

March 1 – Tuesday of Cheesefare Week
Kellia Reading – Psalm 102:8-15

Them that Fear Him: Psalm 102:8-15 (Psalter According to the Seventy), especially vs. 12: “Like as a father hath compassion upon his sons, so hath the Lord had compassion upon them that fear Him.” It is illuminating to reflect on the inner life of the Prophet David, author of Psalm 102. He asserts that “compassionate and merciful is the Lord” and that “not according to our iniquities hath He dealt with us” (vss.. 8-9). These are not theoretical propositions, but rather expressions of experience. David received compassion. David was mercifully favored. David knew that he did not receive what he deserved for his sins. David knew fear of the Lord.

We can say many things about the heart and soul of the lyrical psalmist. Deep within him, he knew the ugliness of sin (vs. 9). Even so, he had continuing communion with the Lord, “like as a father” (vs. 12). Though scathed by God’s anger and pierced in mind and spirit by God’s wrath, even in his flesh (vss. 8-9), David still affirmed the generous healing of God’s forgiveness, mercy, and compassion (vss. 9-12). Out of his own sin, he saw the finality of time. Time would pass over him and bring death (vss. 12-14).

We note how in every experience David tasted fear: fear as dread, as helplessness, but mostly as reverential awe. He touched a fear that changed into ineffable praise and speechless worship. Three times he interrupts his personal reflection to mention “them that fear Him,” among whom, clearly, he counts himself. God’s mercy is powerful, prevailing over His righteous wrath and anger, on behalf of “them that fear Him” (vs. 10). God’s compassion is both gentle yet firm, upon “them that fear Him” (vs. 12). We mortals shall all be swept away by our sins, yet the Lord’s mercy toward us is “unto eternity, upon them that fear Him” (vs. 15).

Most of all, these verses express the discovery of holy awe. David received the Lord’s compassion, mercy, and longsuffering. As a prophet, David returned to the place where he began: the graciousness of God. In wonder, as a child holding a beautiful polished stone, David turned his bittersweet experience from one surface to another, in awe of the grandeur of what he found.

Such kindness from One who owed him nothing and to whom he owed everything! He received a withholding of wrath and anger, a stay of execution (vs. 8). Consequences followed his sin inexorably. And yet “not according to our iniquities hath He dealt with us” (vs. 9).

God forgives from beyond the infinite expanse of creation, far past the capacity of our minds to measure in light years. God has “made His mercy to prevail over them that fear Him” (vs. 10). This is incredible! And God initiates it. Neither our sadness nor our repentance inspires Him to act. These are only our finite responses. Fear may well up in our mind when it is moved by terror, but true fear rests in the heart as adoration. Such is God’s gift for “them that fear Him.”

We neither earned nor expected such unlimited love! From our earthly fathers we learned stern demand mingled with love. Even when our fathers failed us in their humanness, at least we glimpsed at what fatherhood might be. When we meet God, the infinite Lord reveals Himself as compassion “upon them that fear Him” (vs. 12). Our lips now say in trembling, “Our Father.”

Yes, we shall die, for we have sinned – a truth David tasted to the dregs. Let us fall down before God who “knoweth whereof we are made” (vs. 12), who also “made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant . . . in the likeness of men” (Phil 2:7-8). For behold, “the mercy of the Lord is from eternity . . . upon them that fear Him” (Ps 102:15).

Bless the Lord, all ye His hosts, His ministers that do His will. Bless the Lord, all ye His works, in every place of His dominion. Bless the Lord, O my soul. – Psalm 102:19-20

March 2 – Wednesday of Cheesefare Week

Reading at Sixth Hour – Joel 2:12-26

Repentance and Restoration: Joel 2:12-26, especially vs. 13: “*Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for He is merciful and compassionate. He is longsuffering and plenteous in mercy and repents of evils.*” During the years that the Lord Jesus ministered from Capernaum, He healed a paralytic, saying to him, “Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you” (Mt 9:2). Some of the scribes who heard Jesus’ statement concluded “within themselves, ‘This Man blasphemes!’” (vs. 3). Truly desiring that all men be healed, the Lord said to these detractors (and to us as well), “Why do you think evil in your hearts?” (Mt. vs. 4). Evil thoughts are as repugnant to God as sinful acts.

The significance of evil thoughts is twofold. First, they work corruption within us. Then sins results, often bringing the terrible consequences of our wicked deeds. The most grave consequence of our evil thoughts and actions is that divine judgment can befall us. Thus, in today’s pre-Lenten reading, the Lord invites us to heartfelt repentance, promising to “restore to [us] the years the grasshopper and the locust have eaten, and for the blight, and the caterpillar” (Joel 2:25).

We pay a heavy price for evil thoughts and passions. Like worms, they infest our hearts and souls. Saint Gregory of Nyssa describes this degradation well: “Man, who once lived in the delights of Paradise, has been transplanted into this unhealthy and wearisome place, where his life, once accustomed to impassibility, became instead subject to passion and corruption. . . . [For once any innate passion] occupies the castle of the soul like a tyrant [it] afflicts the obedient lord through his own subjects . . .

“For the whole array of passions, wrath and fear, cowardice and impudence, depression as well as pleasure, hatred, strife and merciless cruelty, envy as well as flattery, brutality together with brooding over injuries, they are all so many despotic masters. . . .” These inner masters are what Joel termed “the army from the north (vs. 20) who makes desolate and reproaches the name of Christ, which we bear. The promised land within us is despoiled!

But our Lord calls us to repent: “Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting and wailing and with mourning; rend your heart and not your garments” (vss. 12,-13). Thus, the prophet holds up the icon of saving repentance and encourages us. Let the priests sound the trumpet, let God’s people gather and the newlyweds set aside their nuptial joys. Let God’s people weep for their sins before the altar. Lent is coming! Cry to God for release from sin “spare Your people, do not give Your inheritance to reproach, that the Gentiles should rule over them” (vss. 15-17).

God declares that He will turn His “face away from [our] sins and blot out all [our] iniquities” (Ps 50:9). He desires not the death of sinners, but that we repent and live. He describes Himself as “merciful and compassionate . . . longsuffering and plenteous in mercy” (Joel 2:13). Thus, the Lord invites us to embrace the coming Great Fast. “Be of good courage, rejoice and be glad, for the Lord has done great things” (vs. 21). As Joel assures us, God will “shower [us] as before with the early and the late rain” (vs. 23). He “will restore to [us] the years” eaten up by the consequences of our sins (vs. 25).

According to Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, “Repentance in deep mourning and joined with confession is what unveils the eyes of the soul to see the great things of God.” Repentance is the promise of Great Lent, if pursued diligently, and shall enable us to “praise the name of the Lord your God for what He has so wondrously done unto you” (vs. 26). Now is the time to work at our healing.

Grant, O Lord, that we may complete the remaining time of our life in repentance. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

March 3 – Thursday of Cheesefare Week
Reading at Vespers – Joel 4:12-21

Fasting and Judgment: Joel 4:12-21, especially vs. 12: “Let all the nations rouse themselves and come up to the Valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I shall sit to judge all the nations round about.” As Great Lent approaches, this vespersal reading from the Prophet Joel directs our attention to a day yet to come, the Day of Judgment. On this day all men will stand before Christ. The Crucified One, Christ our God, will on the last day command every man who has ever lived to come before Him in the Valley of Jehoshaphat – the name means the “Lord’s Judgment” in Hebrew (vs. 12).

Thus, at the threshold of the fast, Joel warns us – indeed, pleads with us – to prepare for the dread Day of the Lord. We may choose to go on mindlessly toward eternal darkness and separation, or to prepare ourselves for eternal life and salvation. Let us choose to struggle within ourselves for purity, for if we ignore Joel’s plea and pay no attention to our Savior, we shall surely face desolation.

In the coming fast we have the opportunity to awaken our hearts and minds to Christ, who calls us to undertake the regimen of fasting. However, He does not wish us to abstain in narrow, slavish obedience to a set of rules concerning the intake of food.

Rather, the Lord Jesus asks us to direct our Lenten efforts to Him personally: “Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, wailing, and with mourning; rend your heart” (vss. 12-13). Speaking of the Lord’s command to “sanctify a fast” (vs. 15), Saint Athanasios the Great remind us that “the boast of fasting did no good to the Pharisee, although he fasted twice in the week, only because he exalted himself.”

If we will only heed the prophet’s warning about the dread day of Judgment, his words can motivate us in the coming Lenten effort. Joel’s imagery is terrifying as He describes the Day of Divine Judgment (vss. 15-16). At the same time, he also explicitly speaks of the Lord securing and blessing His people (vss. 16-17). The Lord leaves no doubt that He will make an inquisition on behalf of the righteous blood of His people.

Finally, the Prophet Joel reveals that when God judges there will be separation: “sheep from goats, left from right, the guilty and the children of the kingdom” (vss. 19-21, Mt 25:32-33). We choose for ourselves.

The description of judgment is severe. God will cut down, tread upon, and press all evildoers, “for their wickedness is multiplied” (Joel 4:13). God’s judgment will include repayment for crimes and wrongs. There will be a resounding noise from the multitudes of wicked who will face their cruel and wicked actions (vs. 14). Many will be thrust into eternal darkness with no consoling and no created light available (vs. 15). But it need not be so!

We repeat: when the Lord shakes the heaven and earth on Judgment Day, He also will “keep His people safe and shall strengthen the sons of Israel” (vs. 16). He speaks of His Church purified of transient *strangers* (vs. 17), exactly as Christ the Lord says, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!” (Mt 7:23). Those who claim they belong to Christ, but scoff at His call to purity, will be separated out forever.

The prophet concludes with contrasting images. For the children of God there will be sweet wine, flowing milk, springs of water, and an eternal habitation with the Lord (Joel 4:18). Of all who persecute, attack, and wreak havoc on His people, the Lord says, “I shall avenge their blood and shall not let it go unpunished” (vs. 21). Lent is a gift to us. Let us use it well!

O soul, beware, before the end, and cry out, God, save me, for Thou alone art compassionate. – Orthros Verse for Triodion

March 4 – Friday of Cheesefare Week
Reading at Sixth Hour – Zechariah 8:7-17

Diligence: Zechariah 8:7-17, especially vs. 15: “I have prepared and purposed to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah; be of good courage.” In this passage from Zechariah the Lord God proclaims a new era: a time when He will do good to His chosen ones after their long struggle. In the past, afflictions fell upon “those going out and those coming in” (vs. 10). But now, by His prophet, God announces a reversal of circumstances: “I do not do to the remnant of this people as in the former days,” says the Lord Almighty” (vs. 11). Instead, He declares, “Rather I will show forth peace, for the vine shall give its fruit, the earth her produce, the heaven its dew, and I will give all these things as an inheritance to the remnant of this people” (vs. 12).

Along with God’s announcement of these new circumstances, He exhorts His people to “be of good courage and strengthen your hands” (vs. 13). When faced with defeat, conflict, and affliction, how easy it is for us to become despondent and settle for bare survival. A defeatist spirit takes over. But God, with a promise, calls His people from lethargy to renewed diligence: “I will save you, and you will be for a blessing” (vs. 13).

A recent example is the situation of those Eastern Europeans who lived under communism for many years. Overnight, their political, economic, and social conditions changed. However, the days that followed offered them no golden era. Many aspects of everyday life are actually more difficult today. Still, a new era has come to Eastern Europe. *Strong hands* and diligence enjoy greater opportunity for reward than ever before.

Why does the Church give us this passage to read at the threshold of Great Lent? Though its message was delivered long ago (520-480 BC), its word applies to our own experience of Lent. The prophet of the Lord calls us to the work of the fast. We are to review how we live our life in Christ. What were our former conditions? And more importantly, what is the new circumstance now in place as a result of God’s intervention?

Prophet Zechariah describes conditions we know well: “Men’s wages will not be profitable and a price for livestock will not even exist, and because of affliction there will be no peace” (vs. 10). If we consider the prophet’s message in light of the gospel, we hear Saint Paul speaking of the fallen conditions of our life before we received the grace of God. “The wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23), and we “were dead in trespasses . . . by nature children of wrath” (Eph 2 1,3).

While sin may appear at times to pay well, the Prophet David asks God to “deliver my soul from ungodly men . . . yea, with Thy hidden treasures hath their belly been filled. They have satisfied themselves with swine and have left the remnants to their babes” (Ps 16:13-15). The Psalmist Asaph tells us why: “Surely, for their crafty dealings Thou has appointed evils for them” (Ps 72:17). Evils are precisely the wages of sin of which the Apostle Paul speaks.

We who belong to Christ view this present existence from a new orientation, for “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Our Lord and Savior cries, “Come to Me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I give you rest” (Mt 11:28).

In Christ, we turn away from our sins and their deadly wages and receive refreshment. The Lenten season is time to *make our hands strong* for the things of God. “These are the things you shall do: speak the truth, each man to his neighbor, and judge with peaceful judgment in your gates, and let none of you plan evil in his heart against his neighbor, and do not love a false oath” (Zec 8:16-17).

Lord, grant us to pass the days of Lent diligently that Thy kingdom may come upon us.

