

April 1 – Friday of the Fourth Week of Great Lent
Reading at Sixth Hour – Isaiah 29:13-23

Healing and Restoration: Isaiah 29:13-23, especially vs. 18-19: *“In that day, the deaf shall hear the words of the book, and the eyes of those in darkness and in a fog shall see. The poor also shall rejoice exceedingly in gladness because of the Lord, and the hopeless among men shall be filled with gladness.”* Isaiah once again foreshadows the Kingdom as it will be revealed in Christ. Note the correspondence between this particular prophecy and the one that Jesus reads in the synagogue at Nazareth (Is 61:1): “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because of which He anointed Me. He sent Me to proclaim the good news to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to preach liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind.” When Jesus finished reading these words, He said, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:21).

Isaiah knew well the common sins of mankind; he foretells that God will utterly destroy lawlessness and malice (Is 29:20). Christ purges evil from the hearts and souls of those who submit to Him. As in case of Saul of Tarsus, He brings to nought the ruthless plans of many (see Acts 9:1-9). Scoffers are silenced still when the Lord Jesus heals (Mk 5:39-42). Jesus was declared an offender (Is 29:21), snares were laid for Him (Mt 22:15-22), and the authorities sent Him Who was *in the right* (Jn 19:12) to suffer on the Cross, yet His Resurrection put human clay back into the hands of the Potter (Is 29:16).

Isaiah does more than list the ills that plague humanity. He diagnoses their cause as foolish efforts to “deepen . . . counsel, but not through the Lord!” (vs. 15). The deluded Judas, who consulted with the authorities on how to betray the Lord Jesus, illustrates what Isaiah had in mind. The betrayer, convinced that darkness would cover him, went at night to carry out his dark deed (Jn 13:27-30). In fact his heart itself was dark, and so in turn his thinking became futile (Rom 1:21). Many in this world confidently believe that no one sees or knows their inward thoughts and desires (Is 29:15). God sees and knows (Jn 13:21)! Simply because you do not see Him, do not imagine that He is absent!

Men who disregard their Creator become absurd, according to Isaiah, like a clay pot that says to the potter, “You did not create me” (Is 29:16). Such thinking is devoid of understanding. When such an attitude infects a man’s heart, God knows. “These people draw near to Me and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me, and they worship Me in vain” (vs. 13).

One can mouth the right words at prayer while inwardly debasing worship and transforming it into “teaching the commandments and doctrines of men” (vs. 13). Consider the Lord’s parable of the publican and the Pharisee (Lk 18:9-14), or His perception of the widow who offers her last two mites (Lk 21:2-4).

Isaiah foretells the renewal of the people of God. There will be men and women who “shall sanctify My name for My sake, and will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob” (Is 29:23). He likens these faithful to blind men who out of “darkness and in a fog shall see” (vs. 18).

We can say that we have seen the true Light, received the heavenly Spirit, and found the true faith in Christ. We who once had no hope now have reason to be filled with gladness (vs. 19). Isaiah’s words came to pass, for Christ is our heritage! Devout men “from every nation under heaven” were amazed at Pentecost when the apostles received the Heavenly Spirit and declared “the wonderful works of God” to every listener in his own language (Acts 2:5-11).

Let us extol with Divine Songs of praise the assembly of the Apostles, Prophets, righteous ones, teachers and Martyrs among Priests, yea, all the God-fearing inheritors of the Kingdom! – Orthros for the Sunday of All Saints

April 2 – Saturday of the Fourth Week of Great Lent
Kellia Reading – Isaiah 37:21-29

Pride: Isaiah 37:21-29, especially vs. 23: “Against whom have you raised your voice? You have lifted your eyes on high against the Holy One of Israel.” Saint John Cassian teaches that “when the vice of pride has become master of our wretched soul, it acts like some harsh tyrant who has gained control of a great city and destroys it completely, razing it to its foundations” (*Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 92-3). Like Isaiah, he might have been referring to Sennacherib, King of Assyria (705-681 BC). Let us learn from God and His holy prophet where the source of pride lies. Pride destroys fellowship with other people and invites God’s rebuke, leading to the ultimate destruction of the proud.

As this reading amply demonstrates, pride begins with a loss of awareness. The king of Assyria could accurately list his military conquests all the way to the Mediterranean and south along the coast into Egypt. His armies triumphed in the mountains; he conquered all (vs. 24). As Saint John Climacus says, however, “It is shameful to be proud of the adornments that are not your own” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent*, step 23, p. 140). Pride in successes always deceives. How readily we forget the utter dependence we all have on God. As Climacus reminds us, “only such victories as you have won without the cooperation of the body have been accomplished by your efforts, because the body is not yours, but a work of God.”

The Lord Jesus corrects Pilate for his prideful claim that “I have the power to crucify You and the power to release You” (Jn 19:10). As Christ points out to the procurator, “You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above” (vs. 11). God says the same thing to Sennacherib: “[I] . . . manifested my purpose to desolate nations in their strongholds” (Is 37:26). Let us consider the Apostle Paul’s questions: “And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?” (1 Cor 4:7). Let us seek and destroy every subtle vestige of pride in ourselves, asking God to give us the grace to remember our utter dependence upon Him.

Pride truly makes one lonely, for the proud person is cut off from the warmth of human companionship. The Lord says concerning Sennacherib: “The virgin daughter of Zion has despised and laughed you to scorn. The daughter of Jerusalem has shaken her head at you” (Is 37:22). The *daughter of Jerusalem* can be understood in three important ways. First, it indicates the community at Jerusalem, which despised the proud Assyrian conqueror and resented the bitter impoverishment of Judah that resulted from the tribute exacted from them. There was no fellowship between Sennacherib and Jerusalem.

Second, the verse can be applied broadly to any human being, even upstanding members of the Church. Let us remember that those caught in the clutches of the demon of pride certainly “cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons” (1 Cor 10:21). As the Apostle Paul says, they drink judgment to themselves for not recognizing the Lord’s body (1 Cor 11:29). Lastly, the proud cannot expect their prayers to be answered by the humble Virgin who is called the New Jerusalem – the Holy Theotokos.

The mocking and reviling, the raised imperious voice, and the haughtily lifted eyes of the proud may appear to be directed toward other people. God, however, says that pride rages against Him, and men’s arrogance comes up to Him (Is 37:29). Hence the destiny of the proud is always divine rebuke and – short of true repentance – destruction (vs. 29). May we always turn quickly away from pride without basking in it, lest we be given to the merciless (Prv 5:9).

My eyes are weighed down by loathsome pride, but do Thou accept me penitent, O Lord. – Vespers for the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee

April 3 - The Fourth Sunday of Great Lent, Tone 8

Kellia Reading for the Sunday of Saint John Climacus – Wisdom of Solomon 1:16-2:2

Saint John of the Ladder: *Wisdom of Solomon 1:16-2:22, especially vs. 13:* “He claims to have knowledge of God, and he calls himself a child of the Lord.” As we continue moving toward the radiance of Pascha, the Church urges us to “honor John, that pride of ascetics, that angel on earth, that man of God in heaven . . . [He] planted in the house of God . . . flourished with justice; and like a cedar tree in the wilderness . . . caused the flock of Christ to grow” (Vespers for the Sunday of Saint John Climacus).

The Holy Transfiguration Monastery translation of Saint John’s *Ladder of Divine Ascent* summarizes the life of our holy father thus: He “lived and struggled for a whole lifetime on the God-trodden Mountain of Sinai, having entered the monastic struggles while but a youth in his teens. For forty years he lived as a hermit at Thola, about five miles from the monastery. Later he became the abbot of Sinai . . . He lived to the age of eighty, having reposed in the Lord in the year 603” (p. xix).

Contrast this pious life with the profile of the godless provided in the Wisdom of Solomon. Such a person stands directly opposite to faithful men like John Climacus. Drawing on Solomon’s negative profile, we may develop an inverse portrait of this deified Saint of God (see 2 Pt 1:4) and the true Faith he revealed, just as one prints a true image using a photographic negative.

The ungodly conclude that life is *short and painful* (vs. 1). Saint John’s life, however, reveals the “bliss of virtues and good deeds” that comes to those who “willingly left the things of the world . . . for the sake of the future Kingdom” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 1:5).

Those who cling to a worldly view of human life and destiny (as do the secularists of our own age) must live with a hidden, haunting sadness. Holding onto deformed assumptions, they conclude that “there is no cure for the death of a man, for no one has been known to return from Hades” (vs. 1).

Saint John, that man of God, discloses to us “the Heaven of the mind within the heart” (*Ladder*, Step 29:2). Such pure dispassion is “the harbinger of the general resurrection” (Step 29:7). He provides a glimpse into the restored human life that was first revealed by the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus, verifying for all men God’s true promise of eternal life.

The poor of our godless age contend that we shall be “as though we never existed” (Wis 12:2). The faithful, however, are blessed by the prayers of the “righteous John of perpetual memory [who] ceasest not to intercede for our sakes” (Exaposteilarion, Fourth Sunday of Lent).

Sadly, the majority of people living in this age have “exchanged the truth of God for the lie” (Rom 1:25). They flood us with invitations to join them: “Come, therefore, and let us enjoy the good things that exist . . . as we did in our youth” (Wis 2:6). The wise John, however, “didst turn aside from worldly luxury because it is loathsome; and emaciating [his] body with abstinence . . . didst renew the power of [his] soul . . . with heavenly glory” (Exaposteilarion, Fourth Sunday of Lent).

Although they advance various ideologies and fine-sounding words, the ungodly of this age live by a common, shared rule: “Let our might be our law of righteousness, for what is weak is shown to be useless” (2:11). As a true beacon of mystical light and ascetical life, John teaches us rather that “those whose mind has learned true prayer converse with the Lord face to face” (Step 27:21).

Many in this present evil age indeed “lie in ambush for the righteous man, because he is useless to us and opposes our deeds” (vs. 12). Likewise, the world tested Christ “with insult and torture” (vs. 19), yet found Him meek and patient. Yet He was condemned “to a shameful death”(vs. 20) along with many others who followed His way.

With rivers of tears thou hast made the barren desert fertile and from thy heart thy labors have borne fruit an hundredfold, O holy father, John: pray to Christ our God for our salvation. – Apolytikion of Saint John Climacus

April 4 - Monday of the Fifth Week of Great Lent – Isaiah 37:33-38:6

Reading at Sixth Hour

God Our Helper: Isaiah 37:33-38:6, especially vs. 35: *“I will protect this city, to save it for My own sake and for My servant David’s sake.”* The Lord prompts us to remain encouraged even in the midst of overwhelming trials and afflictions. Despite all the contrary purposes and plans of men, He gives firm assurance. As Saint Nikolai of Zicha says, “All that happens to [us] at the hands of men, happens for [our] profit and to the glory of God” (Prologue from Ochrid, vol. 3, p. 746).

Let us awake to the persistent, unremitting loving-kindness we receive from God at this very moment, and at every turn in our lives. As you read this passage from Isaiah, take its message to heart: God sustains His people because He loves us. His covenant with His Church – and with every individual member of it – will endure to the end of time, unto the ages of ages.

