

The Sunday of John Climacus

Mission Vespers Homilist: Father Vladimir Cantor

Mark 9: 17-31

March 30, 2014

In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Turn not away Thy Face from Thy servant for I am afflicted. Hear me, speedily draw near to my soul and deliver it!”

The Prokemenon this evening that was just sung is taken from the 68th Psalm. This psalm is titled: “Unto the end, concerning, those that shall be changed, a Psalm of David.”

Those that shall be changed? Sanctification? Transfiguration? Holy Relics?
Sanctification: This is the goal of the Christian life in this life and the Age to Come.

This 68th Psalm is a most appropriate psalm for this fourth Sunday of Great Lent and somewhat specific to it, as well. The Gospel reading from this morning regarding the boy possessed by the demon took place immediately when Christ was coming down from Mount Tabor after the Transfiguration. Great Lent is about our repentance and sanctification. The Ladder of Divine Ascent thoroughly investigates this process for us. I doubt that all of this is any coincidence.

I believe this Prokemenon very concisely gives a “Cliff Notes” version of the roots of ascetic life that are so clearly experienced, expanded upon and set forth by St. John Climacus in the Ladder of Divine Ascent. That is to have our life in Christ lead to a purity of heart by toil and labors and walking in the Path of Christ with the help and prayers and intercessions of His Holy Mother, the Theotokos and of all the Saints. God Willing, we acquire the Holy Spirit. That is, the fruits of our repentance are the Gifts of the Holy Spirit which lead to our purification and sanctification in this life.

Only some have knowledge of the top rung of the Ladder by experiencing God in the Uncreated Energies that St. Gregory Palamas wrote about.

According to St. John in the opening remarks about the highest rung of the Ladder he says, “There are three that bind and secure the union of all: faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love, for God Himself is so called.” I will come back to the Prokemenon verse from Psalm 68 throughout this little sermon.

First, let’s keep our attention focused on the goal, the top rung of the Ladder. Almost all of us can see Christ depicted in His Holy Image. He, Himself, left us His image on the Holy Shroud at His Resurrection. This is the Image not made with hands. His Own Glory and Uncreated Energy made this image on the Holy Shroud. The icon is the subject of the troparion for the Sunday of Orthodoxy. It is, also, important to note that this same troparion is sung at the sixth hour during Great Lent during the weekdays. The sixth hour is the time of day when the King of Glory, who is in His Glory, is upon the Cross. Through the Cross we see the Resurrection of Christ. Through our bearing our cross we are, also, delivered from death to share in the Resurrection of Christ. Venerate this Image daily. Keep this Holy Image in your home and try to always have this Image in your mind so that you can see it during the day.

Some, meaning the Saints, are given greater revelations of Christ in this life, according to how much the Lord wills for them to see in this life, and according to how much they are able to see. But, that is true for all of us. How much are we able to see and bear of the Glory of God? The Apostle Paul says, “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but, then, face to face: now I know in part; but, then, shall I know even as also I am known”. (1 Corinthians 13:12).

In this morning’s Gospel, the Lord placed great importance on prayer and fasting, and the use of prayer and fasting to cure the sick and suffering. As I stated before, the Lord had just shown the Kingdom in Great Power and Glory to Peter, James and John, but His Disciples could not cure the boy. Christ emphasizes prayer and fasting, the ascetic life, in this morning’s Gospel account. Our own salvation, purification and sanctification depend on prayer and fasting.

This is the church of the Holy Transfiguration. In the icon, Moses and Elijah are depicted sharing in the Glory of God in the Vision and testifying to Christ's coming Passion. "Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the Kingdom of their Father. He who hath ears, let him hear" (Matt 13:43). When Christ Comes Again in His Glory with the Holy Angels, those who have made progress, have ascended in the virtues through repentance and, diligently, carried the crosses laid before them, with joy in this life, will shine forth as the sun in the Kingdom with all the Saints.

In last Sunday's Gospel reading from St. Mark (Mark 8: 34-9:1), Christ said, "For whoever is ashamed of Me and My Words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man, also, will be ashamed when He Comes in the Glory of His Father with the Holy Angels. Assuredly, I say to you, that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the Kingdom of God present with Great Power." This vision of the Kingdom of God "present with Great Power" is the Vision of Tabor. It is a foretaste of the Vision of the Second Coming. It is the Vision of the Uncreated Light that was given to St. John of the Ladder, St. Gregory Palamas and the other great ascetics and theologians that have personal experience with God. This is to say, they are true theologians.