March 5 – Saturday of Cheesefare Week

Reading at Vespers for Friday of Cheesefare Week – Zechariah 8:19-23

Fasting and the Age to Come: Zechariah 8:19-23, especially vs. 19: “You will rejoice, and you will love truth and peace.” Hebrew prophecy discloses the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, if we are able to discern and accept certain ground rules. We must know Christ and stand within the worshiping Church as “a child of the Light and an heir of eternal good things” (baptismal prayer). If we apply the prophets’ words to the fabric of life, we behold God’s glory naturally and joyfully.

First, we understand that the prophets foresaw the mystery of Christ’s coming only in barest outline. God provided enough information concerning the Lord’s first and second coming that His ancient People knew to expect a Messiah.

Today, we who are united to Christ Jesus have “been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God” (Mk 4:11). However, we have to give flesh to the gospel and act on what we read. We are blessed with the advantage of having the apostolic witness of the New Testament and the wisdom of the Church Fathers.

Second, we must realize that much of Hebrew prophecy was written as poetry and should therefore be read as such. Its imagery is to be received within the heart before it is analyzed by the mind. It must be read within the context of Holy Tradition, guided by the Holy Spirit.

Third, we recall that the language of the Hebrew prophets assumes the ethos and worship of ancient Israel and Judah. Since the coming of Christ, we understand Israel, Jerusalem, and Zion as references to the Church, as Saint Paul makes clear (Rom 9-11). The faithful in Christ are therefore the true Israel of God (Rom 11:8, 23-24).

With these ground rules in place, we turn to the present reading from the prophecy of Zechariah. The lesson concerns the age to come: God’s eternal kingdom, which will prevail following Christ’s last and great return in judgment.

Prophet Zechariah refers to four fasts practiced in ancient Israel in the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months (vs. 19). These ancient fasts were initiated as times of national mourning and repentance over Israel’s sins (and the losses that attended them and led to the exile of Judah’s monarchy), the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple of Solomon, and the unhappy uprising against the Babylonians. Zechariah foresees that one day God will restore and forgive, fasting will end, and fasts will become feasts and times of celebration.

We are Christ’s, and God is urging us to conduct our fasting in the joy of the Lord, in truth and peace. We fast now to prepare to celebrate. In Lent we already look ahead to the feast of Pascha, that we may become worthy of the banquet of the Lamb – the heavenly feast of the age to come in Christ’s kingdom (Rv 19:9), where there will only be feasting.

In the age to come, all of Christ’s servants, Jew or Gentile, will worship as one people from “many peoples and many nations” (Zec 8:22). Since apostolic times, the incorporation of the nations has happened in the Church (Gal 3:28). Two thousand years of inclusion have made the Church largely Gentile, yet we remain one in Christ, a new people.

Why, then, do we still have fasts? Why Great Lent, the Apostles Fast, the Dormition fast and Nativity Fasts? Each season is a prelude to joyous feasting. The fasting seasons are gifts. They encourage us to prepare for that great company of peoples from every nation who will walk in the uncreated light of the New Jerusalem in the age to come. In that day, all tears and the need to fast, restrict, repent, or mourn will be wiped away (Rv 21:4).

O Thou Who knowest the secrets of all hearts, help us to prepare, through fasting, that we may feast with Thee at Thine eternal and glorious banquet in the age to come.

March 6 – Cheesefare (Forgiveness) Sunday, Tone 4
Kellia Reading – 1 Kingdoms 24:1-25:1

On Forgiveness: 1 Kingdoms (1 Samuel) 24:1-25:1, especially vs. 18: “Then he said to David, “You are more righteous than I, for you repaid me with good, but I repaid you with evil.” Over the years during which David, the anointed son of Jesse, served in the court of King Saul, the king’s initial affection for the young David turned into poisonous suspicion. Eventually, Saul was overcome with homicidal jealousy. David fled to the wilderness while Saul gathered an army to search out and destroy him.

During the campaign, God protected David. Twice, the Lord provides Saul with opportunities to repent and quit trying to kill David. Today’s passage portrays the first of these God-ordained occasions, but it also reveals David’s capacity to forgive. It models a beautiful virtue, which, if acquired, will enable God to forgive us (Lk 6:37).

Note how the hand of God brings the unsuspecting Saul into the very cave where David and his men are hiding (1 Kgs 24:4)! This reality is not missed by David’s men, for they say to David, “Look! This is the day of which the Lord spoke to you, that He would deliver your enemy into your hands, to do to him as it seems good from your perspective” (vs. 4). Every reason to strike is directly supported and conveniently provided by circumstance. David recalls God’s promise to deliver him from Saul, and the opportunity for self-defense is now at hand.

David moves up close to his quarry *secretly* (vs. 4). Let us consider why David does not strike the fatal blow, but elects instead to “cut off a corner of Saul’s robe” (vs.5). In taking but a piece of the king’s robe, he revealed ambivalence in his heart: his desire to kill the king vs his abhorrence to touch the anointed of God.

His irresolute action forces the truth on him. Although his thought was to kill Saul, his “heart [was] afflicted” (vs. 5) by his thought of killing – or even touching – the king. In this life we find many excuses, opportunities, and reasons for not forgiving. Only the heart athirst for the living God desires the good in critical moments. Sadly, sometimes even the godly will fail. May we ever be aware!

Writing later, David discloses how he may have been saved in that moment: “The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a contrite heart, and He will save the humble of spirit” (Ps 33:18). He had a healthy heart: humble, contrite, and aware of the capacity to sin. Thus his spirit revolted at the idea of murder, and he hastened to keep his men from the same sin: “The Lord forbid me that I should do this to my lord, for he is the anointed of the Lord” (1 Kgs 24:7).

The image of our Lord, God, and Savior is instilled in every man, even the most reprobate, when He forms us in the womb. According to Saint Nikolai of Zicha: “No one is certain that he will not, before his death, commit that very sin for which he has condemned his brother. . . . Therefore, my brothers, let us condemn no man, that we be not condemned.”

Further, we note that David not only restrains his men, but “went out from the cave and cried out to Saul, saying, ‘My lord, O king!’” (vs. 9). Saint John Chrysostom observes about forgiveness that “if one let go him that hath been scourged and heal him not, he hath done nothing.” Sooner or later, Saul would have found the damage to his robe and realized the assault against his person. But David, steeped in God’s forgiveness, demonstrates forgiveness and seeks healing with Saul (vss. 12-13).

Let our own forgiveness extend beyond holding back revenge. Rather, “bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself” (Gal 6:2-3).

O magnified Lord, let us condemn no man, that we be not condemned, but forgive us our sins and fill us with that contrition which will lead us to forgive even as we have been forgiven.

March 7 – Pure Monday, First Week of Great Lent
Reading at Sixth Hour – Isaiah 1:1-20

Indictment and Self-Examination: *Isaiah 1:1-20, especially vss. 14, 16:* “*Your new moons and feasts My soul hates. You have become a dissatisfaction to Me; I will not forgive your sins. . . . Wash yourselves, keep yourselves clean. Put away the evils from your souls before My eyes. Cease from your evils.*” Here is a sobering challenge at the beginning of Great Lent. Will our Lenten observances – our fasting, almsgiving, and prayers – possibly offend God? The words of the Lord our God are tough; they are intended to unsettle the soul. Let us look to ourselves!

First, the message is not hopeless, yet we must never brush it aside and say, “This message was given centuries ago to ancient Israel and does not apply to us. We are Orthodox Christians.” Wrong! The vision of Isaiah is an indictment against godlessness, especially among those who ignore God’s laws (vs. 2), the morally unsound (vs. 6), and the apostates who abandon their spiritual and cultural foundation to adopt alien ideas and practices (vs. 7).

Isaiah’s portrait is a strikingly accurate depiction of much of postmodern life. In a magazine interview, an American and a French Orthodox Christian were discussing the spiritual condition of their respective countries. The American said, “In the sixties, when Saint John [Maximovich] was in the U.S., young Americans were all interested in spiritual life, but now they are concentrating much harder on career goals and business.” “In France,” noted the other, “they are like little animals . . . in a jungle – only money, a position, and a boyfriend or girlfriend” (*Road to Emmaus*, Fall 2003, p. 52).

However, the Lord continues His appeal with these words: “Come now, and let us reason together” (vs. 18). God certainly expects us to “learn to do good” (vs. 17). He is open to us “if [we] are willing and obedient” (vs. 19). The Lord’s indictment calls for honest self-examination and a genuine effort at self-correction. Written eight centuries before the birth of Christ, God’s judgment remains true today, two thousand years after Jesus walked on earth in the flesh. God is calling us even now to struggle against rampant individualism and self-indulgence.

There is evidence that the Orthodox Church is serious about resisting the permissiveness of the age, as Holy Tradition demands. But let us not delude ourselves. The forces favoring self-indulgence remain strong. Many Orthodox faithful have been deceived by the smooth words of those who promote immoral practices. Some tacitly support a loosening of morality and feel no responsibility for arresting society’s decadence. Some push for greater acceptance of the current godless values, even within their own parishes, workplaces, and families.

If we choose God’s way, however, we may begin the solemn journey of Great Lent today. We must examine our commitment to follow the road that leads to Pascha. We can search our thoughts, words, and deeds to see where rebellion and resistance are operating (vs. 2). Is Christ my Master (vs. 3), or do I forsake Him (vs. 4) for worldly gain and pleasures? Who among us has not made fatal compromises and selfish adjustments? Who is not “in pain, and . . . in sadness” (vs. 5)?

May our tears wash away our iniquities and help us to confess them (vs. 16). Heed Saint John Chrysostom: “Nothing so weighs upon the soul, and presses her down, as consciousness of sin; nothing so much gives it wings, and raises it on high as the attainment of righteousness and virtue” (Homily 38 on Matthew). Saint Nikolai of Zicha encourages action: “The Lord approves and commends all our labor. He desires that we wash our souls in tears, wring them out with repentance, press them with compunction of conscience and clothe them with good works” (*Prologue from Ochrid*, vol. 3, p. 160).

O Lord, who art slow to anger, look mercifully upon us before the hour of Thy wrath on the Dreadful Day.
– Nikolai of Zicha

March 8 – Pure Tuesday, First Week of Great Lent – Isaiah 1:19-2:3

Reading at Sixth Hour

Judgment and Restoration: Isaiah 1:19-2:3, especially vs. 2:3: “Many Gentiles shall travel and say, ‘Come and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will proclaim His way to us, and we shall walk in it.’” In his play *No Exit*, the French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre depicts the exhaustion and futility that one often encounters in contemporary society. The cast of four characters, each with a very diverse personality, is thrown together *forever* in a space having no exit. Each character works out his or her life role as a *persona* against the *personae* of the other two. At the end of the play it is clear that the action will simply begin all over again, for that is the only option. Sartre thus declares his view that human beings can only express themselves in endless, repetitive interactions with others – a rather depressing conclusion about the nature of life.

In opposition to Sartre’s declaration, God reveals to Isaiah that human beings are not utterly bound to an inescapable personality. Rather, the Lord offers us the choice to “eat the good things of the land” or “be devoured by the sword” (vss. 19-20). What is inescapable in human nature is our moral freedom. We choose to accept or refuse God, “for the mouth of the Lord has spoken” (vs. 20).

At the conclusion of this passage, Isaiah describes the age to come and further embellishes the motif of freedom of choice. He declares the Church to be the true destiny of history. At the end of time, the Church (which Isaiah calls *the mountain of the Lord, the house of the God of Jacob, Zion and Jerusalem* in 2:2-3) will become the great desire of all the nations. People will encourage one another to go to the *New Jerusalem*, “to the house of the God of Jacob. He will proclaim His way to us, and we shall walk in it” (vs. 3). When we exit this present world, with its repetitious news of sordid crimes and sins, the freedom that we now enjoy will remain ours eternally: the freedom to choose God’s truth, His worship and His ways.

Between the opening and closing verses – between the declaration of our present freedom to choose and the assurance of eternal human freedom in the age to come – the prophet confronts us with the actual state of this present life (vss. 1:21-23) and of God’s judgment. Instead of remaining a *faithful* bride to God, our holy and loving Bridegroom, the human race (and each of us) plays *prostitute* with false gods. We debase the *silver* of godly choices in Christ in order to serve pleasure, whether it is wealth, success, power, or self-indulgence (vs. 22).

God intended this world to be a home of the faithful (vss. 21-22), but often we make it a nest for murderers (vs. 21). The wine of a freely chosen holy communion is debased by thievery, bribery, and acquisitiveness for what does not endure. Merchandise, information, careers, education, and relationships along with truth are watered down for a swig of indulgence, quite depleted of true and godly value (vs. 22). We favor rulers or leaders who disdain God’s ways, keep company with swindlers, and are guided by bribes (vs. 23). The very ones who should be pleading the cause of widows and orphans ignore the defenseless (vs. 23).

Finally, God discloses His coming judgment against mankind’s sinful and self-serving ways. He displays a series of pictures of radical cleansing, shame, and destruction. Each person will stand before the righteous, who have cleansed themselves by repentance, and answer for his or her sins. Saint Nikolai of Zicha epitomizes this word of the Lord: “I shall look at you, and see if you have Me within you; and you will look at Me, as in a mirror, and will see what you are” (*Prologue from Ochrid*, vol. 3, p. 160).