Isaiah tells us that Jerusalem was delivered from the besieging Assyrian army when death struck the Assyrian camp, most likely as the result of a devastating plague. With no alternatives left him, “Sennacherib king of the Assyrians departed and returned to Nineveh, and dwelt there” (vs. 37). How and why could this turnaround happen? God explains: “I will protect this city, to save it for My own sake and for My servant David’s sake” (vs. 35).

We know that Jerusalem, the impregnable bastion of the Old Covenant people, was later destroyed and her citizens enslaved by the Babylonians. Yet we also know that even during the last century, when great segments of the New Covenant Church were tortured and killed under Communism, God continued to defend His Church, for Hades “shall not prevail against it” (Mt 16:18).

Moses declares: “There is no one like the God of the Beloved, who rides upon heaven and who is your help. . . . Blessed are you, O Israel. Who is like You, a people saved by the Lord” (Dt 33:26,29). When facing insults, attacks, or even death, let us recall Jesus’ words to the Martyr Theodore the Recruit: “Fear not, Theodore, I am with thee” (*PO* vol. 1, p. 182).

The Prophet Isaiah reveals that God is concerned about every affliction we endure. God sends a seemingly irreversible message to King Hezekiah announcing his imminent death, yet the king still “turned his face toward the wall, and prayed to the Lord” (vs. 2). And God responds. “Thus says the Lord, the God of David your father: ‘I heard your prayer, I see your tears’” (vs. 4).

Because Hezekiah trusted God and relied on his relationship with Him, the king prayed and wept without shame. Knowing that he had “walked before [God] in truth and with a true heart” he is able to weep at the word of the Lord (vs. 3). How then can God, who is ever the same (Ps 101:27), who never allows the words of His servants to “fall to the ground” (1 Kgs 3:19), speak through His prophet and “not stand by it” (see Nm 23:19)?

Without a doubt the Lord tests His sons and daughters. He places hard facts and words before us. He shows us the probable outcomes and consequences of our actions. Why? So that we will weep, repent, and change our ways. Terrible diagnoses are declared. Inevitable death looms. Do we rage and rail against the Lord – or do we turn our face to the wall, praying and weeping, confessing our sins, acknowledging that our frail existence is ever dependent on God?

In this life even death’s power is limited. “The Lord shall keep thee from all evil, the Lord shall guard thy soul” (Ps 120:7). Cast your cares upon Him who cares for us (1 Pt 5:7), and with the righteous Job be bold enough to say, “Though the Mighty One should lay His hand upon me, and already He has begun, I will speak and reason before Him” (Job 13:15).

O Compassionate Lord, help me to embrace that life which flows from Thee alone.

April 5 - Tuesday of the Fifth Week of Great Lent
Reading at Sixth Hour – Isaiah 40:18-31

Pessimism: Isaiah 40:18-31, especially vs. 27: “For why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, saying, ‘My way is hidden from God, and my God took away my judgment and departed?’” With this question the Prophet Isaiah challenges the ancient people of the Covenant, who are complaining that God is unconcerned about their problems. They conclude that God is indifferent to His own! But could the happenings of His people be hidden from God?

The people’s assertion discloses their disconnectedness from the Lord. For those who speak in this way, God might just as well *not* exist. They expect nothing from Him and seek nothing from Him. How well this view fits the secular outlook of today! People make decisions and act without reference to God. They assert that, since He is neither measurable nor tangible, He is irrelevant and probably non-existent.

Isaiah rebukes his fellow countrymen for this kind of pessimism. As a people, they had received their name from their forefather Jacob, a man who had wrestled with and prevailed over God. On that occasion God renamed him “Israel,” which means *struggled with God*. Isaiah expresses shock: how can they say such things? Why are they so negative? Is God an idol (vss. 18-19)? Is He not the Lord of men and nations (vss. 21-24)? Look at the creation He fashioned and governs (vss. 25-26). God has not withdrawn; in fact, those who truly wait on Him shall be renewed (vs. 31).

In the first three verses of today’s reading, Isaiah targets idolatry – absorption in things. He invites the discouraged to compare the Lord to those gods fashioned by human artisans. Some of these idols were made out of gold, silver or “wood that will not rot” (vss. 18-20) so that they would last for centuries. Isaiah implies, of course, that such idols will rot and fall apart eventually. Investing one’s primary life energy in created things is madness, a point that the Lord Jesus reiterates: “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” (Mk 8:36).

Next Isaiah chides his pessimistic countrymen with these words: “Do you not know the foundations of the earth?” (vs. 21). God Himself “possesses the circle of the earth” (vs. 22). “He makes the rulers He establishes to rule to be as nothing” (vs. 23); when He blows on them, they wither and “the whirlwind will take them away like stubble” (vs. 24).

Isaiah offers us God’s view of leaders: they only last for a season. By contrast, he draws our attention to God’s work as Creator: “Lift up your eyes on high and see. Who displayed these things? He who brings forth their host by number; He who calls them all by name, from the greatness of His glory to the strength of His might, nothing escapes Your notice” (vs. 26).

See how verse 27, quoted in the opening line, is the key to this entire prophecy. Once the challenge is set forth, Isaiah’s closing verses summarize what he has called his readers to consider up to this point. This latter portion focuses particularly on the Lord: God is everlasting and created the ends of the earth (vs. 28). The Everlasting does not faint as men do; rather, He gives power to the faint (vss. 29,30). There is no searching out His understanding by human means (vs. 28); it is best that we “wait on God,” for then we shall “shall run, and not be weary . . . walk, and not hunger” (vs. 31).

The human race falls into pessimism – whether in Isaiah’s time or in our own – when men fail to wait upon God. May we give up our earthbound fixations and worship only the Lord of Heaven!

Come let us worship and fall down before Christ. Save us, O Lord, who sing unto Thee! – Prayer at the Little Entrance

April 6 - Wednesday of the Fifth Week of Great Lent
Reading at Sixth Hour – Isaiah 41:4-14

A Chosen People: Isaiah 41:4-14, especially vs. 14: “*O Jacob, O Israel few in number, I will help you, and I will redeem you, O Israel, says God.*” During an intense persecution of the newly formed churches in Asia Minor, the Apostle Peter wrote to encourage his besieged congregations, reminding them that “you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people . . . who once were not a people but are now the people of God” (1 Pt 2:9-10). As in the days of Isaiah and Peter, we still are the *people of God*.

Notice that Isaiah’s prophecies bear the same essential message as Saint Peter’s letter. God inspired these writings in order to encourage His people. Both men wrote while enemies were contending against them. Both assured God’s people that they were the chosen of God and that the Lord would redeem them from every assault. They were not to fear but rather to trust in Him. We likewise take courage, for we also are members of the chosen people of God. Let us heed the message of the Prophet Isaiah. Other people may depend upon alliances, but we need not do so, for God is with us. Enemies of the Church ultimately count for nothing, for God Himself redeems us.

Isaiah knew the nations of the eastern Mediterranean were unsettled by successive waves of invasion and conquests. They feared the great empires that lay to the east in Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (Is 41:5). As a prophet, Isaiah poses the Lord’s question to His chosen people in the land of Judah: Who has “worked and performed” these invasions, calling these empires into existence from the beginning of history? (vs. 1-4). To this question Isaiah gives God’s own answer: “I, God, am the first, and into the future I Am” (vs. 4).

Isaiah examines the means by which the peoples of the coastal lands respond to these threats, and finds “each one judging for his neighbor, that he might help his brother” (vs. 6). In other words, they were relying on alliances and calling upon idols to save them. Craftsmen and artisans were making idols and temples; “they fastened [them] with nails. They arranged them, and they shall not be moved” (vs. 7). In other words, they relied on their own efforts to save them.

The true source of courage for God’s people in every circumstance, however, is the Lord who chose us as heirs of His promise to Abraham (vs. 8). No matter what befalls us, we must always heed the word given through the Prophet Isaiah. We are not the ones who are to arrange our affairs (vs. 9), for God tells us, “I will help and secure you” (vs. 10).

Do you feel weak? He assures you that “all your adversaries shall be put to shame and disgraced” (vs. 11). So do not run about frantically looking for help, but pray to the Lord and listen to Him who says that “they shall be as though they did not exist” (vs. 11). Events may throw us into a frenzy and threaten to overwhelm us, but *God is with us*. We have a God who can carry us through anything in this life, even death. Our worst enemies are our own fears and the whisperings of the evil one who coaxes us to tremble, to give up faith, and to trust every appealing solution – except God.

The Lord promises His chosen people that the powers of “your adversaries shall be put to shame and disgraced” by the Lord Himself (vs. 11). Assaults on God’s people – whether in the form of sickness, the “system,” rising prices, the loss of loved ones, poverty – “shall be as though they did not exist” (vs. 12). The real battle for your allegiance and faith takes place in your heart. God “holds your right hand, saying to you, ‘Fear not’” (vs. 13). Listen and believe as He declares: “O Jacob, O Israel few in number, I will help you and I will redeem you” (vs. 14).

Help us; save us; have mercy on us; and keep us, O God, by Thy grace. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

April 7 - Thursday of the Fifth Week of Great Lent
Reading at Sixth Hour – Isaiah 42:5-16

The New Covenant: Isaiah 42: 5-16, especially vs. 6: “I will . . . give You as the covenant of a race, as the light of the Gentiles. . . .” In this passage the Prophet Isaiah delivers two closely related proclamations from God, found in verses 6-9 and 14-16. Isaiah prefaces each divine announcement by introducing the Lord, who speaks for Himself in verse 5 and 10-13.

Theodoret of Cyrus points out that both proclamations concern “the Son Who possesses the glory of the Father . . . the glory of the Father that He will manifest” (*Isaiah Through the Ages*, p. 617). First God the Father proclaims the coming of God the Son to be “the covenant of a race” (vs. 6). Isaiah recognizes that this event definitely demands a *new song* from all peoples of the earth (vs. 10). In His second announcement, God declares that the advent of Christ will be His major assault against His enemies (vs. 13) who have placed a dark ignorance upon men. Henceforth the Son will guide them in “paths they have not known” (vs. 16).

God the Father – who gives the breath of life to all people but reserves the Spirit to them “who tread down earthly desires,” as Irenaeus of Lyons says (*Isaiah Through the Ages*, p. 616) – first announces the coming of His Son. His Incarnation is God’s righteous saving act of good will toward all men. The Father gives us Christ “as the covenant of a race, as the light of the Gentiles” (vs. 6). Whereas the Old Covenant was carved on tablets of stone, the New Covenant is personal – the Son comes as a man to other men, to enlighten all nations and peoples.

The purpose of the advent of the Son of God is “to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners who are bound, and those who sit in darkness from the prison house” (vs. 7). How exquisitely God describes our human predicament and the dawn of His salvation! What He offers in Christ will open “the eyes of our understanding, that the light of [His] Gospel may shine brightly in us,” for “although [we] knew God, [we] did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in [our] thoughts, and [our] foolish hearts were darkened” (Rom 1:21).

