado, no matter how reasonable they may seem. In this way, you'll put a stop to all the machinations of the enemy.