For worlds, large and small, that do not tremble before Thine awesome presence, I cry out: O Master Most Merciful, have mercy on me and save me! – Nikolai of Zicha

March 9 – Pure Wednesday, First Week of Great Lent – Isaiah 2:3-11
Reading at Sixth Hour

To Walk in God’s Light: Isaiah 2:3-11, especially vs. 5: “O now, house of Jacob, come and let us walk in the light of the Lord.” Today’s reading is a prophecy for the ancient people of God, directed at their capital of Jerusalem. Saint Nikolai of Zicha notes that this prophecy at the same time “refers to Christ’s Church. It must have been shrouded in mystery for the Jews before Christ, but it is limpidly clear for us today. The . . . Lord’s house is indeed established in the top of the mountains – in the heights of heaven; for the Church of Christ primarily is not of the earth but of heaven, and one part of the membership of the Church (and that now the greater part) is in heaven, while the others are here on earth” (*Prologue from Ochrid*, Vol. 3, p. 163).

The prophecy is divided into four parts. First, the Lord unveils our eyes so we can envision the glorious Church that shall exist in the age to come (vss. 2-4). Second, God makes His appeal that we come to into His house and learn from Him (vs. 3), ending war and bringing peace to all (vs. 4). Instead of waiting passively for the fulfillment of prophecy, the Church of this present world is instructed to walk in the divine light that is to come; the message must be put into action (vs. 5).

Third, God moves from appeal to warning in verses 6-9. Ancient Israel chose not to heed His word and did not “walk in the light of the Lord” (vs. 5). The nation drew down upon herself a terrible, inevitable result: God forsook the majority of His ancient people, and from an apostolic remnant He formed a new people out of all nations. In His warning, God explains the reason for his rejection of the majority: “they worship the works of their hands, which fingers made” (vs. 8).

Fourth, the Lord extends his warning to the Church: if you embrace idolatrous sins, you had better plan on entering “into the rocks and hide in the earth from the face of the Lord” (vs. 10), for all the good it will do. Everyone, especially the members of the Church, is encouraged to heed these words, for the “haughtiness of man shall be humbled, and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day” (vs. 11). Be attentive!

And what is the meaning of the expression *to walk in the light of the Lord*? The Lord Jesus teaches us this truth in words that echo those of Isaiah: “Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted” (Mt 23:12). As Saint Nikolai of Zicha adds, “The new world, the new creation, the new man: all began with obedience and humility” (*Homilies*, vol. 1, p. 13).

If we are to exercise obedience and humility, Theodoret asserts that we must “no longer . . . sit by the dim lamplight of the Law, but fill [our] souls with the brilliant rays of the true Light” (*Isaiah Through the Ages*, p. 32) – that is, with Christ who is the Light. He invites us to walk with Him along the way that He defined as He lived His Incarnate life. “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant” (Phil 2:5-7). Christ Jesus, the Light, asks us to walk in Him in order that we may have light. “Come take light from the Light which can never be overtaken by night. Come glorify Christ, risen from the dead” (*Nassar*, p. 920).

If we approach Isaiah’s prophecy as a message for the Church as she shall be (vss. 2-4), then we find that Christ is encouraging you and me now, in this world “filled with the abominations” (vs. 8), to struggle toward what we know *shall be*. Saint John of Kronstadt underscores the point: “Our union with God in the future world will indeed come about, and it will be for us the source of light, peace, joy and bliss; this we partly recognize by experience even in the present life. During prayer, when our soul is wholly turned toward God . . . I would say, we experience an inexpressible well-being. It is good to be here” (*Spiritual Counsels*, p. 227).

O Thou, who didst cause Thy Light to shine upon Thine apostles, enlighten our souls. – Orthros of the Transfiguration

March 10 – Pure Thursday, First Week of Great Lent – Isaiah 2:11-21

Reading at Sixth Hour

The Eyes of the Lord: Isaiah 2:11-21, especially vs. 11: “For the eyes of the Lord are lofty, and man is humble. The haughtiness of man shall be humbled, and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day.” The initial verse of today’s reading is an example of how the Septuagint often supplies readers with a more complete text than do other translations. Most modern bibles rely on the Masoretic-Hebrew text, which makes no mention of the *lofty* (far-seeing) eyes of the Lord. For example, the *New Jerusalem* bible reads: “Human pride will lower its eyes, human arrogance will be humbled, and Yahweh alone will be exalted on that day.” In the Septuagint, by contrast, the Lord’s eyes are *lofty*, with a superior, all-seeing advantage – He sees into our very thoughts as well as our actions and words. Isaiah urges us to remember God’s searching view so that we might remain humble and avoid being “insolent, arrogant, high and lifted up” (vs. 12).

These verses not only explore the reasons to be humble before the Lord, but also prompt us to use the mystery of confession to keep a “short account” of the impurities in ourselves, against which we constantly struggle. Isaiah confirms what Solomon teaches elsewhere: “The eyes of the Lord are in every place; they keep watch over both the evil and the good” (Prv 15:3). The wise Solomon’s *every place* includes those dark, mean, selfish thoughts that slink around inside us even when we hide them from ourselves, letting our arrogant pride assure us that we are “good people.” Pride makes us forget that we are sinners who need to lay our moral garbage humbly before God, thus breaking the power of sin and of our favorite misdeeds.

Using poetic imagery, the Prophet Isaiah turns our attention to the negative aspects of high-minded pride by focusing on high things that suggest lordship and domination. The tall cedars of Lebanon, for example, are famed throughout the Middle East, as are the sturdy oaks that grow on mountain slopes in places like the Golan Heights (vss. 13-14). These trees resemble the sequoias of southern California. Their tops rise high into pure, rarefied air, like the coastal redwoods that tower above the fog even when it covers the lowlands and obscures one’s vision. Surely we will climb the heights and behold what others know not! Beware the snake of seductive pride, which makes us dream that that we can see far beyond others.

Isaiah directs us to other images related to power, to “every high tower and fortified wall” (vs. 15), so that we might explore the allure of having control over others. Remember Lord Acton’s famous observation: “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.” Acton, like Isaiah, knew that power often arouses negative moral forces within us. Be wary, for the Lord promises that “every man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of man shall fall” (vs. 17).

Beauty, physical attractiveness, skill, and natural charm also offer occasions for sin. Isaiah gives us a lovely image of ships at sail (vs. 16), skimming over the waters and destined for profit. At the final Judgment, however, our place in eternity will be set and “the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day” (vs. 17). We will gain nothing from those fleeting assets that give us leverage in this life.

Finally, Isaiah addresses our efforts to guard those sources of momentary superiority, advantage, or attractiveness; our vain efforts to protect these assets easily become dark caves full of sin (vs. 19). Saint John of Damascus warns: “All mortal things are vanity and exist not after death. Riches endure not, neither doth glory. . . . All these things vanish utterly” (*The Service Book*, p. 193). Prudence is wisdom and providing for old age is responsible, but the child of God remembers that all is in His hands. He can “arise to strike the earth” (vs. 21). Trust in the Lord!

Let all be glad and ever rejoice that hope in Thee, and do Thou dwell among them. – Psalm 5:11

March 11 – Pure Friday, First Week of Great Lent – Isaiah 3:1-14

Reading at Sixth Hour

The Lord Does Pass Sentence: *Isaiah 3:1-14, especially vs. 14:* “*The Lord will enter into judgment with the elders of His people and His princes: ‘For you set fire to My vineyard; the plunder of the poor is in your houses.’*” Having indicted His people because “they are disobedient to the Lord” – with the result that “now their glory is humbled” (vs. 8) – the Lord ends His presentment with a severe sentence. God’s full judgment, with additional indicting facts and details, continues through the first verse of chapter 4. What is significant is that Isaiah describes a society we know. If we squirm when reading what he received from the Lord, it is because his words hit close to home – compare them to our society’s present condition! Isaiah’s record of the Lord’s indictment proves that he is a true prophet.

What makes a nation and society robust and strong? It is men and women of stature (vs. 1). To be *mighty* men (vs. 2), a nation’s leaders at all levels must have strength of character, whether they are presiding sagely from the bench, serving congregations, advising wisely concerning the future, teaching budding generations, commanding the military, giving counsel in life’s struggles, producing worthy art and music, or guiding us in the spiritual life (vss. 2-3).

Too often we encounter immature, self-indulgent, and petulant leaders who seek their own enrichment, satisfaction, and comfort after the style of infants and little children! They mock the spiritual values and standards that once produced great statesmen in this nation (vs. 4). Isaiah speaks of people “collapsing,” which would seem to include mental and physical breakdowns. Free expression becomes idolatrous, so that we see repeated instances in which the “child will be arrogant toward the elder, and vulgar toward the honorable” (vs. 5).

If these trends in society continue, we may go begging for good public servants and professionals, as described by Isaiah in verses 6-7. Poor leadership comes home to haunt! If Jerusalem, capital of Judah and the center of the life of God’s ancient people, is “ruined” and “fallen” because of lawlessness and disobedience to the Lord, then believe that our glory also can be humbled. We can wind up with our own shame as a witness against us (vs. 8-9).

God’s indictment is fearful to read and horrendous in implication, especially when used as a window to examine what we are now experiencing. The declaration and exhibition of the sins of Sodom (vs. 9) are displayed for us now openly across the nation. Is it not disturbing that officers of the law have been brought to trial simply for doing their duty in making arrests and curbing vice (vs. 10)?

Perhaps Isaiah’s voice, and our interpretation of his vision, is just the outcry of the stodgy and the uptight. No! Scripture merely holds up God’s truth like a mirror so that we may examine ourselves. As Christians, we are a holy people. We are meant to be leaven to the society in which we live, not mere casual bystanders. Be cautious of those who “bless you [but] lead you astray” (vs. 12). Indeed, we have *punishers* who gather us together and “make demands” as they rule over us (vs. 12).

Of one thing we may be sure, and history affirms the point: “The Lord stands up to plead and stands to judge His people” (vs. 13). He will have His say about us and for us, just as He did with Jerusalem and Judah, for we are His vineyard. When a bishop gives the blessing at a hierarchical liturgy, he intones, “O God of hosts . . . look down from heaven and behold, and visit this vine, and perfect that which Thy right hand hath planted” (Ps 79:15-16). But vines have to be pruned, cultivated, and tended, and God will do that. He “will enter into judgment with the elders” (vs. 14) and anyone else who sets fire to His vineyard and does much wickedness.

Be gracious to us Thy servants, that we may persevere unassailed and ever glorify Thee. – Kneeling prayers of Pentecost

March 12 – Saturday of the First Week of Great Lent – Psalm 101
Psalter Reading at Great Compline

Man Implores, God Abides: Psalm 101, especially vs. 25-26: *“In the beginning, O Lord, Thou didst lay the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the works of Thy hands. They shall perish, but Thou abidest. . . .”* The High Plains of western Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, and Nebraska became the famous Dust Bowl in the 1930s. Drought, fierce heat, and dust-filled winds brought farms, towns, and families – indeed, the entire region – to the brink of collapse.

An account of a Volga German immigrant farmer captures the impact of that brutal time: “With his children facing a mortal illness, his land dead and dusted, Gustav thought of the Russian steppe often, and it was always better in his mind than this place in America. He still went to Church, half a mile away, and the family tried to sing ‘*Gott is de liebe*’ along with the rest of the congregation, but they were nearly empty inside. . . . Then the bank took his combine. . . . He moved the children hundreds of miles south to live with cousins in Texas” (*The Worst Hard Time*, p. 260). Gustav’s homesteading venture on the High Plains had utterly failed.

How can we pray when we feel overwhelmed by forces we cannot manage, when our vigor and capabilities are insufficient to meet the demands that assault us? Surely, at the very least, we are overpowered when death comes, but many other events in the course of a lifetime can stagger us and leave us in a state of quandary. Just as medicines and therapies cannot halt the mortal juggernaut, neither will insurance policies, saving accounts, hard work, or friendships enable us to weather the storms brought by the economy, society, and human relationships.

In such situations the God-fearing person implores the Lord; he joins the psalmist and cries out in the midst of his pain: “O Lord, hear my prayer, and let my cry come unto Thee. . . . I am smitten like grass, and withered is my heart, for I forgot to eat my bread” (vss. 1,5). If we heed this psalm in its entirety, however, it teaches us how to understand the ways of Christ our God and to speak directly to Him.

The Lord Jesus is the true God. Having woven Himself into the human fabric by His Incarnation, He travels this life with us. He never deserts us but carries us to shelter, pouring the oil and wine of the Holy Spirit on our wounds and extending the ministry of His healing Body, the Church, so that we may be restored to health. Christ is among us! The psalmist expresses defeat and desolation using images of birds (vss. 7-8), and confesses that “I like grass am withered” (vs. 11). For the remainder of the psalm, however, he faces toward the God who *ever abides* (vs. 12) and finds strength in Him.