When God the Father declares, “I will not give My glory to another, nor My praise to carved images” (vs. 8), He helps us grasp the unity in essence of the Father and Son who share equally in divine glory, and in the rightful worship of men. Here, truly, are *new things* that He announces to us even “before they spring forth” (vs. 9). Be confident in God’s declarations, for He indeed caused “things from of old” to come to pass, announcing them beforehand so that they might be known as *new things* (vs. 9).

The prophet responds to God’s declaration by calling all people to “sing to the Lord a new song, you His realm. Glorify His name from the ends of the earth” (vs. 10). He mentions the peoples living in the coastal lands, in the desert villages of Kedar, east of Palestine, and on the rocky heights of Petra to the south of the Holy Land. All should sing a new song and “shout from the tops of the mountains” (vs. 12). Why? Because God “shall stir up His zeal, and cry out against His enemies with strength” (vs. 13). Always remember that the coming of Christ remains God’s all-out declaration of war against mankind’s true enemies: sin, Satan, and death. The Lord Jesus issued the edict of war by trampling down death, yes, by His own death.

Be aware that God’s second proclamation in this reading identifies the Incarnation as the end of the Lord’s restraint against His foes. In becoming man the Lord fully involved Himself in our human condition, like a woman in labor (vs. 14). He has destroyed the geographic barriers that used to separate us from God, and now leads our blind human race by “a way they did not know” (vs. 16). That way is Christ, the true and living Way (Jn 14:6).

Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered; and let them who hate Him flee before His face. – Sticheron of Pascha

April 8 - Friday of the Fifth Week of Great Lent
Reading at Sixth Hour – Isaiah 45:11-17

The Savior of Mankind: Isaiah 45:11-17, especially vs. 17: *“Israel is saved by the Lord with an everlasting salvation. They will not be ashamed or disgraced forever.”* In the twentieth century the world endured the rise and decline of two aggressive ideologies: fascism and communism. Each promised a glorious history for mankind under its banner. Each captured the hearts of loyal followers who fanned out to spread that promise of glory. By means of war and revolution these followers made great territorial gains and, without remorse, liquidated millions they identified as undesirables. Thank God, they have been largely defeated.

In the present passage from Isaiah, God declares the true conclusion of mankind’s history: the reign of Jesus Christ in the final age. Isaiah’s prophecy differs markedly from those recent infamous ideologies, however. Christ’s Kingdom is revealed as God’s will, for “God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth” (Phil 2:9-10). It is not man-made theory. Furthermore, it will not be achieved by human energy and force, but by the will of God at work in the fabric of His creation.

Understand that God makes the raw ingredients of history, including the earth and the human race. He is leading events toward “the things that are to come” (vs. 11). Most important is an unnamed “king with righteousness” (vs. 13), a ruler raised up by God and known to us, since He was manifested in the flesh and “revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles” (Eph 3:5) – our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ Jesus dominates this prophecy, which profiles Him and His Kingdom.

We learn of this king that “all his ways are right” (Is 45:13). As Saint John the Theologian teaches, “grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (Jn 1:17). “He shall build My city” (Is 45:13) is a reference to the City of God described by Saint Augustine of Hippo. This heavenly City “so long as it is wayfaring on earth, not only makes use of earthly peace but fosters and actively pursues along with other human beings a common platform in regard to all that concerns our purely human life and does not interfere with faith and worship. Of course, though, the City of God subordinates this earthly peace to that of heaven. For this is not merely true peace, but strictly speaking, for any rational creature, the only real peace. . . ” (*City of God*, p. 465).

Christ “shall build My city and return the captivity of My people, not with ransoms or gifts” (vs. 13), but with His own precious Blood and in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Lord of hosts further tells us that “Egypt labored for [Him]” (vs. 14). In the ancient world Egypt was the epitome of gross paganism. Yet under Christ’s service she produced great saints such as the Patriarchs Athanasios and Cyril and the great monastic fathers Anthony, Pachomios, and Makarios.

“Men of stature” (vs. 14) came to Christ from many places, including Ethiopia. We learn of the eunuch who served Candace, the Ethiopian queen, in Acts 8:26-39. Moses the Black was the leader of a robber band who repented and was healed by Saint Isidore. He founded a monastery with seventy-five disciples of his own and triumphed as a martyr for Christ.

All these men and many others bound themselves to the Lord Jesus with bonds of love, doing obeisance to Him. Along with the Prophet Isaiah, they found that “God is with you; and they . . . say, ‘There is no God beside You’” (vs. 14). How many of His opponents have indeed been “ashamed and disgraced” (vs. 16)! Yet the Church, the Israel of God, is “saved by the Lord with an everlasting salvation” (vs. 17).

Since Thou art Savior, O Christ, energize our hearts by Thy Holy Spirit that by His grace we may enter into the kingdom of heaven where Thou dost ever abide. – from St. Mark the Ascetic, “No Righteousness by Works”

April 9 - Saturday of the Fifth Week of Great Lent
Kellia Reading – Malachi 3:19-24

The Day of the Lord: Malachi 3:19-24, especially vs. 20: “*But to you who fear My name the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings. . . .*” The Book of Malachi ends with a prophecy of the Day of Judgment that the prophet calls “the day of the Lord” (Mal 3:19). (See also Is 2:12 and 14:3; Jer 46:10; Ez 30:3; Jl 2:11; and Am 5:18.) In prophetic writings such as Malachi, judgment is portrayed as a day of divine burning against “all who do wickedly” (vs. 19). Yet it also is described as a day of “healing” and vindication for the righteous, for those who fear the name of the Lord (vs. 20).

Hence Malachi exhorts every generation to live in accordance with the Law of the Lord, as first given to Moses. We are to be in constant expectation of the day of God’s judgment (vs. 20-21). Malachi promises that Elijah will herald the final day, coming to “turn the heart of the father to his son, and a man’s heart to his neighbor” (vs. 23).

In order to grasp Malachi’s message of fire and burning on the last great Day, we turn to Saint Paul’s warning: “Serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:28-29). What does it mean to say that “God is a consuming fire?” Why does Malachi stir our hearts with images of a great burning as the Lord destroys human beings made in His own image – consumed in flames?

Alexandre Kalomiros explains that “love is fire. Anyone who loves knows this. God is Love, so God is Fire. And fire consumes all those who are not fire themselves, and renders bright and shining all those who are fire themselves” (*The River of Fire*, p. 120). Those whom God renders bright and shining have, as Saint John of Sinai says, a soul that “longs and pants for the Lord with the fire of love” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* step 30, p. 226). Still, God destroys sin. A pre-communion prayer from Simeon the Translator asks, “O thou who art a fire consuming the unworthy: Consume me not, O my Creator, but rather pass through all my body parts, into all my joints, my reins, my heart. Burn Thou the thorns of all my transgressions.”

When we turn to the Lord Jesus with all our heart and soul, our mind and strength (Mk 12:30), we beg, like Saint Simeon, for the Savior to cleanse us. We know that the “Sun of righteousness” has risen “with healing in His wings” (Mal 3:20). Anyone who is anointed “unto the healing of body and soul” by “the hearing of faith” has his garment of incorruption preserved pure and unpolluted, because the merciful God showed mercy to him through the abundance of His love. The Gospels are filled with accounts of the healings performed by the Lord Jesus. Countless among the faithful have been restored to their right minds and established in their hearts by His gracious touch.

The great Day of the Lord will be heralded by the return of Elijah the Prophet, “who was sanctified before he was conceived . . . angelic of body and fiery of intelligence, that heavenly man and forerunner of the Second Coming of Christ.” Saint John the Baptist warns his generation “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Lk 1:17) that the Messiah is coming to lay His ax “to the root of the trees,” for “every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Mt 3:10). Christ in turn likens John the Baptist to Elijah: “But I say to you that Elijah has also come, and they did to him whatever they wished, as it is written of him” (Mk 9:13).

Let us therefore remember the moral laws given by God through His servant Moses. The ordinances that He commanded at Horeb are for all Israel – the people of the Old Covenant and of the New. Let us bend our straying hearts in loving obedience.

Wherefore, having attained privilege with God, intercede, O Holy Prophet Elijah, with Christ our Savior to grant forgiveness of sins to those who early celebrate thy holy memorial. – Troparion for Prophet Elias

April 10 - The Fifth Sunday of Great Lent, Tone 1

Kellia Reading for the Sunday of Saint Mary of Egypt – Nehemiah 12:40-44

Joy and Sorrow: Nehemiah 12:40-44, especially vs. 40: “Also that day they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and the children also rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off.” To grasp the spirit of this passage, we must first consider the anguish already endured by God’s people. The Prophet Jeremiah records the story:

The Lord turned to destroy the wall of the daughter of Zion. He stretched out a measuring line and has not turned back His hand from trampling her. Therefore, the bulwark mourned, and the wall weakened with it. Her gates sank into the ground, and He destroyed and broke her bars. Her king and her princes are among the Gentiles, and the Law is no more; and indeed, her prophets see no vision from the Lord. The elders of the daughter of Zion sit on the ground and keep silence. They throw dust on their heads and gird themselves with sackcloth. They have brought down to the ground the leading virgins in Jerusalem. My eyes fail with tears, and my heart is troubled. My glory is poured out upon the ground at the destruction of the daughter of my people. . . (Lam 2:8-11).

Both Jeremiah and Nehemiah speak of Jerusalem and its wall, as well as of the nation of Judah. Yet Jeremiah’s lament contrasts starkly with the joy of the later prophet. Between the two memoirs lay seventy years of exile for God’s people; laboring for foreign masters, they “sat down and wept” when they “remembered Zion” (Ps 136:1). During those years, Jerusalem lay in ruins.

Finally, however, under the generous policies of Persia’s King Cyrus, the exiles returned to rebuild their city and their temple. As Nehemiah writes, they now rejoiced, “for God had made them rejoice” (Neh 12:40). They saw that His hand had ended their exile and given them stamina to carry out the hard work of reconstruction. At last the day came when they could once again offer “great sacrifices” and set aside special occasion to rejoice in the rebuilding.

The mystery that is ours in Christ involves a similar kind of destruction and mourning followed by restoration and rejoicing. On the one hand, today’s reading serves as a type of God’s determination to destroy our pride, break down our defensive walls, and fill our eyes with weeping until our hearts have poured out our grief over the pristine beauty we have wasted. On the other hand God opens the way that leads back to our true city, the Church. There, as a people struggling to be healed and restored, we have the privilege of offering great sacrifices and rejoicing in the salvation accomplished by our God and Savior Jesus Christ.

Nehemiah’s emphasis on rejoicing “with great joy” (vs. 40) calls us to participate in the Divine Liturgy. Our Lord, God, and Savior gives us the celebration of the Eucharist as an act of joyous praise and thanksgiving for “all things of which we know and of which we know not.”

Likewise, “the joy of Jerusalem [is meant to be] heard afar off” (vs. 40). Men should be drawn to our worship “from afar,” as were the courtiers that Tsar Vladimir sent to Byzantium. Standing inside the Church of Hagia Sophia, they were mystically drawn up into heaven.