"Seek God and your soul shall live." This is the last verse from the 68th Psalm. There is good reason to focus on God and keep Him first and foremost. He is our Salvation in the course of our lives and not just during the Great Fast. The only way into the Kingdom of God is the path Jesus Christ took. It is our duty to take up the cross and try to walk the narrow path, to enter through the narrow gate. "Seek God and your soul shall live; turn not away Thy face from thy servant for I am afflicted." Ah, repentance, humility. We strive to see the Beauty and to behold the Countenance of the Lord but we are troubled, we are sick, we need His Help. Yes, this is the first step toward repentance. Zacchaeus sought to see God and he did, overcoming all obstacles and Christ came into his home. Zacchaeus invited Christ by his zeal, and his desire to seek God. The Publican admitted his sickness and his troubles. I refer, in this case, to the admission, "for I am afflicted". Blessed are the Poor in Spirit.

“Turn not away Thy Face from Thy servant for I am afflicted. Hear me, speedily.” Here I refer to the Prodigal Son. God, I am seeking you. I have sinned. Things look hopeless but I’m not giving up. Make me, at least, your servant. Hear me speedily, attend to my soul.

Yes, this is the Good Lord and Master running to embrace the repentant sinner who asks to be restored. “...AND deliver it”..deliver ME.. to where? To LIFE. Deliver me from sin, my enemy, my sickness. Oh Master, give me Life.

These examples set before us in the preparatory Sundays for Lent, and, also, presented in this evening’s Prokemenon are the beginnings of the carrying of one’s cross. It is, also, the continued Path of the Cross that leads to the Kingdom. Everyone’s path is individual and a mystery, but those who ask His Help are guided by the Holy Spirit.

Another verse from this Prokemenon, “Thy salvation, O God, hath set me up.” What does this mean? “hath set me upon The Rock of Thy Commandments. Thy Salvation. The full verse in context from Psalm 68:30 is: “I am poor and in heaviness; let Thy Salvation, O God, lift me up.” The Cross is our path and way of salvation and our Comfort if we embrace it. I think for self reference and study at home, the struggles of the Christian Life and the Narrow Path are well laid out for us in the 17th Kathisma. It is read at the Burial Matins of Christ. It read at our own burial service. Read it. You will find the Narrow Path in its verses. In the tradition that I am familiar with, there is a refrain sung for the first half of this Kathisma through the 91st verse. “Blessed art Thou, Oh Lord” is quietly sung over and over again as these verses are chanted. During the second half of the Kathisma, “Save me, O Savior” is sung quietly over and over again until the end of the Kathisma. It is the longest chapter in the Bible. We experience the prayer of the Apostle Peter during it. “Save me, Oh Savior, I am sinking in the sea.” Ah, the Vision of God. Peter could walk on water when he kept his eyes on the Lord. He became distracted by fear, but he asked for help.

Another verse from the Prokemenon, “The poor see and rejoice.” The poor? Those who are poor in spirit. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. The Publican, Zacchaeus, The Prodigal, The Wise Thief. This is the spirit of the First Beatitude. Humble thyself before the Lord your God.

In reference to the Wise Thief: What a blessing during Lent that we have the Sermon on the Mount every day of the week in the Typical Psalms.

We do not have the daily Gospel readings but we have the Sermon on the Mount preached to us. But in the very wise wisdom of the Church a refrain is added between each of these verses of the Beatitudes, “Remember us, O Lord, when Thou Comest into Thy Kingdom”. This is the prayer of the Wise Thief!

The very verses from the Gospel for an ascetic saint, in most cases, are the Beatitudes but during Lent we have the Prayer of the Wise Thief, sung in between each verse of these Beatitudes. Let us remember that as the Lord, Himself, told us, “So, likewise, ye, when ye shall have done all these things which are commanded you, say, we are unprofitable servants, we have done that which was our duty to do” (Luke 17:10).

All virtue that we attain in this life belongs to God. It is not ours. As St. Innocent, the Apostle to America, said regarding virtue, “all that you have that is good and praiseworthy is not yours but the Gift of God. Only sins and weaknesses are your own, all the rest is God’s.”

It is probably best not to be aware of our ascent of the Ladder of the virtues in this life. Instead, we should remember Peter calling out to the Lord to save him and Zacchaeus climbing the tree to see Him. In other word, we should not look to the left or the right but keep our eyes focused on God and with the remembrance of the Publican and the Prodigal, take up our Cross of repentance, turn toward Christ and ask him to attend to our souls and to deliver us to Life.

As St. John Climacus mentions from time to time in the Ladder, we should always remember the impending hour of our deaths and the Last Judgement. Then we will do what we should to correct our lives now.

Through the prayers of the Most Holy Mother of God, the Ladder by which the Word of God condescended to us by taking on human flesh and through the prayers of St. John Climacus, May the Light of Christ shine upon us sinners, as far as we are able to see it and bear it in this life, and more fully in the Age to Come. Amen. Glory to Jesus Christ!