In every generation the Lord does “rise up and have pity upon Sion” (vs. 13) – upon His own people. His servants gather to worship while the nations come to fear His name, and “kings of the earth” bow in reverence before His glory (vs. 14-15). History affirms that the Lord “hath regarded the prayer of the humble, and hath not despised their supplication” (vs. 17). Our Savior still is creating His people (vs. 18). Through the centuries He “hear[s] the groaning of them that be in fetters, to loose the sons of the slain” that all may declare His name in Sion (vss. 20-21).

In moments of collapse and uncertainty, may we never cease from speaking to Christ our God, for we declare, “O Lord, Thou didst lay the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the works of Thy hands. They shall perish, but Thou abidest” (vss. 25-26). His constant presence “shall not fail” (vs. 27), nor shall He leave us comfortless. By His grace, may we live long enough to see our children and grandchildren “have their dwelling, and their seed forever . . . guided aright” (vs. 28) by the wisdom and truth of our life-giving God.

For Thou art a merciful God and lovest mankind, and unto Thee we ascribe glory! – Doxology of the New Year

March 13 – First Sunday of Great Lent – Exodus 38:1-8, 13-17, Tone 5
Kellia Reading for the Sunday of Orthodoxy

God With Us: Exodus 38:1-8, 13-17, especially vss. 1-2, 13: “Now Bezalel made the ark. He overlaid it with pure gold inside and out. . . . He then made the lampstand to give light, of gold.” The vocation of iconography, as practiced in the Church today, is prefigured in this history from Exodus. It tells of an artisan “in whom the Lord put wisdom and knowledge to know how to do all manner of work for the service of the holy place” (Ex 36:1) and describes the two sacred furnishings he created for the ancient tabernacle.

Among the ancient people of God who lived long before Christ’s coming in the flesh, the Lord our God could not be depicted in the same manner as do the icons of Christ and His saints that adorn our Orthodox temples today. The ark and the lampstand signaled the presence of a God who remained unseen – inconceivable, invisible, and all-holy. Bezalel’s sacred creations were assigned very special places on the throne or Holy Table of the ancient tabernacle, just as their present-day counterparts enjoy corresponding positions of honor today.

The ark held three items from the forty-year desert sojourn that followed the liberation of God’s people from Egypt: the two stone tablets with their ten summaries of divine law (Ex 25:16); a jar containing manna, the miraculous food that God provided to sustain His people in the wilderness (Ex 16:1-35); and Aaron’s rod, a staff that budded by the clear action of God (see Nm 17:16-26 and also Heb 9:4-5). From the mercy seat of the ark, God promised to make known to Moses and the people “everything I will give you in commandment to the children of Israel” (Ex 25:22). The ark was the central feature of the ancient tabernacle and also of the more permanent temple built by Solomon (see 3 Kgs 6:1-21; 8:1-11).

The seven-branched lampstand was the other key feature of the ancient tabernacle. It provided light for Aaron the priest and his sons when they ministered within the holy place. Today the seven-branched lampstand, known in Hebrew as a menorah, is often seen in synagogues and Jewish homes. Golden lampstands are likewise found today on the Holy Table in many Orthodox temples. This sacred lighting fixture was originally made of gold (Ex 38: 13,16-17) because of that metal’s value and its association with sanctity. (The wood of the ark was also covered with gold). We can easily imagine how pain might turn to rage when, after learning from God of His people’s idolatry (Ex 32:7-14), Moses saw that the sacred gold had been used to fashion a calf-god for worship (Ex 32:15-21).

As we read the detailed instructions for furnishing the tabernacle, we begin to grasp how imperfectly earth-born mortals strive to express the presence of God. Our reading should prompt us to give special honor at all times to the vessels and the clergy that serve in some way to portray the reality of God’s presence among us.

From a theo-logical perspective, the seven-branched lampstands and the golden tabernacle that sit on an Orthodox altar should also be perceived as icons of the Most Holy Theotokos. Like the tabernacle that holds the holy Gifts – the true, saving Bread of Life – she held in her womb the true God who took on flesh for our salvation. His Incarnation revealed Mary to be the all-pure, ever-virgin ark of God Himself. And as the golden lampstand, she holds Him up to us as the true Light that shines in this darkened world.

O Ark made golden by the Spirit, rejoice, for thou dost cause the Light to dawn! – Akathist Hymn

March 14 – Monday of the Second Week of Great Lent
Reading at Sixth Hour – Isaiah 4:2-5:7

The Exaltation of God’s Remnant: *Isaiah 4:2-5:7, especially vs. 4:2:* “*In that day, the Lord will shine in counsel and glory on the earth, to exalt and glorify those of Israel who remain.*” In the early portion of Isaiah’s record, he provides a classic example of his style of prophecy to the people of God. The tenor of his verses shifts back and forth between bitter condemnation and assurance of glorious exaltation. This reading begins with the prophet’s promise that “the Lord will shine . . . to exalt and glorify those of Israel who remain” (4:2). The second portion (5:1-7) completely reverses the motif through a divine condemnation: “I will tell you what I shall do to My vineyard: I shall remove its wall and it shall be for booty. I shall break down its wall and it shall be trampled underfoot” (5:5).

Following the pattern of alternating mercy and punishment, Isaiah prophesies exaltation only to follow it with God’s bitter judgment. His words square with the record of history. In the late seventh and early sixth century BC, the majority of the population of the kingdom of Judah went into exile. Jerusalem “fell into the hand of the oppressor, when there was none to help her, when her enemies laughed at her deportation” (Lam 1:7). It was a time of harsh judgment, for “Jerusalem sinned grievously” (1:8). Hence “all her people groan and seek for bread; they gave the objects of their desire for food to stay alive” (1:11).

Then in 536 BC a tiny remnant of those exiled in the seventh century, together with their descendants born in captivity, were able to return to Judah and Jerusalem from Babylon. These survivors understood that the Lord had washed “away the filth of the sons and the daughters of Zion, and [purged] the blood of Jerusalem from their midst by the Spirit of judgment and the Spirit of burning” (Is. 4:4). This remnant knew the pain of judgment but also experienced the exaltation of being blessed of God – a pattern repeated at other times in Old Testament history.

The returning exiles began constructing the second Temple under Zerubbabel and also built homes and restored the wall around the city. They reestablished the worship of God in the new Temple and sought to live righteously, because they knew they were “recorded among the living in Jerusalem” (4:3). Out of bitter pain they determined to keep a godly purity, so that they might “be called holy” (e.g., Neh 9:1-3; Zec 8:11) and know the presence of God’s glory over them as “a place of shelter, and for a hiding place from inclement weather and rain” (Is 4:6).

The Holy Fathers of the Church, writing during the fourth century of the Christian era, discerned another parallel in Isaiah’s text. Isaiah’s prophecy of *devastation and restoration* predicted the ravaging of Jerusalem in AD 70 by the armies of the Roman General Titus, who destroyed the Temple. The Church survived, according to the Fathers’ interpretation, because it was protected by “a cloud to overshadow it by day, and as it were smoke and light of fire burning at night, and . . . covered altogether with glory” (Is 4:5) – in other words, by Christ our God.

The Christians who lived during those years of the Roman assaults understood the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and the decimation of traditional Jewish communities as fulfillment of the prediction that bitter judgment would fall upon the ancient people of God. Indeed, the Jewish community was “not . . . pruned or cultivated, but thorns [sprouted] forth as in a barren land” (5:6). Yet by the mystery of His hand, Christ’s own found fulfillment in Isaiah’s words. God washes away the blood guilt of the sons and daughters of Zion, i.e. the Church, in the holy laver of baptism and with the anointing of the Spirit (see 4:4).

I was glad because of them that said unto me: Let us go into the house of the Lord. Our feet have stood in thy courts, O Jerusalem. – Psalm 121:1-2

Tuesday of the Second Week of Great Lent – Isaiah 5:7-16
Reading at Sixth Hour

The Lord's Vineyard: Isaiah 5:7-16, especially vs. 7: *“For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the man of Judah is His beloved plant. I waited for it to bring forth judgment, but it brought forth lawlessness, and not righteousness, but a cry.”* Before considering the reading for today, let us first review the entire fifth chapter of Isaiah. It divides into four parts. First, the Lord sings the song of His vineyard that appeared in the second half of yesterday's reading (5:1-6). In that passage God begins his complaint against Judah and Jerusalem: “For I waited for it to bring forth grapes, but it produced thorn-plants” (vs. 4).

Isaiah next catalogues six woes, each specifying a sin of the people against which the Lord issues judgment. Verses 8-16 in today's passage concern two of these woes. The other four woes are addressed in verses 17-26. The concluding section (vss. 26-30) is not assigned in the Church's lectionary but describes the nation's impending conquest by foreign armies and characterizes the invaders as instruments of God's judgment against His people's sinfulness.

In the present reading, God pronounces His first woe against the covetous. Driven by the passion to “join house to house” and “add field to field” (vs. 8), the wealthy are squeezing their poorer neighbors off their hereditary lands. The Lord exclaims curtly, “Surely you will not dwell alone in the land.” This statement reads as either a rebuking question or a sardonic exclamation.

When one of God's people disenfranchises his brother from his God-given heritage, he commits a great sin in God's eyes. Acquisition of others' property was accomplished through excessive interest on debts or even raw judicial force, as in the case of Ahab and Jezebel against Naboth (3 Kgs 20:1-16). Let us take note: the greedy removal of others from their lands violates the tenth commandment (Ex 20:17), breaks fellowship, and rejects the basic human covenant given by God.

After the Lord specifies the sin, He declares the sure judgment that is to follow: desolation and depopulation, often as a result of crop failure (vs. 9,10). Historically, the sequence of greed, land appropriation, and depopulation inevitably leads to rural poverty, starvation, and the curtailment of food production. This process took place in Judah during the time of Isaiah, then again in Galilee at the time of Christ (driven by imperial Roman policies), and under the Soviets during collectivization. It is a sin with God-ordained consequences.

God proclaims His second woe against those who waste their lives drinking and carousing. “Woe to those who rise early in the morning to follow intoxicating drink; to those who continue until night, for wine shall inflame them” (vs. 11). Yes, these people may enjoy “the harp, the strings, the tambourine and flute” (vs. 11), but such *feasting* brings this indictment: “They do not look at the deeds of the Lord” (vs. 12). The self-indulgent fail to see the hand of God at work in their actions. In all ages we find godless secularists – people we know all too well!

In the end, predictably, worldly people and godless societies are bound to suffer captivity, death, hunger, and humiliation (vss. 13-15). These very declarations appear in the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55): “He hath filled the empty with good things and the rich hath He sent empty away” (vs. 53). In all generations everywhere, God opposes greed, aggrandizement, self-indulgence, and the spurning of His provision for all people.

Spare us, O Lord, according to the multitude of Thy mercy, for our days have passed away in vanity. Wrest us from the hand of the adversary and forgive us our sins that we may put off the old man and be clothed upon with the new man and may live unto Thee in all things. – Liturgy of St. Basil

March 16 – Wednesday of the Second Week of Great Lent – Isaiah 5:16-26

Reading at Sixth Hour

Self-destruction: Isaiah 5:16-26, especially vss. 22, 24: “Woe to your strong ones . . . who mix intoxicating drink. . . . Their root shall be like chaff and their flower shall go up like dust, for they did not will to do the law of the Lord of hosts, but despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.” Again, Isaiah’s prophetic indictment of sin is followed by the promise of divine punishment and action, intended by God as a corrective. In these verses Isaiah continues his familiar pattern. Four woes are pronounced against 1) those who disdain God (vss. 18-19); 2) reprobate thinking (vs. 20); 3) pride (vs. 21); and 4) the self-serving (vss. 22-24) – followed by the divine sentence.

The passage concludes with the decree of judgment against the Lord’s own sinful people: “In the manner that stubble shall be burned by coals of fire and consumed by a violent flame, their root shall be like chaff and their flower shall go up like dust” (vs. 24). Isaiah’s understanding of sin and its consequences, as seen in this passage, agree closely with Saint Paul’s views concerning sin expressed in Romans 1:18-23.

Disasters have their spiritual beginnings in men’s hearts, for we “draw sins to [our] selves as with a long rope” (Is 5:18). We put our hands to the rope of desire and pull, drawing the action of sin to us. Isaiah highlights this truth by verbalizing the implicit statement of every sinner’s heart: “Let [God] speedily hasten what He will do that we may see it” (vs. 19) – a rankling affront! Within the heart’s recesses, our passionate thoughts hasten our journey toward visible, sinful action. This corrupt interior movement effectively negates the truth of God, leading us to question whether He truly acts in our lives. Such interior insults leave us utterly *without excuse* before God (Rom 1:20).

When we deny and destroy the image of God within us, we first *do ourselves in* by the disastrous consent of the heart. The sinful heart dares God to act visibly, as if challenging Him to put up a billboard listing what is already written within us. We creatures arrogantly manifest our sin by this appalling demand that God prove Himself – that He first meet our human criteria so that we may trust Him!