Such elevation of the spirit occurs when the faithful ungrudgingly give “the portions specified by the Law for the priests” as God commands (vs. 41). Our generous support of the Church, clergy, choirs, and gathering places for fellowship and education is necessary.

Yet because we are sinners, these provisions mean little if we neglect the essential “purification” (vs. 42) that God expects from us. Our struggle for renewal in Christ is diverted if we neglect the liturgy, do not support the Church’s physical and pastoral fabric, and – most especially – fail to keep our souls cleansed through confession to the Lord.

O Lord, save Thy People and bless Thine inheritance; grant us victory over our enemies. – Troparion of the Holy Cross

April 11 - Monday of the Sixth Week of Great Lent
Reading at Sixth Hour – Isaiah 48:17-49:4

The Lenten Journey: *Isaiah 48:17-49:4, especially vs. 21:* “If they shall thirst, He will lead them through the desert, and water shall flow from the rock for them.” We now enter the last week of the Great Fast. Those who have labored diligently can measure the demands of the struggle against their physical and spiritual gains and give thanks to God. If we have not kept the fast perfectly, if we have flagged at some point or have not attained the heights to which He called us in the beginning, do not mind that now. Press on, for the end is near. We can choose to finish the struggle well in the time that remains. For encouragement, the Lord gives us this reading from Isaiah to strengthen our zeal and renew our determination.

God led the Fathers of the Old Covenant, and now He shows us how to advance. He sets the course for us. If earlier in the fast we missed the peace, righteousness, and fruitful benefits of the struggle, our gracious Lord now reminds us of the wondrous blessings that come from heeding His commandments (vss. 17-19). Using images from the desert pilgrimage of God’s people after they came out of bondage in Egypt, God assures us that He will not abandon us to slavery in our sins. He exhorts us to flee the Babylon of our passions – to hasten away from self-indulgence by embracing redemption and living according to its precepts (vss. 20-21). And He warns us that the ungodly do not find life (vs. 22).

God Almighty further exhorts us, His people of the New Covenant, to heed our Redeemer. The chosen Servant of God, the One who came forth from the Virgin’s womb, embodies in Himself all of the true Israel. Although His Passion may seem like a labor in vain, Christ reminds us that the recompense of God is with Him, the Risen One (vss. 1-4).

Note that God prompts us to recall that, as His pilgrims, our labors are a God-planned course: “I am your God, who showed you how to find the way wherein you should walk” (vs. 17). As we keep the fast and struggle for repentance, we shall enter God’s holy house “in faith, reverence and fear of God.” Our “peace [shall] be like a river and [our] righteousness as a wave of the sea” (vs. 18). God desires that our fasting make us fruitful in righteous thoughts and actions so that “[our] seed would also be like the sand” (vs. 19). There will be God-pleasing and life-fulfilling results for those who enter the fray and labor to be faithful.

Think of the peace that flows from your heart when you attend the Lenten services and partake of mid-week communion with the Lord Himself in the Pre-sanctified Gifts. Think of the cleansing that fasting and prayer bring to your heart. Think of the tiny bits of progress and moments of grace that come during this season. Take heart at the proclamation of Saint John Chrysostom, which is foreshadowed in these verses: “Let no one mourn that he hath fallen again and again; for forgiveness hath risen from the grave” (*Paschal Homily*).

God directs us to “go forth from Babylon, you who are fleeing from the Chaldeans” (vs. 20). Beloved, we labor knowing full well that Christ is risen, for “the Lord delivered His servant Jacob” (vs. 20). He is present and leads us through the desert (vs. 21). Put off the old man and put on the New Man. Only the ungodly who turn away will lose out on the rejoicing (vs. 22).

Christ Himself, speaks to us in chapter 49: “Listen to Me. . . . He called My name from My mother’s womb” (vs. 1) and made “My mouth like a sharp sword” (vs. 2). As a suffering man, the Lord Jesus fulfilled ancient Israel’s task. Thus God says to Him, “You are My servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified” (vs. 3). Christ is indeed risen!

O Life-giver, my soul goeth early to the temple of Thy Holiness, because Thou art compassionate. Purify me by the compassion of Thy mercies. – Lenten troparion

April 12 - Tuesday of the Sixth Week of Great Lent
Reading at Sixth Hour – Isaiah 49:6-10

Our Lenten Shepherd: Isaiah 49:6-11, especially vs. 10: *“He who has mercy on them will comfort them; and He shall lead them by the fountains of waters.* Lent is a pilgrimage taken in communion with the Church and led by our Servant Lord. As He Himself says, “I will make every mountain as a road, and every path a pasture to them” (vs. 11). The Lenten pilgrimage follows a well-planned route, like a graded superhighway. As we approach the end of the Great Fast, determine to stay on the course that Christ our God has outlined and to remain under His guidance – for He Himself journeys with us, caring for the needs of heart, soul, and body.

To understand more deeply the journey we are taking with Him, study carefully what Isaiah discloses concerning our Shepherd in verses 6-7, the season in which we are journeying together (vs. 8), and what we may expect to encounter along the way (vss. 9-11).

Note that God the Father in these verses addresses Christ in His humanity: “It is a great thing for You to be called My Servant, to establish the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the dispersion of Israel” (vs. 6). God’s plan embraces all of history, providing salvation for everyone. Deliverance will not be limited to the ancient tribes of Jacob, nor even to the remnant of ancient Israel: “God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son” (Jn 3:16). He “desires all men to be saved” (1 Tim 2:4). Salvation is not restricted. “Behold, I give You as the covenant of a race and as the light of the Gentiles, that You should be the salvation to the ends of the earth” (Is 49:6) – what Saint Augustine calls “a remedy for mankind of a power beyond our imagining” (*Isaiah Through the Ages*, p. 722).

As God the Father continues speaking to His Son, He addresses Him as One “abhorred by the nations” (vs. 7). Here God foreshadows the Passion of Christ and those who later “spat in His face and beat Him; [while] others struck Him with the palms of their hands” (Mt 26:67).

These forecasts of the Passion, however, are linked to a triumphant prophecy that is proven true. God the Father says, “Kings shall see Him and rise, and rulers also shall worship Him for the Lord’s sake. For the Holy One of Israel is faithful” (Is 49:7). Throughout history many holy monarchs have humbled themselves before Christ and made Him king of their realms. The despised One is indeed the King of Kings who is above all kings.

When Christ came from the Father, He came for everyone. The Gospels accurately record His rejection, Passion, and Resurrection, yet we also find objective evidence in two thousand years of subsequent history that proves God did not leave the Light of the nations “under a basket” (Mt 5:15). Rather, “in the day of salvation I helped You” (Is 49:8). Thus our Shepherd is now “a covenant to the Gentiles, to establish the earth” through His Church, causing even the deserts of the world to inherit (vs. 8).

Lastly, the Lord Jesus is the Lenten Shepherd who accompanies us as we finish the fast. To every prisoner of sin He says, “Go forth” (vs. 9). The Good Shepherd frees us, giving us light, slaking our thirst, protecting and comforting us (vss. 9-10). Do you see? A merciful and caring Lord – our true Shepherd – assures us that we “shall not hunger, neither shall [we] thirst, nor shall the burning heat of the sun strike [us]; but He who has mercy on [us] will comfort [us]; and He shall lead [us] by the fountains of waters” (vs. 10). His strength is more than sufficient to enable each of us to finish well the fast.

I have passed all my life in darkness; for the night of sin hath brought me darkness and dense fog; but since Thou art the Savior, make me manifest as a child of the day. – Ode Five, Great Canon of Saint Andrew of Crete

April 13 - Wednesday of the Fifth Week of Great Lent
Reading at Sixth Hour – Isaiah 58:1-11

Assessing the Fast: Isaiah 58:1-12, especially vss. 1-2: “My people. . . seek Me day by day, and desire to know My ways. As a people who did righteousness, and did not forsake the judgment of their God, they now ask Me about righteous judgment, and desire to draw near to God.” Fasting is an important form of piety, devotion, and spiritual growth. When our Lord Jesus came among us, this practice was already well established among the people of God.

This reading from Isaiah reveals that, prior to the Lord Jesus’ teaching about fasting (see Mt 6:16-18; 9:14-17; Lk 18:9-14), God had already defined the essentials. These prophecies represent both Holy Tradition and history. As we observe the harmony between the word of the Lord in the teachings of Isaiah and Christ, we may use this passage as a God-given measuring rod to evaluate our fasting.

We ponder these verses to help us finish well the fast that we began. It is not too late to set the course straight. The good thief found Paradise in a single moment while crucified beside the Lord on an adjoining cross. Let God touch your heart! Read a verse from Isaiah, consider it, and ask the questions below to correct, support, and guide you toward Pascha.

Verse 1: Which do I use, my standards or God’s? Study the Beatitudes (Mt 5:3-12), the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:1-17), the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), or the apostles’ teachings in Romans 12, Ephesians 4-6; 1 Peter 2-4, and the Epistle of James.

Verse 2: What in me is resisting God’s teaching, His guidance, or His correction?

Verse 3: What do I believe pleases God in my fasting? Is it limited food and extra prayers, or am I using these means to grow in love and obedience to Him? How does my fasting serve my ego, goals, and needs rather than the Lord’s desires and goals? Which of God’s graces do I miss in my self-serving? And lastly, do I justify being cross, curt, or mean when I fast?

Verse 4: Have I increased or decreased my quarreling during the fast? *Verse 5:* Do I make my fasting visible to others rather than hiding my devotion to the Lord as He commands (Mt 6:16-18)?

Verse 6: What efforts have I made to remove every circumstance and condition that might lead others to sin? How have I made life more difficult for others? Have I eased the pain of others? What wrongs have I corrected to lighten the struggle of others?

Verse 7: What have I done personally to relieve someone’s hunger, to provide shelter to the homeless, and assure others of needed clothing? *Verse 8:* Have I asked God to enlighten me in practical ways so that I might provide aid, comfort, and assistance to some needy person or family?

Verse 9: How often have I asked God to free me, to notice and hear my problems, while I neglect the dignity, freedom, and cries of others?

Verse 10: To what degree do I approach helping others as a legalistic duty, rather than sharing and aiding them with a heart full of thanksgiving to God who has so richly provided for me?

Verse 11: To what extent do I fast merely to please myself or to impress my fellow Christians, rather than seeking to become more aware of God’s presence?

Verse 12: What aspects of fasting do I find spiritually empty? Is there a part of me that sees the fast as just one more thing to get through? How has the fast added to or detracted from my growth in faith, hope, and love? Am I drawing nearer to God and finding His peace in my heart?

Grant me reverence, estrangement from evil, holy discipline, and save me, O Lord! – Pure Monday Vespers

April 14 - Thursday of the Sixth Week of Great Lent – Isaiah 65:8-17

Reading at Sixth Hour

Completing the Fast: Isaiah 65:8-17, especially vss. 15-16: “My elect . . . who serve Him shall be called by a new name, which shall be blessed upon the earth. For they shall bless the true God. . . .” Saint Nikolai of Zicha thus describes a Paschal liturgy he attended in Jerusalem: “When the Patriarch sang ‘Christ is risen,’ a heavy burden fell from our souls. We felt as if we also had been raised from the dead. . . . Coming out from the service at dawn, we began to regard everything in the light of the glory of Christ’s Resurrection, and all appeared different from what it had yesterday; everything seemed better, more expressive, more glorious” (*Lenten Triodion*, p. 13)

By the power of the Holy Spirit, the faithful in Christ are blessed to meet this same new reality in the Divine Liturgy – a re-creation in which everything becomes “better, more expressive, more glorious.” Our good God foreshadows all this in today’s verses from Isaiah, which speak of the age to come: “There shall be a new heaven and a new earth, and they shall not remember the former things, nor shall these things come into their heart” (vs. 17).

The glorious and radiant life of which the prophet speaks impels us onward to embrace the final days of Great Lent’s “bright sadness.” We are inspired to complete the fast and enter Holy Week so that we may join at last in the Paschal cry: “Christ is risen!”

This particular prophecy from Isaiah describes the unmerited inheritance that God has prepared for those of the New Covenant – “My people who sought Me” (vs. 10). At the same time it explores the bittersweet but missed opportunities of the ancient people of God – and reminds Christians of the legacy we have received from them. We are blessed to “rejoice exceedingly in gladness” as the Lord’s servants and His “elect” (vss. 14,15).

The prophecy begins with a word from God: “As the grape shall be found in a cluster, and they shall say, ‘Do not destroy it, for there is a blessing from the Lord in it,’ so shall I do for the sake of him who serves Me. For his sake I will not destroy them all” (vs. 8). The Holy Fathers understand Christ to be the seed of the grape from which the New Vine has sprouted, for He was born of the ancient people of God, that is, from the old vine. Isaiah’s prophecy is accurate: God indeed brought “forth the seed of Jacob and the seed of Judah” (vs. 9), for the Lord Jesus was a physical descendant of Jacob and Judah. Thus, “My elect shall inherit it, and My servants shall dwell there” (vs. 9).

Take special note of the radical reversal of circumstances experienced by the Old Covenant people of God. The prophet describes with vivid metaphors the flowering of the Church and those whom God calls “My servants.” He interweaves this imagery with predictions of worsening conditions for all who reject God – a prophetic image that history confirms. After two disastrous, failed revolts against the Roman empire, the Jews faced century after century of dispersion, exile, persecutions, and marginalization. Even today their return to the Holy Land remains fraught with violence and disorder. They appear destined “to the sword” and “slaughter” (vs. 12). Why? “Because I called you, but you did not obey; I spoke, but you refused to listen” (vs. 12).

Let us not be foolish, as some have been, and despise Israel after the flesh. Rather, let us “consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off” (Rom 11:22).

O Lord of hosts, be with us, for we have none other help but Thee. Have mercy on us! – Great Compline

April 15 - Friday of the Sixth Week of Great Lent
Reading at Sixth Hour – Isaiah 66:10-24

The Eternal Pascha: Isaiah 66:10-24, especially vs. 10: “Be glad, O Jerusalem, and celebrate holy days in her. All you who love her, rejoice exceedingly, and all you who mourn over her. . . .” Christ the Life-giver is our Pascha, and this prophecy of Isaiah radiates with God’s eternal Pascha – Grace Himself from on High. Let none imagine that the Lord Jesus’ Paschal victory lies in the past as a one-time event.

In fact, our celebration of Great and Holy Week transforms time and transcends its very limits. “The cross, the grave, [and] the third day resurrection” are eternal, even as the Lord Jesus’ Resurrection is God’s supreme, eternal promise and the earnest of the Life to come. Let us arise day by day during the Holy Week ahead, seeking His timeless glory, until on the night of Pascha the uncreated Light dawns with great exultation and joy.

But be sober and aware. We need to take stock of ourselves as servants of the Lord, considering both our service to Him and our sloth and disregard. Isaiah confronts us with a stern warning. We indeed find assurance that “the Lord’s hand shall be known by those who fear Him; but He shall threaten the disobedient” as well (vs. 14). Let us confess and cry out, “Lord, have mercy!”

The prophet opens with a call to all among the people of God who love Jerusalem, both those who rejoice for her and those who mourn over her (vs. 10). As Alexander Schmemmann teaches, “Christ came to ‘gather into one the children of God who were scattered abroad’ (Jn 11:52). And from the very beginning the Eucharist was a manifestation and realization of the unity of the new people of God, gathered by Christ and in Christ” (*The Eucharist*, p. 22-3). We have fasted; now let us go to Lazarus’ tomb, enter Jerusalem, join the Lord in the Upper Room, pray in Gethsemane, and weep at Golgotha. Soon we will also rejoice with the New Jerusalem, our Mother the Church.

Indeed let us come gladly to our Mother, for from her we shall receive the Holy Gifts of eternity and “take pleasure in nursing because of the entrance of her glory” (vs. 11) – that is, of Christ our God. Saint Paul says, “In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace” (Eph 2:13,14). For “the Lord’s hand shall be known by those who fear Him; but He shall threaten the disobedient” (Is 66:14).

Above all, we must heed the prophet’s warning that “the Lord shall come like a fire . . . to render His vengeance with anger and His renunciation with a flame of fire. For all the earth shall be judged in the fire of the Lord, and all flesh with His sword; and many shall be wounded by the Lord” (vss. 15-16). Let us not be among “those who purify and cleanse themselves in the gardens and porches, who eat the meat of a pig or any abomination, they shall be destroyed together” (vs. 17). If you “have left your first love,” remember “from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works” (Rv 2:5).

When the Lord says, “They shall bring your brethren from among all the Gentiles as a gift to the Lord . . . to the holy city Jerusalem” (vs. 20), He refers to the apostolic laborers who are making “disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). We acknowledge that the Lord’s commission is laid upon everyone in the Church, without exception. We are to bring our brethren as a gift “with psalms into the house of the Lord” (vs. 20). Whether overseas or in our own cities, among neighbors and friends or with new acquaintances and strangers, let our discipleship reach out!

We do well to consider the promise that the Lord sets before us in this passage: “The new heaven and the new earth which I make shall remain” (vs. 22). Let us labor for that which endures and not find ourselves among those who have “transgressed” against the Lord (vs. 24).

Grant us in this world knowledge of Thy truth, and in the age to come, life everlasting. –Third Antiphon prayer

April 16 - Lazarus Saturday – Zephaniah 3:14-19
Second Reading at Great Vespers for Palm Sunday

Victor Over Death: Zephaniah 3:14-19, especially vs. 16: “At that time the Lord shall say to Jerusalem, ‘O Zion, be of good courage; do not let your hands grow slack.’” When the Lord Jesus came into ancient Bethany, there were two general reactions to His visit. Some in the village contended that Lazarus might have been healed, if Jesus had only arrived sooner (Jn 11:21,37). But with Lazarus now dead four days, no one envisioned the possibility that Jesus would restore him to life.

During His three years of ministry, the Lord had convinced many that He could reverse illness and prevent death. However, the case of Lazarus seemed impossible simply because of the body’s corruption after four days in the tomb (Jn 11:39). Even after the Lord told His disciples that Lazarus was dead and assured them, “I go that I may wake him up” (vs. 11), they followed Him in doubtful silence. An aura of futility enervated everyone; their hands were *slack*, overwhelmed by fatal assumptions (Zep 3:16).

Can you imagine running through the streets of Bethany shouting, “The Lord, the King of Israel, is in your midst . . . do not let your hands grow slack” (vs. 15-16)? Such an impulse might be understandable if you knew the account of Lazarus in Saint John’s Gospel, but how probable would it be otherwise? How deep is your conviction that God will remove our rotting away in death? Let us consider the whole issue more carefully and be encouraged by the Prophet Zephaniah’s word.

Zephaniah exhorts God’s people to sing, shout, and “rejoice with your whole heart” (vs. 14), and he gives them reasons to do so. Likewise, by raising Lazarus after his friend was four days dead, the Lord Jesus gives a solid basis for people to cry out, “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! The King of Israel!” (Jn 12:13). In the crowd are eyewitnesses “who were with Him when He called Lazarus out of his tomb and raised him from the dead” (12:17). Yet as Saint John tells us, others who were *not* present at Lazarus’ tomb also meet the Lord “because they heard that He had done this sign” (12:18). Like them, we enjoy the testimony of reliable witnesses – not only to the Lord’s raising of Lazarus, but also to the reality of Christ’s own Resurrection.

Look at why the prophet urges the people to such exuberant celebration: “The Lord has taken away your iniquities” (Zep 3:15). Why do men die? Because “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). All of us fall under God’s judgment at the expulsion from Paradise (Gen 3:3,24). But the Apostle Paul agrees with Zephaniah: “There is . . . now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1).

Are we not united to Christ if we “walk . . . according to the Spirit” (Rom 8:1)? Zephaniah further declares that God “ransomed you from your enemies” (Zep 3:15). At Lazarus’ empty tomb and then at His own light-filled sepulcher, the Lord Jesus cast out death, corruption, and all tears. To cap off his reasoning, Zephaniah reminds us that “the Lord, the King of Israel, is in your midst” (vs. 15). Christ is among us! He is and ever shall be!

What evil need we fear now? Loss of income? Social ostracism? Incurable cancer? Aging and death? The only evil that we might reasonably fear is the loss of our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ. Listen to Him: “The Lord your God is with you. The Mighty One shall save you” (vs. 17). The Lord Jesus saves those that are oppressed and receives them that are rejected. He makes “them a praise and renowned throughout the whole earth” (vs. 19).

O Vanquisher of death, Hosanna in the highest. Glory to Thy might, O Savior! –Troparion of Lazarus Saturday

April 17 - Palm Sunday – Zechariah 9:9-15, Tone 2
Third Reading at Great Vespers

Christians Rejoice! Zechariah 9:9-15, especially vs. 9: “*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Proclaim it aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold your King comes to you; He is righteous and saving; He is gentle and mounted upon a donkey, even a young foal.*” Zechariah’s exhortation to rejoice is echoed in the hymns for Palm Sunday: “Rejoice and be happy, O city of Zion. Be joyful and glad, O Church of God; for behold, thy King is come sitting upon a colt and praised by youth.” That same charge – “rejoice in Him” – appears in many of the prophecies of the Old Testament when reference is made to the Christ, the Anointed Messiah (cf.: Ps 2:11 and 34:9; Is 9:3; Zep 3:14).

Zechariah gives us cause to rejoice, for his portrait of a future Monarch matches the Lord Jesus Christ perfectly. Christ our God is the just ruler, the true Savior, meekness incarnate, and the author of salvation. In His Kingdom, weapons of war are destroyed, prosperity abounds, captives are freed, and worldly wisdom is defeated. Christ is not imaginary, but truly God.

Consider Christ our God, the King Himself. Above all, He is just and equitable in all His judgments (Zec 9:9). He discerns the inner thoughts of all (Mk 12:43-44): He clearly perceived Judas’ treachery (Lk 22:21), Peter’s capacity to love and serve despite moments of weakness (Jn 21:17), and Thomas’ ability to overcome his doubts (Jn 20:27). We have seen gathering evidence that, as King, He will gather all nations “before Him [see Zec 9:10] and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats” (Mt 25:32).