From sinful arrogance there follows the inversion of truth. As Isaiah declares, men “call evil good, and good evil [and] put darkness for light and light for darkness [and] put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!” (vs. 20). The prophet describes what the Apostle Paul calls the *debased mind* (Rom 1:28). When we flaunt God and choose not to “glorify Him as God, nor [to be] thankful,” we become *futile* in our thoughts and our foolish hearts are *darkened* (Rom 1:21). Just listen to the arguments that favor killing the unborn, homosexuality, pornography, euthanasia, sex outside of marriage, or recreational drugs. Rationalizations supporting these sins display a common darkness of heart. Instead of mirroring the image of God, we all too readily “suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom 1:18).

Isaiah also pronounces woe to them that “are intelligent in their own eyes and expert in their own sight” (Is 5:21). Saint Paul echoes him in Romans 1:22: “Professing to be wise, they became fools.” A *fool* in Holy Scripture is one who scoffs at the fear of the Lord, despises godly wisdom, and flaunts even basic religious instruction (Prv 1:7). The root cause of self-centered conceit is pride: a vaunted confidence in one’s own capacity to determine the truth about life’s issues and purpose.

When *foolishness* or pride is translated into visible behavior, the result is a self-serving attitude that inevitably perverts goodness and, in Isaiah’s words, tends “to justify the ungodly for a bribe and take away justice” (Is 5:23). If we persist in sin and refuse to repent, we will “be burned by coals of fire and consumed by a violent flame” for despising God’s word (vs. 24).

From my youth up many passions have warred against me. But do Thou help and save me, O my Savior, and quicken and exalt me in purity made resplendent by the Triune unity. – Hymn of Ascent

March 17 – Thursday of the Second Week of Great Lent – Isaiah 6:1-12

Reading at Sixth Hour

Encounter with God: Isaiah 6:1-12, especially vs. 5: “So I said, ‘Woe is me, because I am pierced to the heart, for being a man and having unclean lips, I dwell in the midst of a people with unclean lips; for I saw the King, the Lord of hosts, with my eyes!’” Saint John Chrysostom wonders, “How then can Isaiah claim to have seen the Lord?” (*Isaiah Through the Ages*, p. 89). Is this not a contradiction of realities that a finite man should look upon the Infinite Himself? It is inconceivable!

Vladimir Lossky is clear about this point: “One cannot fix God with a concept. Such is ‘learned ignorance.’ God therefore remains transcendent, radically transcendent by . . . nature. . . . It is He about whom we have no knowledge unless it be to know how we do not know Him” (*Orthodox Theology*, p. 25). Similarly, Saint John the Theologian declares, “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him” (Jn 1:18). At Sinai, God tells Moses explicitly, “No man can see My face and live” (Ex 33:20).

What then do we make of Isaiah *seeing* God? Saint John Chrysostom answers his own question thus: “The prophet speaks of that which was possible for him to see . . . the vision was an act of condescension” (*Isaiah Through the Ages*, p. 89). God *deigned* to meet Isaiah, and, in the meeting, He disclosed as much of Himself as the man Isaiah was capable of knowing and seeing. As readers, we are left with Isaiah’s *report*, which reveals these six facets of God’s character: God is indeed beyond human knowing, supremely holy, able to cleanse of all sin, desirous that we serve Him, the Overlord of all nations, and He who watches over His own.

Isaiah observes in his vision that “around Him stood seraphim” with six wings – and every one of them, by means of two of his wings, *covered his face* (vs. 2). Not even these pure and heavenly creatures standing in the presence of God are able to behold Him in His essence. We may affirm the impossibility of *seeing* God while upholding His utter unknowability and humbly accepting the mystery of His Being. These truths provide the right starting point for continuing a high-quality relationship with God!

Isaiah further reports that the seraphim lead the heavenly worship of God as they cry to one another the anthem, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory” (vs. 3). We find here the source of the “thrice-holy hymn” that we offer to the Lord during the Divine Liturgy. We assert that God is the holiest – that He alone is Holy. So be amazed, then, at what the Fathers observe: Isaiah’s triple acclamation foreshadows the revelation of the Trinity, disclosed to the world at the Incarnation of God the Word.

One seraph heals Isaiah by touching his mouth with a flaming coal; likewise, our sin may indeed be “cleansed” (vs. 7). Saint Ambrose bids us notice that the seraph did not say, “I will take away, but that fire from the altar of God, that is, the grace of the Spirit. For what else can we piously understand to be on the altar of God but the grace of the Spirit?” God heals!

After his cleansing, the prophet hears the voice of God calling him to His service. An authentic encounter with God results in a summons to do His will. The Lord does not force anyone to serve Him but offers us opportunity by asking, “Whom shall I send?” (vs. 8). We must consider our answer!

God gave Isaiah a message of both judgment and restoration. The prophet warns repeatedly about what will transpire when we do not receive God’s word because our “ears hear with difficulty” (vs. 10). Sadly, the nation would soon go into exile in Babylon. Utter desolation comes (vs. 11) and yet God promises that a remnant of his people “shall multiply” (vs. 12). God wants our best!

Make Thy face to shine upon Thy servant and teach me Thy statutes. Let my mouth be filled with Thy praise, O Lord, that I may praise Thy glory all the day long. – Royal Hours of the Nativity

March 18 – Friday of the Second Week of Great Lent – Isaiah 7:1-14

Reading at Sixth Hour

Opposing God: Isaiah 7:1-14, especially vss. 10-12: “Moreover the Lord added this to Ahaz, saying, “Ask a sign for yourself from the Lord your God; ask it either in the depth or in the height above.” But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, nor will I tempt the Lord.” Sometimes, otherwise intelligent people will fly in the face of wise counsel, wreaking havoc on themselves and others. Take the man dominated by a passion for alcohol: he refuses the pleas of his wife and children, scoffs at the warnings of his employer, argues with his pastor and friends, and ignores the counsel of his physician. As soon he gets his paycheck, he ignores all the loving warnings he has been given and heads off to the bar. He is a man driven and unable to receive godly counsel.

Do not suppose, however, that opposition to loving advice is a problem confined to addicts. Each of us, at one time or another, has resisted a mountain of truly sound counsel and godly advice. We survive our foolish choices only through God’s loving-kindness and go on *a little the worse for wear*. Later, looking back – older, sadder, and by grace, perhaps a little wiser – we come to regret or even lament our obstinacy.

The worst kind of obstinacy in the face of wisdom given to us in love is to reject the counsel God gives us through His Church. The Prophet Isaiah records an instance of God offering gracious counsel and its stubborn refusal by an ancient king, God’s persistent love and His great, surprising mercy.

Isaiah’s message to King Ahaz of Judah waves the banner of caution – Ahaz should be wary of hasty decisions. The same adage applies to us, whenever we encounter sales efforts that seem overly urgent: “You have just five days to respond to this offer!” “I can’t guarantee you this price later!” “We have just two left!”

King Ahaz seems thunderstruck upon learning of a military attack against him: “So his soul and the soul of his people was confounded, as a tree of the woods is shaken by the wind” (vs. 2). In such a state of panic the wise embrace God’s counsel: “Guard yourself and be silent; do not fear, neither let your soul be disheartened” (vs. 4). May God give us the grace to be attentive to Him in times of stress, measuring ourselves according to this prompting from Isaiah.

The Lord also teaches us to be wary of easy, obvious solutions. Examine any answer that appears too easy. Does it ignore the wisdom of Holy Tradition? Ask yourself whether a given solution agrees with the teachings of the prophets, apostles, and holy Fathers. Isaiah warns Ahaz against the kings of Assyria and Ephraim, for they “have plotted evil against you” (vs. 5). Even more important is his next word, “Thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘This counsel shall not continue, nor shall it come to pass’” (vs. 7). Second Kingdoms records that Ahaz went against this counsel. Instead, he begged the king of the Assyria to aid him, with terrible consequences for himself and his nation (see 4 Kgs 16). Heed godly counsel!

Before King Ahaz made his foolish choice, God sends Isaiah to him a second time (vss. 10-17). Isaiah gives him fair opportunity to trust that God will solve the insoluble: “Ask a sign for yourself from the Lord your God” (vs. 11). The tragedy is that Ahaz refuses. He couches his refusal in polite, pious language, but he refuses God’s offer nonetheless (vs. 12). May we never reject a clear gift of God. May we always seek His help! Ahaz’ choice gave the Assyrians access to the kingdom of Judah through an unholy alliance that weakened his nation by taxation, making possible its later conquest by the Babylonians.

Amidst these events, however, our merciful God announces a miracle for all nations: “The virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and you shall call His name Immanuel” (vs. 14). Save us, O Lord!

Holding steadfastly the foresayings of the prophet, let us shout with a loud voice with Isaiah, saying: Behold, the Virgin shall conceive in the womb and give birth to a Son, Immanuel. – Sunday of the Holy Forefathers

March 19 – Saturday of Second Week of Great Lent – Genesis 3:17-19

Kellia Reading

The Curse: Genesis 3:17-19, especially vss. 17, 19: “Cursed is the ground in your labors. In toil you shall eat from it all the days of your life. . . . till you return to the ground from which you were taken.” God does not temporize with us! Out of unimaginable love and concern for our betterment He states His expectations – and then He never varies. He means what He says. Being *His* creatures in *His* creation, we are free to respond to Him by obeying, forgetting, or disobeying – it is as simple as that.

Prior to our response, God is kind. He merely describes the *consequences* of forgetting or disobeying. Once we choose to sin, however, the Lord neither compromises nor negotiates. There is no wavering on His part. Thus, Genesis teaches us to look squarely at the consequences of sin: the *curse*. With the exception of Christ our God, no human being can defeat the curse that arises from sin. Saint Paul puts it quite simply: “In Adam all die” (1 Cor 15:22), for we are all members of one family (e.g., 1 Cor 12:26).

But do not despair in the face of the labors, pain, thorns, sweat, and death described in today’s reading. The Gospel addresses the curse with overflowing hope that surges out of the mystery of Christ. This blessed hope is expressed in the balance of Saint Paul’s statement to the Corinthians: “Even so in Christ all shall be made alive” (1 Cor 15:22). Nevertheless, we must assiduously avoid taking foolish comfort in the apostle’s statement as if it somehow eradicates the curse.

Saint Gregory Palamas looks at both sides of this divinely established reality. First, he instructs us to approach the curse realistically: “For the transgression of the commandment became by all means the cause of death to both the soul and the body, either now during this age, or during that unending punishment. This is real death, the soul’s withdrawal from divine grace and its attachment to sin” (*Treatise on the Spiritual Life*, p. 32). This death, he tells us frankly, is “more dreadful than torment in Gehenna. That is why we flee it with our every power,” renouncing “everything that destroys us and separates us from God and from everything out of which such a death exists.”

At the same time, the good news of the Church counters the curse by offering us God’s way out of sin and death – if we turn to Life Himself and commit ourselves to Him. In the mysteries of baptism and chrismation, the Church repeatedly speaks of a “robe of light,” “the light of salvation,” and “illumination.” Christ throws light into the deep center of the heart to expose the real nature of death to our blinded sight.

Saint Gregory reminds us to embrace our hope wisely, for “just as the death of the soul is real death, so too the life of the soul is real life. The life of the soul is union with God, just as the life of the body is its union with the soul. And just as through the transgression of the commandment, the soul, being separated from God, is put to death, likewise its reunification with God, with obedience to the commandments, grants it life” (*Treatise on the Spiritual Life*, p. 32).

Since we stand between the curse and the hope given in Christ, what is to be done? Listen to Saint Gregory carefully when he says “the time of this life is a time for repentance.” It is a time for turning ourselves around, so that we may trim away “everything . . . which prevents the ripening of the fruits worthy of the divine harvest . . . wealth, luxury, vainglory, everything that is destructive and transient, every disgusting and evil passion of the soul and body, all imaginary rabble of the mind, every rumor and spectacle, and every word able to bring harm to the soul” (*Treatise on the Spiritual Life*, p. 41). Turn to the beauty of Christ!

Shine in my heart with the true Sun of Thy righteousness; enlighten my mind and guard all my senses, that walking uprightly in the way of Thy statutes, I may attain unto life eternal. – Prayer after Confession

March 20 – Second Sunday of Great Lent – Exodus 3:1-8, Tone 6
Kellia Reading for the Sunday of Saint Gregory Palamas

The Fire of God: Exodus 3:1-8, especially vs. 2: “Then the Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush, but the bush was not consumed.” Saint Nikolai of Zicha shares his personal reflections on the burning bush, inviting us to consider its meaning for our lives. “Let me ponder on the burning bush on Horeb: 1. How the bush burned but was not consumed. 2. How the most pure Virgin, carrying the Lord within herself, bore the divine fire but was not burned by it. 3. How the fire of divine grace rejuvenates, heals and illumines my sinful soul” (*Prologue of Ochrid*, vol. 3, p. 11).

An association between the presence and action of God and fire may be found throughout Holy Scripture. Some instances of this association reveal the divine fire as grace-bearing, light-giving, or strengthening. In such cases the fire of God comes to enable or renew. On the other hand, the Apostle Paul prays that “we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:28, 29). The fire of the Lord may fall in judgment, as in Nm 16:31. The terrible destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah also reminds us of this truth (Gn 19:24-25).