In joining Himself *eternally* to our humanity, our Lord Jesus manifests perfect meekness, the virtue to which He calls His servants, promising them “they shall inherit the earth” (Mt 5:5). With all power available to Him at every moment, He stood mute and meek before His accusers and submitted to the power of the Roman imperial government (Mt 27:13-14).

Supremely, the Lord Jesus is *saving* (Zec 9:9). Jesus was born to be the Savior, as the Gospel teaches (Mt 1:21). We are saved from divine wrath and judgment by His blood and reconciled by His risen life (Rom 5:9-10). He declares, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (Jn 14:6). He came into time and space, overcoming every limitation of human life in order to raise us to unbounded, eternal life with Him. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved” (Jn 3:16-17).

The Prophet Zechariah’s description of Christ’s reign portrays the Kingdom of God and the age to come. This eternal dominion already influences the present world order. The Lord’s Kingdom is at work in the hearts and souls of the faithful within whom He reigns, and through whom His presence in this world is extended, perceived, and realized.

But let our rejoicing be modest for, as the Lord Jesus warns, “Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword” (Mt 10:34). Only in the end shall He command “peace among the nations” (Zec 9:10). Yet His Life-giving Spirit is even now at work. There are moments when weapons and war are set aside (vs. 10), when the wealth of the world is shared with those in need (vs. 12), when men and women bound by sin are freed (vs. 11), and when the modern-day philosophers (vs. 13) – the pundits of worldly wisdom – are confounded by Christ’s power to heal and restore lives. Rejoice, O people of God!

Upborne upon the heavenly throne, and seated upon the earthly foal, O Christ our God, receive the praise of angels and our hymns as we exclaim, Blessed is the King who comes! –Kontakion of Palm Sunday

April 18 - Great and Holy Monday – Ezekiel 1:1-20
Reading at Sixth Hour

The Radiant Throne: Ezekiel 1:1-20, especially vs. 13: “*In the midst of the living creatures there was an appearance as of burning coals of fire, as an appearance of lamps turning among the living creatures. There was the brightness of fire, and out of the fire lightning came forth.*” During the first three days of Great and Holy Week, the Old Testament readings at Sixth Hour report the theophany through which God called Ezekiel to be His Prophet. In today’s reading, a radiant throne appears amidst light, fire, and lightning, surrounded by Cherubim (Ez 1:13). In the second reading, God commands Ezekiel to attend to His word (Ez 2:1). In the third, God reveals “lamentation and mourning and woe,” which oddly taste “as sweet as honey” (Ez 2:10; 3:3).

God calls Ezekiel to reveal a great truth to the ancient people of God – both those enslaved in Babylon and those still in Judah. The latter, though not yet deported, soon will either die or be enslaved for rebellion against the Babylonians, thrusting the entire nation into affliction. The Church reads these telling lessons at the beginning of our commemoration of the Lord’s Passion. They remind us of God’s great faithfulness to His people even in times of unspeakable anguish. These readings are followed immediately by excerpts from the Gospels that connect the heavenly glory of God with the Passion of Christ.

Today’s reading focuses on God’s radiant throne, described as a massive chariot (vss. 13-20) escorted by four gleaming cherubim, herein called “living creatures” (vss. 5-20). The prophet begins by identifying himself, his age, and his status as a Levitical priest and a deported slave in captivity (vss. 1-3). Then, he describes the heavenly throne and the cherubim in great detail. The divine appearance comes with wind and cloud, “fire flashing” and “brightness in it” (vs. 4), accompanied by the four majestic beings and moved by the spirit of life (vs. 20). What can we make of this mystical vision of God’s throne?

Let us begin with Ezekiel. Through his father, Buzi, Ezekiel was descended from Aaron and thus qualified for the priesthood (vs. 3). At thirty years of age, he was eligible for the first time to serve as a priest in the Temple. But how could he begin his sacred service? The only site at which God’s ancient priests served was in the Temple at Jerusalem. Yet Ezekiel was a deportee, a captive slave in pagan Babylon, far from the destroyed Temple.

However, consider that Christ our God has made *you* His priest. Although He now reigns from His glorious throne, our Lord Jesus, like Ezekiel, became a slave in this Babylon of sin and death in order to free you and me. The mercy of God! Priests like Ezekiel, under the Old Covenant, offered “repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins” (Heb 10:11). Yet we boldly “enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus” (vs. 19), because our Savior chose us to be “a royal priesthood . . . His own special people that [we] may proclaim the praises of Him who called [us] out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pt 2:9).

Consider also the glory of God disclosed to Ezekiel so vividly as a sweeping wind, a great cloud, brightness and gleaming fire (vss. 4,13). The same uncreated light that shone on Mount Tabor reveals the One who died on the throne of the Cross for our sake. Bow before Him!

Lastly, consider the four “living creatures” (vss. 5-20). Ezekiel shares a vision of the cherubim surrounding the glorious throne (vss. 12,20), recalling the Lord on the throne of the Cross with angels worshipping Him. Worship Him!

The whole creation, beholding Thee crucified, trembled; and the foundations of the earth shook for dread of Thy might. Glory to Thee Who wast crucified and rose from the dead. – Great and Holy Friday Orthros

April 19 - Great and Holy Tuesday – Ezekiel 1:21-2:1
Reading at Sixth Hour

The Majestic God: Ezekiel 1:21-2:1, especially vs. 1:27-2:1: *“I saw . . . and I fell down on my face, and heard the voice of One speaking. Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak to you.’”* We continue Ezekiel’s account of the vision he received “in the midst of the captivity” (Ez 1:1), in which he describes the radiant throne revealed by God. Today the prophet turns to the Person of the Lord Himself, integrating the description of the “four living creatures” (vss. 5-21) into a portrait of God enthroned in His heavenly majesty.

Read carefully in order to grasp the whole of this vision. The heavens open to Ezekiel through a cloud (vs. 4). The prophet then sees four radiant cherubim, the living creatures who fly beneath the great throne of God (vss. 5-14). The throne itself is set up on a vast expanse of awesome crystal – called a “firmament” in this translation (vss. 21-24) – a surface akin to the sapphire pavement described in Exodus 24:10 or the sea of glass in Revelation 4:6. Ezekiel’s famous “wheels” move in perfect concert with the cherubim (Ez 1:14-20). The throne is a royal chariot, by which we understand that God travels everywhere freely.

Certain truths concerning God emerge from this vivid imagery. He is “everywhere present” and accompanied by angelic hosts (vs. 21). He is Almighty – awe-inspiring in His majesty (vs. 27). Man is made in His image (vs. 25), yet men rightfully fall down before His majesty (vs. 27). In the vision of God we face magnificence. Let us consider, as we did yesterday, how we are to relate this vision to the humble Lord Jesus in His Passion.

Once again, the Church reads the account of this vision immediately before reading from the Passion narrative, as an aid to help us understand that we are confronting One and the same God. The mortal darkness that falls over our hearts clouds our vision (Rom 1:21). A godless view of life blinds the men and women of this age, and often we fail to glimpse God in the broken man on the Cross – yet He is the very One seated on the throne of sapphire (Ez 1:25). “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor 1:18). On Great and Holy Friday, we hear these words: “The whole creation, O Christ, hath been transfigured by fear at beholding Thee suspended on the Cross.” Let us cry out, “O Lord, glory to Thee, ”to Him who willingly endured the Cross.

Ezekiel’s prophetic vision teaches us to see power in the Cross – an unimaginable power from the source of all power, from God Himself. What glorious irony there is in the Passion! The frail God-man stands before Pilate. He seems a mere victim of overwhelming forces. Realize that such dark powers still seek to frighten men today. Let us name and disarm them, for they are demonic, working through political, social, and physical entities. They join together “against the Lord, and against His Christ” (Ps 2:2), but “He that dwelleth in the heavens shall laugh them to scorn” (Ps 2:4). The One surrounded with “the appearance of fire . . . round about” (Ez 1:26) “shall herd them with a rod of iron” (Ps 2:9).

Finally, the figure of Ezekiel lying prostrate before the “glory of the Lord” incites us to humble ourselves before the Holy Lord Jesus. “O come, let us worship and fall down before Him” (Ps 94:6). On Great and Holy Thursday, we will approach the Cross and kiss the feet of the Almighty on His majestic throne. Is He not speaking to us now when He commands, “Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak to you” (Ez 2:1)?

When Thou shalt come, O righteous Judge, and the river shall flow before Thy judgment seat, deliver me then from the unquenchable fire and make me worthy to stand at Thy right hand. – Kontakion of the Sunday of the Last Judgment

April 20 - Great and Holy Wednesday – Ezekiel 2:2-3:3

Reading at Sixth Hour

Foreshadowing the Passion: Ezekiel 2:2-3:3, especially vs. 3:3: “Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, your mouth shall eat and your stomach will be filled with this scroll that is given you.’ So I ate it, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey.” God revealed Himself to Ezekiel while he was in Babylon in “the midst of the captivity” (Ez 1:1). The prophet – along with many of God’s people – had been a slave for nearly five years. And now the destruction of Jerusalem was imminent – a time when those of God’s people who had remained in Judah would likewise face death or deportation and bondage.

As the entire vision unfolds (Ez 1:1-2:2), heavenly wonders and glory are revealed to the prophet. Then God commissions Ezekiel to proclaim bitter truths to His chosen people. The task will be met with resistance, but the Lord explains that it will be the same type of opposition that has already provoked the Lord against the people. Ezekiel should expect hard looks, fits of stinging anger, fearsome words, and threats against his life (vs. 6). As so often happens with *hard* truths, the messenger as well as his message will face fierce and determined opposition.

The vision revealed Ezekiel’s entire life work to him, and he became a type of the Lord Jesus. The prophet’s ministry thus foreshadowed the Passion of Christ. As Ezekiel was born for affliction, so also the Lord, in taking on flesh, assumed a ministry that ended in crucifixion and death. But there was God-given sweetness and triumph in the Resurrection.

God calls Ezekiel “Son of man” (vs. 2:3), a common Hebrew form of address that the Lord Jesus adopts when referring to Himself (cf. Mt 8:20, Mk 14:41, Jn 3:13). God uses this form of address to bridge the gap between the awesome divine nature displayed in the vision and the finite nature of His servant Ezekiel. The Lord Jesus uses Son of man similarly in referring to Himself – He expresses condescension to mankind and unity with our fallen condition. In both instances God reaches out from infinite to finite.

Notice God’s words when He commissions the prophet: “I am sending you to the house of Israel” (vs. 2:3). The Lord Jesus likewise reminds His listeners that He is sent from God to the house of Israel (cf. Mt 10:40, Mk 12:6, Lk 4:18, Jn 5:23). Saint Paul describes Christ as He who “humbled Himself,” made Himself “of no reputation,” and became a “bondservant” for all (see Phil 2:7-8); here, God calls Ezekiel to accept rejection by his fellow slaves and countrymen.

Ezekiel is truly a type of the Lord Jesus, for when God calls the prophet to speak on His behalf, He directs him in this manner: “You shall speak My words” (vs. 7). As soon as he eats – receives – the word of God (vs. 8), Ezekiel is to digest the word of God inwardly (vs. 3:1). Observe how, in this process, Ezekiel prefigures Jesus, for Christ said, “I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me” (Jn 5:30).

Finally, the Prophet stands as a type of Christ because the message that God “unrolled . . . before” Ezekiel on the heavenly scroll is “lamentations and mourning and woe” (Ez 2:10) – and yet Ezekiel willingly receives it and finds it sweet. Even in his servile existence in Babylon the prophet consistently obeys God even to the point of facing death (vs. 6). Listening to Ezekiel, the ear of faith hears Christ’s voice in the garden of Gethsemane: “O My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will” (Mt 26:39). With the honey of Resurrection in His mouth, Christ embraces His Passion on behalf of all who choose to follow Him.

O compassionate Lord, I magnify Thy Passion, with Thy Resurrection: Glory to Thee! – Vespers for Great and Holy Friday

April 21 - Great and Holy Thursday – Isaiah 50:4-11
Third Reading at Vespers

Follow the Savior: Isaiah 50:4-11, especially vs. 10: “Who among you fears the Lord? Let him listen to the voice of His Servant. You who walk in darkness and have no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely upon God.” Christians who know the faith and read this passage will discern here the Passion of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The words fire devotion. We are astounded by the foresight of the prophet. In this vein, Saint Nikolai of Zicha encourages us to “examine, my brethren, how exact this prophecy is, word for word. Examine with amazement how the discerning man of God foresaw through the barrier of several hundred years more clearly than the ordinary eye sees the clear bottom in shallow water” (*Prologue from Ochrid*, vol. 3, p. 244). Yes, the prophet truly was used by God to forecast what would come to pass.

Now, as you reflect upon Isaiah’s words, go into the vineyard like the obedient son and labor for your salvation as the Father has bidden (Mt 21:29). Let us grasp the obedience of the Lord so that we may follow Him. He did not turn away from the shame of spitting but made His “face like a solid rock and . . . would not be ashamed” (Is 50:7). As good teachers and pastors, the Holy Fathers valued application above all. Let us learn from our Lord’s example and follow Him in faith – not merely receiving Christ’s saving acts as an awesome divine gift, but embracing His Passion and taking up our own cross, whatever it may be.

The first two verses of this reading reveal the mindfulness of the Lord Jesus during His Passion. Justin Martyr observes that the Master had always before confounded the Pharisees and scribes, yet during the Passion He “kept silence, and chose to return no answer to any one in the presence of Pilate” (*Dialogue with Trypho*). What was the reason for His silence? Was Christ silent merely to prove that Isaiah was a true prophet? Of course not! The Lord Jesus challenges us to seek composure in Him. As Saint Ambrose says, “How many have I seen fall into sin by speaking, but scarcely one by keeping silent; and so it is more difficult to know how to keep silent than to speak. He is wise, then, who knows how to keep silent” (*On the Duties of the Clergy* 1.2). In His humanity the Lord knew “when to speak a word at a fitting time” (vs. 4).

In the following verses, Christ models the virtue of embracing affliction, shame, and humiliation. “I gave My back to whips, and My cheeks to blows; and I turned not away My face from the shame of spitting” (vs. 6). Saint Athanasios pleads: “O, my dearly beloved, if we shall gain comfort from afflictions, if rest from labors, if health after sickness, if from death immortality, it is not right to be distressed by the temporal ills that lay hold on mankind” (*Letter 10 for Pascha*). Like the Lord, and only by His aid, we are called to gain the grace of giving our backs to scourges and our cheeks to blows. But, oh, how we are wont, in our flesh, to dodge the badges of shame.” As Saint Isaac the Syrian says: “God for your sake humbled Himself, but you, for your own sake, do not humble yourself” (*Isaiah Through the Ages*, p. 744). Nevertheless, Saint Isaac adds: “By your labors your wounds are healed.” Let us not fear but follow, crying, “Lord, save me!” (Mt 14:30).

The last two verses are a call from Him who became a servant for our salvation. He invites us to “trust in the name of the Lord and rely upon God” (Is 50:10). He expects us to translate His acts into our lives, to accept the risks of faith. Recall our paschal invitation to “take light from the Light that is never overtaken by night.” Let each of us “kindle a fire” and “feed a flame” that we may “walk in the light of . . . the flame [we] kindled” (vs. 11). God will not fail us, even though He allows affliction and sorrow.

O Christ our God, Thou alone seest the weakness of each one of us. Help us, that we may discover that which is necessary to our eternal salvation. To Thee be glory and praise. – Saint Nikolai of Zicha

April 22 - Great and Holy Friday – Isaiah 52:13-54:1
Third Reading at Vespers

The Prophetic Jewel: Isaiah 52:13-54:1, especially 53:6: “All we like sheep have gone astray. Man has gone astray in his way, and the Lord delivered Him over for our sins.” From earliest times the Church has approached today’s astounding prophecy as the *fifth Gospel* (Barrois, *Face of Christ in the Old Testament*, p. 120). This crown jewel among the riches of Isaiah is customarily read at Sixth Hour on Great and Holy Friday (and also at Vespers), recalling that portentous moment in AD 33 when from noon “until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land” (Mt 27:45). Surely we read these inspired words with dread in our hearts, fearing that we might be indulging in the mortal error of Uzzah, who foolishly stretched out his hand to steady the Ark of the Covenant (see 2 Kgs 6:6).

Father Paul Tarazi comments on the “chiastic” structure of this passage, meaning that its verses are arranged in the form of a cross, like the Greek letter *X* (*chi*):

A (52:13-15) B (53:1-3)

C (53:4-6)

B' (53:7-9) A' (53:10-12)

In **A**, the Servant is glorified before kings, while in **B** He suffers and is humiliated. **C** reveals the fact that the Servant’s suffering *is for the sin of His fellows*. In **B'**, the Servant’s humiliation and suffering are unto death, while in **A'** the Servant is glorified before the great and strong.

Note the crossing which occurs at the letter **C**. As Tarazi notes, “The new idea can be found at the center. . . . Its theme was not even hinted at by the previous poems [of Isaiah]” (*Old Testament Introduction*, vol. 2, p. 180). For us, the chiastic form of this famous prophecy of the Lord’s crucifixion warms the heart, calling forth our praise to God. Exploring Isaiah’s chiasm, let us examine its three central elements (**A**, **B**, and **C**).

A. Christ our God has been “exalted and glorified exceedingly” (vs. 52:13) through the ages since that day when He offered Himself up for our iniquities. He is the wonder of nations wherever His Gospel has been proclaimed (vs. 15). Isaiah thus begins with the glory that nations have raised to Christ. He ends with a similar announcement: “The Lord wishes to cleanse Him of His wound. . . . The Lord wishes to take away the pain of His soul, to show Him light . . . and to pronounce righteous the Righteous One who serves many well” (53:10-11). As a result, “He shall inherit many . . . because His soul was delivered over to death. . . . and He bore the sins of many” (vs. 12).

B In verses 53:1-3 the Lord’s earthly ignominy is highlighted, while in 7-9 the cost of this humiliation becomes clear: “For His life is taken from the earth, and because of the lawlessness of My people He was led to death” (vs. 8). According to Saint Nikolai of Zicha, Christ “clothed Himself in simple garments, so that He might impress us, not by His garb but by the power of His spirit. . . . By tradition, His face was swarthy and His hair chestnut-colored” (*Prologue from Ochrid*, vol. 3, p. 253). The saint reminds us that Christ transformed shame and humility into virtues not with words, but by offering His very life.

C In verses 53:4-6 the “fifth Gospel” is proclaimed most clearly. Theodoret of Cyrus pronounces this abiding judgment: “We each fall under the blow of chastisements for having sinned, but He, although He Himself was free from sin, bore His chastisements for our sake. . . . It is He Who has taken the chastisement on Himself and Who has granted us the peace” (*Isaiah Through the Ages*, p. 787). Christ, the uncreated divine Light Himself, illumines every word of this crown jewel of prophecy!

A salvation Thou produced in the midst of the earth, O Christ our God, when Thou didst stretch out Thy pure hands upon the Cross, calling together all the nations, who cry to Thee, O Lord, glory to Thee. – Sixth Hour prayer, Great and Holy Friday

April 23 - Great and Holy Saturday – Ezekiel 37:1-14
Reading at the Vesperal Liturgy of Saint Basil

The Mystery of Resurrection: Ezekiel 37:1-14, especially vs. 3: “Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’ So I answered, ‘O Lord, You know this.’” God speaks through His Prophet Ezekiel to show us “a great multitude of bones on the face of the plain. They were very dry” (Ez 37: 2). We confront bleak death. Can it be undone?

Throughout our lives death occurs repeatedly. A little child loses his favorite teddy bear and asks plaintively, “Where is Bear?” His parents do not know and seem not to care. The child even suspects his parents of taking the toy and disposing of it. He wanders everywhere, searching, but never finds his little furry companion. When he realizes it is gone, a piece of him dies.

As we grow older, much is wasted before us. Friendships and marriages die. Hopes and visions die. Death leers at us at every turn. As our strength and capacities diminish, we may even read the obituaries every day to see if our name is listed – or to compare our own years with the ages of those who died!

Father Georges Florovsky offers this notable disclaimer: “Human death did not belong to the divine order of creation. It was not normal or natural for man to die.” Death is not in accord with the will of God; it is alien, an enemy in league with the evil one who is the purveyor of death. Florovsky reminds us that death is “the wages of sin” (Rom 6:23) and stoutly rejects any notion of death “as a release of an immortal soul out of the bondage of the body.” He counters with the worldview of Scripture, which holds forth the great truth that “death is not a release, it is a catastrophe” (*The Bible and the Holy Fathers*, p. 909).

By bringing us into the valley of dry bones, God sets a mystery before us: “Can these bones live?” (Ez 37:3). Cancer, heart attacks, tsunamis, suicide bombers, earthquakes, and the graves of our war dead may lead us to reply, “Unlikely!” But Ezekiel does not answer this way. He defers to the power, mercy, and boundless love of God. “O Lord, You know this” (vs. 3). Yes, death defies the image of God within us. We cry out, “What of death, O Lord?” Is this the end – a pile of weathered bones in the valley of hades?

The word of the Lord to Ezekiel arrests our attention: “Thus says the Lord to these bones: ‘Behold, I will bring the Spirit of life upon you. I will put muscles on you and bring flesh upon you. I will cover you with skin and put my Spirit into you. Then you shall live and know that I am the Lord’” (vss. 5-6). The Prophet Ezekiel was a slave, his country devastated by conquest and deportation. Yet God promises him, “Behold, I will open your tombs, bring you up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel” (vs. 12).