These two images of divine fire appear opposite in character and raise questions concerning God’s vengeance versus His mercy. Of the fiery stream that pours forth from the throne of the Ancient of Days (Dn 7:9-10), Saint John Maximovich says: “The more consciously and persistently a man strives toward God in his life, the greater will be his joy when he hears: ‘Come unto Me, ye blessed.’ And conversely: the same words will call the fire of horror and torture on those who did not desire Him, who fled and fought or blasphemed Him during their lifetime!” (Kalomiros, *River of Fire*, p. 131). The deep truth of God as love, revealed by our Lord Jesus Christ, may only be experienced, depending on the state of our soul.

Recognizing that our experience of the fire of God depends upon our *response* to God is sobering, but also hopeful. Just as the pillar of fire led the ancient people of God, directing and protecting them (Ex 13:21-22), the All-pure Theotokos was led, directed, and overshadowed so that she might bear the all-consuming fire of the eternal Word of God. She received the Uncontainable in her womb and gave physical nurture to the Fire of God, upon whom no one may look and survive. The appellation “all-pure” directs us to consider the state of her heart and soul, which God chose as fitting for His union with our nature. The term calls us to self-examination, prayer, and the ascesis of purification – to labor. May the fire of God illumine my darkness!

Most significant to the *faithful in Christ* is the announcement that purification and cleansing by fire can make us fit vessels for the fire of God. The empowering presence of the Holy Spirit that descended upon the disciples at Pentecost “appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and *one* sat upon each of them” (Acts 2:3). These average, ordinary men were filled with and shielded by the fire of God, and thus received God’s fire *as grace*. Divine fire renews radically.

Compare the change that occurred in the disciples after Pentecost. Their manner in the Gospel of Luke, as they travel with the Lord through Galilee, Samaria, and Judea, is very different than the portrait of them in the Acts of the Apostles. Were these the same men? They were indeed *average and ordinary*, like ourselves, but they were able to speak of what “we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled . . . the Word of life . . . manifested to us” (1 Jn. 1:1,2). They had become men purged by the fire of God.

O Holy Paraclete, come, and what is rigid, gently bend, and what is frozen, warmly tend. – Hymn of Pentecost (Western Rite)

March 21 – Monday of the Third Week of Great Lent
Reading at Sixth Hour – Isaiah 8:13-9:7

God's Light or Dark Apostasy: Isaiah 8:13-9:7, especially 9:1: *“O . . . people who walk in darkness, behold a great light; and you who dwell in the country of the shadow of death, upon you a light will shine.”* Simeon, who held the Christ child, knew the joy of Isaiah's prophecy concerning the Light for all nations and the “Consolation of Israel.” However, Isaiah's prophecy also addresses the dangers of turning away from the light that shines in the face of Christ and embracing the darkness of this fallen world. In this reading Isaiah teaches us how to guard against apostasy, remaining wary of signs and actions that move us away from truth, life, and salvation, so that we may follow his prophetic message!

In the verse that precedes this passage, the Lord encourages Isaiah: “Do not be afraid of their terror, nor be troubled” (Is 8:12). The Lord here refers to the dread reigning among the people of Judah as the Assyrian empire relentlessly crowded in upon them. Isaiah's response is straightforward: “Sanctify the Lord Himself, and He shall be your fear” (Is 8:13). Wise advice for every believer!

God speaks two words through His prophet, first encouraging Isaiah – and His devout followers in every age – and then issuing a warning to the apostate majority in Judah and anyone who turns away from God. We hear Christ Himself speaking here to “the children God gave me” (vs. 18), reminding us that He is “a sanctuary” (vs. 14). He alerts us that He rejects apostasy: “I shall wait for God who turned His face away from the house of Jacob, and I will trust in Him” (vs. 17). Remaining faithful to the truth in Christ “will be for signs and wonders” (vs. 18), but condemnation awaits anyone who apostatizes.

Sadly, many members of “the house of Jacob” refused to embrace true knowledge of God, finding Him to be instead “a stumbling stone . . . a rock of disaster” (vs. 14). Thus, the majority of God's ancient people were unable to sustain themselves when faced with the threat of foreign imperial armies. No wonder Isaiah predicts that “therefore many among them shall be powerless and fall, and be broken, and men who are in safety shall draw near and be conquered” (vs. 15).

The apostates near Isaiah propose that he should “seek those who call from the earth and are ventriloquists, who speak from the belly” (vs. 19). Apostasy often leads us to accept the occult and demonic, and to rely upon the evil powers that underlie such practices. Heed Isaiah's warning: “They shall look up to heaven above, and on the earth below, and behold tribulation, distress, and darkness. There will be severe despair and darkness” (vss. 21-22).

Yet there is also great hope in Isaiah's prophecy, most explicitly in his mention of the “country of Zebulun, land of Naphtali” (vs. 9:1), the northern and eastern tribal lands of ancient Israel. After the Assyrians deported many of the inhabitants, this region was repopulated by pagan Gentiles. The people of that tragic land chose to “walk in darkness,” but they shall one day “behold a great light” (vs. 1). Yes, Christ fulfilled God's promise, for even in this region that lives under “the shadow of death, upon you a light will shine” (vs. 1).

Let us consider the gift that we ourselves have received in Christ our God. We know the One whom Isaiah foresaw, the true Light of the world. Like Simeon, “we have seen that true light . . . we have found the true faith . . . for He hath saved us!” (post-communion hymn). Christ has come to illuminate the earth in all its darkness: “For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. His name will be called the Angel of Great Counsel” (vs. 5). If we hold fast to the Kingdom of Christ, we will be “as those who rejoice in harvest” (vs. 2). God promises!

Thy Nativity, O Christ our God, hath given rise to the light of knowledge in the world, for they that worshiped the stars did learn therefrom to worship Thee, O Sun of justice! – Troparion of the Nativity

March 22 – Tuesday of the Third Week of Great Lent – Isaiah 9:9-10:4

Reading at Sixth Hour

Repentance or Judgment: Isaiah 9:9-10:4, especially vs. 11: “For all this His anger is not turned away, but His hand is still uplifted.” The Holy Fathers teach us to repent, to accept God’s ways in life so that we may develop “a good defense before the fearful judgment seat of Christ” (*Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom*). Saint Nikolai of Zicha says this about God’s judgment: “If men, unto seventy times seven, refuse the salvation of God, then He will not save them” (*Prologue from Ochrid*, vol. 1, p. 181). God does not desire the death of sinners but seeks our repentance in order to save us.

Isaiah reminds us of the moment of judgment every time he repeats the refrain quoted at the beginning of today’s meditation. In these verses we find indictments of four sins, in particular, among the people of God: arrogance of heart, godless evildoing, cruelty, and exploitation. We recall that the Lord Jesus teaches us the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:3). God bestows His blessing upon those who resist sin with poverty of spirit, mourning for their shortcomings and seeking righteousness. Make no mistake; God will not turn His anger away until we take up the difficult path of the Beatitudes. We must plead for His mercy and say in humility, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom” (Lk 23:42).

However, sometimes Christians speak “in arrogance of heart” (Is 9:8) and presume to “build ourselves a tower” (vs. 9) – perhaps even successfully. The world encourages us toward godless self-reliance rather than meek dependence on God. How often do we refuse to say, “I know, O Lord, that I justly deserve any punishment Thou mayest inflict upon me, for I have so often offended Thee and sinned against Thee in thought, word, and deed” (prayer before confession). When we make such a choice, we may be certain that God’s “hand is still uplifted” against us.

Modesty in prayer, on the other hand, reflects an honest poverty of spirit and true mourning for sin. Such a spirit leads to the Kingdom of Heaven and brings comfort from God. How much better it is for us to say, “The bricks fell” (vs. 10), thus admitting our wrongs and committing ourselves by the grace of God to rebuild as the Lord directs.

The spirit of contemporary culture is foolish, for it never invites us to consider God. Many people never think to turn to the Lord “until they [are] struck” (vs. 12). What an accurate definition of *godlessness*! And even the *niciest* people are guilty of indifference, including the false prophet “who teaches lawlessness” (vs. 14). Too often such people mislead even young men, orphans, and widows, “for all of them are lawless and evil” (vs. 16). Our Savior, however, “teaches us by a parable to run away from the haughtiness of the Pharisees” (Orthros hymn for the Third Sunday of Lent), warning us that only “the pure in heart . . . shall see God” (Mt 5:8).

Failure to seek the Lord of hosts manifests itself in iniquity that burns “like fire, and like dry grass,” devouring “all the hills round about” (Is 9:17). In such a state one does not consider “the Lord’s wrath” (vs. 18), even when driven to “eat the flesh of [one’s] own arm” (vs. 19). God does not desire us to live this way! The Beatitudes teach us that “blessed are the merciful” and “blessed are the peace makers” (Mt. 5:7,9).

Those who suffer most from society’s godless wickedness are “the needy of My people” (Is 10:2). Widows and orphans become prey for clever predators. “For all this His anger is not turned away” (vs. 4). How much better for us when we “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Mt 5:6) so that we never find the Lord’s hand uplifted against us – for we shall stand before Him for all eternity.

O Christ our God, Who didst compassionately ordain for us forgiveness with kingly authority; forsake us not in our danger of estrangement from Thee, but arise and save us! – vespéral prayer for the Third Sunday of Lent

March 23 – Wednesday of the Third Week of Great Lent
Reading for Sixth Hour – Isaiah 10:12-20

Prophecy as Forth-telling: Isaiah 10:12-20, especially vs. 12: *“But it shall come to pass, when the Lord has completed all He will do on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, He will go against the arrogant heart of the king of the Assyrians and the glory of his haughty looks.”* The Holy Spirit enables prophets to describe accurately the immediate socio-political conditions around them. By the same Spirit, they also receive knowledge of future events beyond their time. Their visions, of course, are colored by the prophets’ own cultural and historical experience.

Isaiah, a master-craftsman of prophecy, affords us an opportunity to meditate on three different aspects of the prophetic art: 1) “forth-telling,” or speaking the word of God concerning current events; 2) “foretelling,” or predicting the inevitable consequences of contemporary conditions and actions; and 3) “foreseeing,” taking the long view of history to describe how God’s hand will shape mankind’s affairs, both nationally and internationally.

The present reading particularly exemplifies Isaiah’s skill at “forth-telling” – voicing God’s judgment upon current events. The political situation that Isaiah addresses grew out of the expansionism of the Assyrian empire in the area today called Iraq. In 732 BC, in a series of swift military campaigns, Assyria captured Damascus and forced Israel, the northern kingdom of God’s people, into vassalage.

How does God view these events? Looking at developments from the perspective of the southern kingdom of Judah, Isaiah declares that God will visit “the arrogant heart of the king of the Assyrians” after completing “all He will do on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem” (vs. 12). First, he proclaims woe against His people for their pride and arrogance (see Is 9:9-10:4). That earlier passage is direct “forth-telling” in the form of God’s resolve not to turn away His anger (vs. 4). We recall the condemnation of godlessness and evildoing in 9:17, and the people’s persistent robbing of “judgment from the needy” (vs. 1).

Then, lest God’s lawless people imagine that the Assyrian invasions were *accidental*, and that God will rescue them, Isaiah declares that God Himself will use Assyria as “the rod of My anger” (vs. 5). Invincible Assyria serves as a tool in God’s hands. Afterwards, Assyria also falls under God’s judgment. The Lord finds serious wickedness in their king, for that greedy monarch is not satisfied with God’s limited objectives. He believes he should have *more* (see vs. 11). Thus, the king of Assyria learns that the ax does not “glorify itself without him who chops with it” (vs. 15). Rather, “the Lord of hosts will send dishonor against [his] honor; and He will kindle a burning fire against [his] glory” (vs. 16).

Observe Isaiah’s “forth-telling.” He keenly analyzes the psyche of the conquest-minded Assyrian monarch (vss. 13-14). The king has complete confidence in himself: “I shall act in my strength and by the wisdom of my understanding” (vs. 13). Why restrain his greed? Why not take the labor and wealth of others (vss. 13,14)? He is wholly confident in his power.

God took a contrary view. He saw this monarch as a mortal man, subject to divine will. Tools such as axes, saws, rods, and staffs always do the bidding of their masters. Kings are meant to do the will of the Lord. This particular king soon discovered his vulnerability. Plague decimated his army, taking the lives of 185,000 troops during a siege of Jerusalem (4 Kgs 19:35). Shortly thereafter the Assyrian king was assassinated by his own sons (vs. 37). God, “the Light of Israel,” acted as fire and burned the whole kingdom of Assyria (Is 10:17-18).

O Christ our King and our God, guide Thou the nations of the world into Thy justice and Thy truth, and establish among them that peace which cometh from Thee and is the fruit of Thy righteousness. And have mercy upon us, O God, according to Thy great mercy!

March 24 – Thursday of the Third Week of Great Lent
Reading at Sixth Hour– Isaiah 11:10-12:2

Prophecy as Foretelling: Isaiah 11:10-12:2, especially vs. 12:2: “Behold, God is my Savior and Lord. I will trust in Him and be saved by Him. I will not be afraid, for the Lord is my glory and my praise. He has become my salvation.” The Church Fathers understand the phrase “the Root of Jesse” in Isaiah 11:10 as a foretelling of Christ’s incarnation. The Lord Jesus is He whom Isaiah declares to be “a sign for the Gentiles and [who] will assemble the lost ones of Israel” (vs. 12).

Saint John of Damascus begins his explanation of the Root of Jesse with the Theotokos: “The holy and much-lauded ever-virgin one, Mary, the Mother of God . . . being pre-ordained by the eternal, prescient counsel of God and imaged forth and proclaimed in diverse images and discourses of the prophets through the Holy Spirit, sprang from the root of David, according to the promises that were made to him. ‘For the Lord has sworn, He says in truth to David, He will not turn from it: of the fruit of your body, I will set upon your throne’ (Ps 131:11)” (*Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Bk. 4, chapter 14).

From the Theotokos, then, came the Lord Jesus. Accordingly, Saint Nikolai of Zicha asks, “Who else is this rod – or root – from the stem of Jesse but the Lord Christ?” (*Prologue from Ochrid*, vol. 3, p. 204). Since Jesse was the father of King David, it follows that the Lord Jesus, from the root of Jesse, was also of Davidic lineage through His mother – a point further emphasized by His birth in Bethlehem, the city of David.

Isaiah 11:10 declares that He “shall arise to rule nations. The Gentiles shall hope in Him.” In this passage the Church Fathers perceive a foretelling of our Lord’s Resurrection. According to Saint Eusebios, the following phrase, “His resting place shall be honorable,” describes Christ being seated at the right hand of God the Father (*Isaiah Through the Ages*, p. 214). Saint Jerome, however, understands “His rest” as a reference to the Holy Sepulcher. Long before the tomb of Christ was hewn out of the rock, “Isaiah foretold its glory: ‘His rest shall be glorious’ . . . the place of the Lord’s burial should be held in universal honor” (Letter #46, “On Behalf of Paula and Eustochium to Marcella”).

Isaiah’s prophecy further foretells the reign of Christ expanding over all the earth after Pentecost (vs. 11). The language here foreshadows Saint Luke’s full description of those who gathered on Pentecost: “Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the part of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs – we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God” (Acts 2:9-11). The Church Fathers note that the Gospel in their day has already spread far beyond the lands named in Isaiah 11:14-15.

The apostolic message includes the proclamation of the Cross of Christ “to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24). Theodoret of Cyrus, speaking of Isaiah 11:12, asks: “To what other standard [or sign] could this relate, except to the Cross?” (*Isaiah Through the Ages*, p. 215). The Cross is an illumined sign for all nations.

Isaiah also foretells the end of mankind’s jealousies and conflicts through a glimpse into the Lord’s end-time reign. At that time the jealousy between the ten tribes of Israel and the two southern tribes of Judah will end (vs. 13). Ah, but rivalry and jealousy will continue as we await that day! The concluding verses of (12:1-2) offer comfort, foretelling how God in His mercy has turned aside His wrath at our sins and become our Savior.

Thy Prophet Isaiah foretold the way of salvation, O Savior, by the grace of Thy Spirit. Grant that we too may follow in the way that he has shown. O Lord, Glory to Thee.

March 25 – Feast of the Annunciation, Friday of the Third Week of Great Lent
Third Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 9:1-11

Preconditions: Proverbs 9:1-11, especially vs. 10: *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the counsel of saints is understanding; for to know the law is characteristic of a good mind.”* When the Archangel Gabriel announces to the Theotokos that she is to bear “the Son of the Highest” who will “reign over the house of Jacob” (Lk 1:32-33), he is referring to the Church and to Christ as the monarch of an everlasting kingdom. For the angel is addressing a young woman who has met God’s every precondition for becoming Theotokos: the birth-giver of God.

Likewise, according to one elder, “Jesus can be born in us, can be born through us . . . [to take] real possession of our being.” However, just as the Virgin needed to be ready to become the Mother of God, we too must gain spiritual readiness by learning to despise “everything the Lord hates” (Prv 6:20-23). We seek to make the “seven pillars” of wisdom’s palace the foundation of the spiritual temple of our heart (vs. 9:1).

Holy Wisdom, of course, is our Lord Jesus Christ. He is everything that God loves (Jn 17:26): humble, truthful, life-nurturing, pure of heart, obedient to God, merciful, and conciliatory. There is nothing in Him that God hates, such as an unclean soul or “a haughty eye, an unrighteous tongue, hands that shed righteous blood, a heart that devises evil thoughts . . . feet that hasten to do evil” (vss. 6:20-23).

Proverbs shows us Holy Wisdom as a regal queen who builds a glorious palace supported on seven pillars. There she prepares a feast for every spiritually foolish person who seeks understanding and will “turn aside” to her (vs. 9:4). If we awaken to the realization that we lack true perception, if we are determined to seek discernment and live, then Wisdom will straighten our understanding with knowledge (vs. 6).

The servants of Holy Wisdom are the holy apostles and Fathers of the Church. Wisdom sends them forth to call us with “a lofty proclamation” (vs. 3), saying: “Come, eat my bread and drink the wine I mixed for you” (vs. 5). Wisdom also reproves evil men and rebukes the ungodly when they tread Him disgracefully (vss. 7-8). However, we need not be counted among them, for our Savior gives us the opportunity to “be wiser” and “continue to receive” divine instruction (vs. 9).

The very first precondition that Christ sets for us as His guests is “fear of the Lord [which] is the beginning of wisdom” (vs. 10). Christ our God, our Holy Wisdom, never asks from us a craven, cowering kind of fear, but rather a healing and wholesome awe before our Creator. He has called us into being out of nothing, and now calls us to eat His bread and drink His wine at His royal feast.

Let us never disdain the invitation of Holy Wisdom! Instead, let us cast aside everything proud and false, seeking after what is humble, truthful, life-sustaining, pure, obedient to God, merciful, and conciliatory. These are the preconditions that God looks for in us.

We may begin today to acquire these God-pleasing virtues in order to allow the Lord Jesus to be born in us and take possession of the reins of our heart. The Lord ends with a promise: if we will strive to meet His preconditions, we “will live a long time, and the years of [our lives] shall be increased (vs. 11). May Holy Wisdom, our *Hagia Sophia*, ever be born in us!

Grant us, O Lord Christ, pardon and forgiveness of our sins and transgressions, all things good and profitable for our souls, and a good defense before Thy fearful judgment seat. – Post-communion Prayer

March 26 – Saturday of the Third Week of Great Lent
Kellia Reading – 1 Kingdoms 4:2-11

Faulty Discernment: 1 Kingdoms 4:2-11, especially vs. 7: “*And the Philistines were afraid, for they said, ‘These are the gods that have come into the camp! Woe to us! Deliver us today, Lord, for such a thing has never happened before.’*” Today’s passage is a brief account of one phase in a drawn-out struggle between ancient Israel and the Philistines. This event occurred during the lifetime of the Prophet Samuel, although he is not mentioned. It may sound familiar to anyone who reads the daily news and sees the struggle of peoples around the world to control their destinies. Popular opinion, imperfect intelligence, desperation crying for action, and an exalted sense of our own importance are among the factors that lead a people to adopt what they deem to be a good plan.

The lack of discernment on both sides in this ancient conflict is noticeable in verse after verse. The Philistines and ancient Israel both size up the situation and go into action, sometimes with a plan (vs. 2), sometimes based on the opinion of their senior leaders (vs. 3), and sometimes based a mix of true and false conclusions (vss. 7,9).

In one sense the Philistines were not entirely at fault. They were pagans, after all, who did not know the true God. Their appeal in verse 7 to a lord is not addressed to the true God. From what we know of them, they worshipped the fertility god Baal, an idol whose immoral veneration is condemned in Scripture. The Philistines first invaded the Palestinian coast, settled along the shore, and regularly strove to assert control eastward, into the inland plateaus where most of the tribes of Israel lived. They came to dominate the entire area presently known as Palestine, which derives its name from them as a result.

The tribes of Israel, uncomfortable under the yoke of the Philistines, longed for total control over all the lands from the River Jordan to the Mediterranean and to the boundaries with Egypt in the south and west. But when “the Philistines prepared battle plans against Israel, and . . . about four thousand [of their] men were struck down in the battle lines” (vs. 2), the people know something is wrong. Assembled in defeat, they choose to listen to their elders’ ideas (vs. 3).

Any real critique of this hasty decision has to be assessed against 1 Kingdoms 3:19-21, which immediately precedes the present passage. The people have bypassed their true prophet, Samuel. Instead, they vest confidence for returning to battle in their leaders’ idea of the moment: to bring the nation’s most hallowed icon with them into combat. The Ark of the Covenant, however, was supposed to reside only in the holy tabernacle at Shiloh. Yes, distinctions must be made between the invisible God and any sacred fixture or icon. We worship God alone – and we render reverence to religious icons *only* in their appointed places.

The people’s faulty discernment stems directly from placing their trust in humanity’s *bright ideas* rather than searching out godly counsel and discerning the will of God in humility. The outcome of the battle clearly reflects the Lord’s view of such self-willed actions. The ark, of course, remains with the Philistines only to plague them until they return it to the people of Israel (1 Kgs 6). The ark is never again restored to an appropriate temple until the reign of Kings David (2 Kgs 6-7) and Solomon (3 Kgs 5:12-8:11). May we gain wisdom from Israel’s faulty discernment and learn to use only those proven ways that God provides for ascertaining His will.

Help us; save us; have mercy on us; and keep us, O God, by Thy grace. – Deacon’s petition after Holy Communion

March 27 – Sunday of the Third Week of Great Lent – Psalm 74, Tone 7
Kellia Reading for the Sunday of the Adoration of the Cross

God Is Judge: Psalm 74, especially vs. 6: “For judgment cometh not from the byways, nor from the west, nor from the desert mountains; for God is judge.” This psalm is the perfect companion to the hymn sung on the Sunday of the Adoration of the Cross: “Before Thy Cross we bow down in worship O Master, and Thy Holy Resurrection we glorify.” It makes clear that our bowing down is not simply an act of gratitude for salvation but also our confession of sin before the Lord Jesus Christ who was crucified for our sake. This Christ of the Cross, before whom will we appear without any defense, is God our Judge.

All the dramatic turns, the joyous highs and dark lows that mark the years of our lives are filled with thoughts and actions for which we will give account. This is not to say, however, that the mystery of confession counts for nothing. By no means! Be assured that what we truly confess to Christ our God under the priestly stole offers true relief to our hearts. The priest assures us, “May . . . God forgive thee all things, through me a sinner, both in this present world and in that which is to come and set thee uncondemned before His dread judgment seat.”

The point is that the dread judgment seat is not neatly folded up and put away simply because we confess, or even make a *good confession*. As Judge, God will judge us as He assesses and chooses. Yet there is grace in this psalm that we may apply to ourselves if we take God’s word to heart, heed it seriously, act upon it, and keep it always in mind.

Through most of Psalm 74 we hear God speaking as Judge. The opening lines (vs. 1-2) are a confession, much like the profession of faith found in the Nicene Creed. This confession is general, however, while the Creed is much more specific. Only in verse nine, nearly at the end of the psalm, is there an opportunity for you and me to speak – if we will. The final verse is left to God, giving Him the *last word*.

God’s initial word to us is that we will get a fair hearing (vs. 2). However, there will be no appeals or opportunities to correct any sins we did not seek to redress in this life. He tells us pointblank that He will melt down every excuse, rationalization, and pious front that we have hidden behind. There will be no secrets any longer (vs. 3).

The Lord our God places His truth in our hearts, proclaims His expectations in the pages of Holy Scripture, and is entirely forthright (vs. 4), especially in addressing the worst of human problems: *pride*. He uses a metaphor to warn us of pride in verse 5: “Lift not up your horn on high,” for such a spiritual act demonstrates “unrighteousness against God.” Sin is always devious, corrupting our thinking and tainting our public persona.

God’s judgment is certain, although others may provide us with foretastes of judgment during this lifetime (vss. 6-7). The psalmist portrays judgment as a cup of high-proof wine, undiluted by water or other impurity. When this cup inevitably spills over upon us, we accept the reproofs that we receive as coming from the hand of God (vs. 8). The dregs will be given to those who resist, defy, abuse, or belittle God and His judgment. Those dregs will be high-powered, indeed. The pride and arrogance we use to justify sin will be broken apart and exposed, for God promises that “all the horns of the sinners will I break” (vs. 10).

Yet God offers hope in this psalm to all who seek to purify themselves by confessing and working at honest improvement, reminding us that “the horn of the righteous man shall be exalted” (vs. 10). Our God is a compassionate as well as a just judge. When we choose His path we can truly say, “I will rejoice for ever; I will chant unto the God of Jacob” (vs. 9).

O Lord, by Thy grace may I amend my life, sin no more, and walk in Thy righteousness. – prayer after the Mystery of Confession

March 28 – Monday of the Fourth Week of Great Lent – Isaiah 14:24-32

Reading at Sixth Hour

Breaking the Yoke: Isaiah 14:24-32, especially vs. 24-25: “As I purposed, so it shall remain – to destroy the Assyrians in My land and on My mountains. They shall be for trampling underfoot, and their yoke shall be taken away; and their renown shall be removed from their shoulders.” This week’s prophecies from Isaiah unveil five mysteries of the Kingdom of God. The first prophecy foretells the end of Assyrian and Philistine oppression for the ancient kingdom of Judah.

However, God also reveals the mystery of salvation in Christ, including three stunning truths embedded in Isaiah’s predictions: 1) what God determines cannot be frustrated; 2) divine action frees the faithful; and 3) God provides refuge from affliction for His people. Through Christ God destroys human bondage and restores us to life. No power, not even death, can annul the purpose of the Lord, our Life-giver; in Him the faithful are set free, and within His Church all may gain release from bondage to sin and death.

First let us look at history. In Isaiah’s time, two nations oppressed the people of God. The Prophet Isaiah addresses the threat of the Assyrian empire, which dominated the tiny kingdom of Judah economically and impoverished God’s people by exacting massive payments of tribute. The neighboring kingdom of Philistia, itself a satellite of Assyria, pillaged and conquered the villages, cities, and farms of Judah that lay along the nation’s common border. These attacks withered the tiny nation even further.

Isaiah compares these impositions to a yoke (vs. 25) grinding the people down with unbearable burdens and as a punishing rod sent to afflict them (vs. 29). Yokes are placed on beasts and men when they must bear heavy burdens and pull ponderous loads. Isaiah uses the vivid image of the yoke to describe his nation’s vassalage under Assyrian might. The Lord’s immediate message to His ancient people is that the Assyria’s yoke soon will be removed (vs. 25). However, He expands His message beyond Judah and Assyria: “This is the purpose the Lord purposed upon all the inhabited world” (vs. 26). Notice the universality of the Lord’s statement. This prophecy becomes a type of the saving work of God in Christ – a message for all peoples.

We faithful in Christ have heard this loving invitation from the Lord Jesus: “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Mt 11:29-30). We are yoked to “love . . . as strong as death” (Sg 8:6) and even stronger, for He arose from the dead. He pulls the crushing load that we cannot carry. Best of all, God’s saving work cannot be annulled (Is 14:27).

Of old God promised to “destroy the Assyrians in My land and on My mountains” (vs. 25). This promise points to the risen Christ who “hath trampled down death by death” (Paschal troparion). The prophet asks, “Who will reject what the holy God purposed?” (vs. 27).

Isaiah also warns the Philistines that the collapse of Assyria will not release them from God’s wrath. “Do not be glad, all you foreigners, for the yoke of him who struck you is broken to pieces. For from the seed of serpents shall come forth the young asps” (vs. 29). Woes will follow, for God has purposed to free all His chosen ones. Then “the humble of His people shall be saved” (vs. 32), which echoes Christ’s promise, “Come to Me, all you who labor . . . and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28).

Finally, Isaiah declares: “The poor will be fed by him” (vs. 30). Today the Church is the new Zion wherein all those afflicted by the demonic powers – either as a result of their own passions run amok, or by death itself – will surely escape “the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pt 2:20).

O Christ our God, the fulfillment of the prophets, fill our hearts with joy and gladness. – priestly prayer after conclusion of the Divine Liturgy

March 29 – Tuesday of the Fourth Week of Great Lent – Isaiah 25:1-9

Reading at Sixth Hour

The Destruction of Death: Isaiah 25:1-9, especially vs. 8: “Death prevailed and swallowed them, but again God wiped away every tear from every face; He took away the disgrace of His people from all the earth; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” We encounter two variants of this important verse. According to most English translations of Isaiah, God “will swallow up death for ever” (RSV). The Orthodox Study Bible translation quoted at the beginning of this meditation is not quite the same. However, both versions lead to an identical conclusion: death, the destroyer of all men, will ultimately be destroyed by God. Glory to Jesus Christ!

In today’s selection the prophet offers us a vivid image of God bringing about the ultimate destruction of death – an image that anticipates Christ’s Resurrection. Hence it is not surprising that Saint Paul quotes Isaiah in 1 Corinthians 15:54, nor that Saint John the Theologian refers to the same verse in Revelation 21:4. God gave Isaiah the grace to foresee the very annihilation of death itself, yet the full import of Isaiah’s prophecy would not be fully revealed until the Passion and Resurrection of Christ our God! That God gave such foresight to Isaiah testifies to the greatness of this prince among the servants of God.

Isaiah discloses three facets of the divine triumph over death that is achieved fully in Christ. First, God is able to use death, destruction, and desolation (all of which seem contrary to divine compassion) to bring glory to Himself (vss. 1-3). Second, God stills “ungodly men” while sheltering the poor who thirst for life amidst the bitterness of death’s powers (vss. 4-5). Third, these divine acts impel us to praise and exalt the name of God (vs. 1), for while they do not compare to the wonders of the coming age when God “shall do this to all the nations” (vs. 6), we can yet speak of the blessing of life that God offers to all people: “This is the counsel for all the nations” (vs. 7).

Looking back over the twentieth century with its nihilism and worship of death, we are haunted by man’s capacity to negate human life through slave labor camps, death factories, mass exterminations, starvation, bombings, and the poisonous legacies of radiation and pollution. Yet God calls us through His prophet to praise and exalt Him for all the wonderful blessings He has brought to our race despite the macabre events that mankind has unleashed upon the earth (vs. 1). Using death itself, God turned strong cities into mounds – including “the city of the ungodly” (vs. 2) – so that the “wronged people” might praise Him (vs. 3).

We should stand in awe before this amazing truth: God is in control *even of death*, as monstrous and ubiquitous as it may be. Despite the terrors of recent history God has disclosed His abiding capacity to be “a protection to those who were disheartened” (vs. 4) even in the face of “evil . . . ungodly men” (vs. 4-5). Christ is the affirmation of life!

In light of the Passion and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, we now understand God’s intended outcome. On the mount of the Church all men “shall drink in gladness” (vs. 6). When Saint John the Theologian speaks of the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rv 19:9), He confirms Isaiah’s prophecy that “God wiped away every tear from every face; He took away the disgrace of His people from all the earth; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken” (Is 25:8). Thank God that we know Him who destroyed death for our sake, “in whom we hoped and rejoiced” (vs. 9)!

O Lord . . . I will sing a hymn to Your name, for You have done wonderful things! – Isaiah 25:1

March 30 – Wednesday of the Fourth Week of Great Lent – Isaiah 26:21-27:9

Reading at Sixth Hour

The Day of Judgment: Isaiah 26:21-27:9, especially vs. 9: “Therefore the lawlessness of Jacob will be removed; and this is his blessing when I take away all his sin, when they make all the stone of the altars beaten like fine dust. Their trees do not remain, and their idols shall be cut down like a distant forest.” The present reading vividly portrays God’s Last Judgment, and therefore is a solemn warning of the coming Kingdom of God. It illumines Christ’s assertion that “the kingdom of God is near” (Lk 21:31). It fits His portrait of that awesome day, a time of “men’s hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of heaven will be shaken” (Lk 21:26). In reading this passage we are aware that the events Isaiah describes occur in the end times and describe history’s finale, yet for each one of us God’s judgment is always over us and becomes certain when we die.

The first act of God’s final judgment will come against the dwellers on the earth (Is 26:21). As the blood of the righteous Abel cried out from the earth when he was slain by his brother (Gn 4:10), so too on the day of Judgment “the earth will uncover its blood and will not cover its slain” (Is 26:21). No witness to recent history should fail to be surprised at God’s wrath directed against mankind’s brutal fratricide and self-willed violence.

The second act of God’s judgment will be directed against Satan, here called “the perverse dragon serpent” or “the dragon” (vs. 1). Saint Basil the Great adds that “the sword of God is drawn against the dragon, the crooked serpent, which makes many twists and turns in its progress,” warning that, “he who follows the serpent shows that his life is crooked, uneven, and filled with contrariness” (Homily 15 on Psalm 32, in *Isaiah Through the Ages*, p. 405). Isaiah’s imagery is consonant with that of Saint John the Theologian when he speaks of judgment against Satan: “The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are” (Rv 20:10).

Having made these brief remarks about the Last Judgment, Isaiah next focuses on the destiny of the people of God. He returns to the earlier image of the Lord’s vineyard (see Is 5:1-7) and likens the Church to a “beautiful vineyard” (Is 27:2). For centuries the Church has stood as “a strong city, a besieged city” (vs. 3), opposing the dragon. The inability of Satan to prevail against the Lord’s people inspires Isaiah to sing about the Church (vs. 2).

But Isaiah’s prophetic song takes an unexpected turn. Even the Church “shall be taken at night, and its wall shall fall by day” (vs. 3). God’s people will be vulnerable not just to warriors, but even to women (vs. 4). The Church will be decimated and left like “straw in a field” after it is mowed down (vs. 4). “For that very reason therefore, the Lord God did all the things He ordered” (vs. 4), yet as Christ says, the “gates of Hades shall not prevail” (Mt 16:18).

Simply being on the rolls of an Orthodox parish will not be enough on the Day of Judgment. We are to complete our years “in peace and repentance,” partaking of Christ’s Holy Mysteries, struggling in our hearts to keep the fullness of the faith, and living with our fellows in a God-pleasing manner. For “as he struck, shall he not be thus struck? As he slew, shall he not be thus slain?” (vs. 7). If we continue to fight and reproach one another, He will surely “send [us] away” (vs. 8). God looks into the spirit with which we treat others. If we harbor “a harsh spirit about killing them in a spirit of anger” (vs. 8), He will shatter our altars into *fine dust* until our idolatry is cut off (vs. 9). None shall escape God’s wrath against sin, yet if we seek the Lord’s way in this present life “the lawlessness of Jacob will be removed” (vs. 9). God’s ultimate will is for our greater good.

O Christ, who lovest all men, grant us rest in the land of the living, and open unto us the gates of Paradise, and grant us remission of those things wherein we have sinned against Thee. – prayer from the Orthodox Funeral Service

March 31 – Thursday of the Fourth Week of Great Lent
Reading at Sixth Hour – Isaiah 28:14-22

The Cornerstone: *Isaiah 28:14-22, especially vs. 16:* “Behold, I lay for the foundations of Zion a costly stone, a chosen and precious cornerstone for its foundations, and whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame.” Today’s passage from Isaiah presents yet another image of our Lord Jesus and the coming of His Kingdom. Written in prophetic style rather than with an iconographer’s palette and brush, these verses reveal our Savior as cornerstone – the precious foundation of the Church. As Saint Nikolai of Zicha declares: “This wonderful stone, my brothers, is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. For if the prophet had thought it an ordinary stone, he would not have spoken of belief in it” (*Prologue from Ochrid* vol. 3, p. 223). Here is another instance of the Holy Spirit offering the people of God, by means of His holy prophet, a glimpse of the eternal legacy now revealed fully to us in Christ Jesus our Lord (Col 1:26).

Isaiah sets his prophecy against a background of scathing reproof toward His own people. He reveals a dual declaration from God concerning “deeds in anger, a work of bitterness” (Is 28:21) as well as the laying of that precious foundation stone (vs. 16). These disparate images highlight the significance of Him who *is* that very Cornerstone.

When reading this prophecy, bear in mind the historical conditions that prompted Isaiah to rebuke the men and princes of his day. In Isaiah’s time the tiny kingdom of Judah lay between two powerful empires – Assyria to the north and Egypt to the south. Isaiah and the nation of Judah watched as their sister state, Israel, was plundered and its people deported by the Assyrians. In an earlier passage (Is 10:5-14), Isaiah reports how Judah itself was pauperized by heavy tribute payments to the Assyrians. Still, in a manifestly divine intervention, the nation was spared utter destruction (see 4 Kgs 17).

Today’s prophecy, written later in Isaiah’s life, follows a period of national resurgence. For a time, while Assyria faced problems at home, she left Judah to her own devices. However, the Assyrian threat now loomed once again under new imperial leadership. The leaders of Judah now entered into a protective alliance with Egypt – what Isaiah calls “a covenant with Hades . . . in agreement with death” (Is 28:15). God immediately reveals that their plan is a false hope against the “rushing storm” of Assyria (vs. 15).

The Lord of all history consistently warns His people against reliance upon human power and empires. His kingdom is not of this world (Jn 18:36). The Church must trust in Him alone for hope and salvation. God is very direct about this fact in both the Old and New Covenants.

Through His prophet, the Lord asserts that it “will be an evil hope” to depend upon human power (Is 28:19). Pleading against the formation of alliances, He warns: “I will also cause judgment to be for hope, and My mercy to be for a standard. The sudden blast of wind will not pass by you who trust vainly in falsehood, except it also take away your covenant with death. Your hope in Hades will also not stand” (vss. 17-18). We do best never to be tempted into an alliance with evil.

What God offers in place of human alliances is “a chosen and precious cornerstone for . . . foundations” (vs. 16). This cornerstone is now clearly seen, illumined by the revelation of Christ Jesus our Savior. He is the true, impregnable foundation of Zion – of the Church and God’s people. Christ Himself asks: “Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone?’” (Mt 21:42). The Church continues to proclaim Jesus Christ as the true cornerstone, reminding us of Isaiah’s promise that “he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame” (1 Pt 2:6, cf. Is 28:16).

Be Thou our sure foundation to keep us safe from the man-destroying enemy, O Lord! – Orthros Hymn of Ascent