God’s promise seemed no less incredible to the disciples who scattered after the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus. When He died on the cross and entered that plain of dry bones, where was God and His promise? Let us learn from Ezekiel. The prophet obeys God: “So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the Spirit entered into them and they lived and stood upon their feet, an exceeding great assembly” (vs. 10). Likewise, the Lord Jesus kept His promise that “they will scourge Him and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again” (Lk 18:33). “Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. . . . Even so in Christ all shall be made alive” (1 Cor 15:20,22). Ezekiel discloses the way; the Lord’s Resurrection is just the beginning. And many shall follow!

The gates of Hades didst Thou shatter, O Lord, and by Thy death Thou didst destroy death. And Thou didst free the race of man, granting life and great mercy to the world. – Vespers prayer during Bright Week

April 24 - Pascha – Genesis 49:1-2, 8-12
Reading at Palm Sunday Vespers

The Lion of Judah: Genesis 49:1-2, 8-12, especially vs. 10: “*The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from his loins, until Shiloh comes; and to Him shall be the expectation of the nations.*” Today’s passage, one of three readings at Vespers on Palm Sunday, offers a vision of the Lord Jesus as the promised ruler of the people of God and “the expectation of the nations” (vs. 10). It is thus a worthy starting point for meditating on our triumphant risen Lord, Jesus Christ, the King of Glory and vanquisher of death.

By trampling down death by death, Jesus has already fulfilled many of the words of this Genesis prophecy, for “He bows down, and slept as a lion and a cub; and who shall rouse him?” (vs. 9). The Apostle Paul replies: “He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (Phil 2:8), and thus “God also has highly exalted Him” (vs. 9). The icon of Pascha depicts the Lord’s harrowing of hell, with the victorious Christ astride the shattered gates of hades. Death is bound in chains under His feet as He raises Adam and Eve from their tombs, bestowing life upon them. Indeed, who dares to rouse Him? Death is cast down, manacled.

The verses of this reading derive from a Genesis narrative describing the final hours of the Patriarch Jacob, also called Israel (Gn 47:27-50:14). The dying patriarch calls his twelve sons to him (Gn 49:1-2) and, in prophetic manner, pronounces the destiny of their descendants – the twelve tribes of Israel. When his prophecy reaches the fourth son, Judah, it provides a glimpse of the first king of Judah who will arise some five hundred years in the future: King David, whose brothers praised him, whose hand was on the neck of his enemies, and whose father’s sons bowed before him (Gn 49:8).

But Israel’s prophecy goes even further. He describes the close of the age when all nations will bow before the Lion of Judah, who is a descendant of King David. He will be known as the Lamb of God and Root of David, victorious Lord of all history and divine ruler. Christ Jesus alone will be worthy to open the seals of the great scroll and usher in the Kingdom of God (Rv 5:5). The Genesis prophecy points to Christ alone, for no monarch in history has ever gained obedience from all the peoples of the earth, nor shall do so in the future, until the coming of Christ who is “the expectation of the nations” (Gn 49:10).

As we ponder this aspect of Israel’s vision – the image of Judah’s greatest King – we recall Saint Matthew’s account of Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem. Let the old patriarch’s words ring in your ears: “Binding his colt to a vine, and his donkey’s colt to its branch” (vs. 11). The Lord sent two disciples to loose these very animals for Him, fulfilling both Israel’s words and those of Prophet Zechariah (Zec 9:9): “Behold, your King is coming to you, lowly, and sitting on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Mt. 21:5).

Having fulfilled the dual prophecies of Jacob and Zechariah, Christ brought other words spoken by the patriarch to culmination in a revelation discerned by Church. Filled by the Holy Spirit, the Cup of the New Covenant proclaims the Lord’s death until He comes again (1 Cor 11:26). He has washed His robe in wine and “His garment in the blood of the grape” (Gn 49:11) for our salvation – sharing His holy chalice of love that yields Life’s victory over death.

Lo, through the Cross is joy come into all the world. Ever blessing the Lord, let us sing His Resurrection; for in that He endured the Cross for us He hath destroyed death by death. –Paschal Hours prayer

April 25 - Bright Monday – Zechariah 11:10-13
Reading at the Royal First Hour of Great and Holy Friday

The Princely Price: Zechariah 11:10-13, especially vs. 12: “*And they established my wage at thirty pieces of silver.*” Today we are bathed in the radiance of Pascha, for God in His mercy has turned His face upon us: “Shine, shine, O New Jerusalem, for the glory of the Lord hath risen upon thee.” Why, then, do we read of Israel’s rejection of her Shepherd? Suffused in the gleaming paschal light, we read these verses from Great and Holy Friday anew – we who are united to Christ, “the great Shepherd of the sheep” (Heb 13:20).

Six hundred years before the *great divide* in the history of mankind, the Lord granted a vision to the Prophet Zechariah to warn His people that a time would come when “the Canaanites shall know the flock is kept safe, for this is the word of the Lord” (Zec 10:11). Yet the majority of ancient Israel would reject the true Shepherd. As a result the Canaanites – meaning the Gentiles – would predominate among God’s people under the New Covenant. The Shepherd who led his people in ancient times would “cast away” His staff, “break[ing] my covenant which I made with all the people” and ushering in a time of abandonment (vs. 10).

As we joyously celebrate the triumphant Resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we must not forget to mourn over what befell ancient Israel. God worked many miracles among our predecessors, those earlier people of God! How He loved them! Yet the chief priests and elders disdained Him and the Kingdom He offered to all peoples of the earth – including them. He offered them Life, seeking their true worship as He does our own. We must never let the calamity that befell them leave our hearts until they are restored, as Saint Paul clearly promises (Rom 11:22-26).

The verses we are examining (Zec 11:10-13) prophetically toll a moment of judgment by God the Lord: “And I shall take my staff Beauty, and I shall cast it away, to break my covenant which I made with all the people” (vs. 10). God removes His cover over His ancient people, “rais[ing] up a shepherd *against* the land,” a ruler who will not “seek the scattered ones, nor heal the injured, not even guide the healthy. But instead . . . devour . . . the choice ones” (vs. 16).

On Great and Holy Friday, the covenant was broken. Yet in the midst of Israel a few faithful remained, around whom the Gentile Canaanites soon gathered – for they discovered that “this is the word of the Lord” (vs. 11) and chose to stand faithfully with Him (Jn 19:25-27).

Observe the irony: most of ancient Israel perceived their Good Shepherd as merely a common slave. The Mosaic Law requires that if a man’s bull “gore a male or female servant, he shall pay their lord thirty shekels of silver” (Ex 21:32). A slave is worth exactly thirty pieces of silver! Through His prophet the Lord has us consider the implications of His betrayal: “They established my wage at thirty pieces of silver” (Zec 11:12). Thus did ancient Israel repay the Lord for centuries of love, deliverance, and care!

Do not overlook the significance of “my wage” in light of verse 13. In Zechariah’s vision, God commands him to drop those thirty pieces of silver “into the smelting furnace and see if it is proven” (vs. 13). On the dread day of Christ’s betrayal, the casting of the silver into the smelter of judgment fell to the godless traitor Judas (Mt 27:3-5). What of us? Disciples of Christ, do we ever fix a price on our relationship with the Life-giver - set a limit, perhaps even negotiate some debased bargain? Let us pay the full price He asks and commit all that we are to the priceless Savior!

O, how noble! O how dear! O how sweet is Thy voice, O Christ; for Thou hast made us a true promise, that Thou shalt be with us to the end of time, an anchor for our hopes! – Ninth Ode of the Paschal Canon

April 26 - Bright Tuesday (First Week of Pascha)

Second Reading at the Vigil for Great & Holy Saturday – Isaiah 60:1-16

Shine, New Jerusalem: Isaiah 60:1-16, especially vs. 1: “Shine, shine, O Jerusalem, for your light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon you.” Since ancient times this passage has served as the second of fifteen lessons read during the paschal vigil that begins with Vespers on Great and Holy Saturday. In monasteries, where the entire all-night vigil is still served, this passage is always read. In ancient times the administration of the baptismal mystery to the catechumens took place during this same vigil. The rites concluded early on the morning of Holy Pascha as the entire Church celebrated the glorious festal liturgy of the Resurrection.

In parish churches today, this lesson is often omitted from the Vespereal Liturgy of Saint Basil that takes place on Holy Saturday morning. Its words sound familiar, however, because this passage inspired Saint John of Damascus in the composition of his Paschal Canon, especially the ninth ode.

Theodoret of Cyrus provides a brief and excellent summary of Isaiah’s vision: “The prediction simultaneously comprises three subjects: it prophesies, as in outline, the reconstruction of Jerusalem which took place under Cyrus and under Darius [589-456 BC]; then as in a painting” enhanced by a great many colors, “it also shows the more exact contours of the truth, the splendor of the holy Church; yet it likewise conveys even the original of the painting in advance, that is to say the future life and the celestial city” (*Isaiah Through the Ages*, p. 886).

Let us focus on how Isaiah’s prophecy reveals seven aspects of the Church – realities manifested in the present as well as those that are yet to come (Heb 10:1).

1) God’s people are to be a light in darkness. Because Christ the Light lives in the Church, she uniquely reveals His glory. It shines within her despite the darkness of disbelief, confusion, and sin that covers the earth. His glory enables rulers and nations *who receive illumination* to walk in light and brightness (Is 60:1-3).

2) The Church is the gathering of His scattered children. We can lift up our eyes and behold today how the children of God are being gathered from many nations where Orthodoxy was never known before (vs. 4).

3) The Church is the repository of the spiritual wealth of the nations. What great spiritual treasures have come into the Church over the centuries! Today they continue to flow into her as a repository and beacon of Truth (vss. 5-6).

4) The Church offers acceptable sacrifices. Why should there be such an influx of people and spiritual treasures? Is it not that there may be “acceptable sacrifices upon [His] altar, and [that His] house of prayer shall be glorified” (vs. 7), and that “the Holy One of Israel is glorified” (vs. 9)?

5) The Church is the recipient of the promises made to ancient Israel. God’s people have experienced His wrath and mercy alike over the centuries (vs. 10). Yet the Church’s gates have remained open to all peoples (vs. 11), the kings of many nations have served the Lord (vs. 11), and governments that refused the Lord have perished (vs. 12). “The sons of those who humbled and provoked” the Church now revere her (vs. 14).

6) The Church is the true Zion. Today the Church is rightly called “Zion,” the term used in the ninth ode of the Paschal Canon. She is literally the “City of the Lord, Zion of the Holy One of Israel” (vs. 14).

7) The Church is a community filled with perpetual and eternal gladness. Yes, the Church exhibits only imperfectly the transforming power of the Light that abides in her. Nevertheless she is the repository of “eternal joy” (vs. 15) for the faithful – those who know that Christ is “the Lord who saves you and the God of Israel who delivers you” (vs. 16).

Rejoice, O Jerusalem, and leap for joy, in that thou beholdest Christ the King like a bridegroom come forth from the grave. – Paschal sticheron

April 27 - Bright Wednesday (First Week of Pascha)

Third Reading at the Vigil for Great & Holy Saturday – Exodus 12:1-11

Pascha: Exodus 12:1-11, especially vs. 11: “*It is the Lord’s Pascha.*” In the original Greek, this verse has only three words: *pascha esti kyrio*. The verb *esti* (is) stands between *pascha* (Passover) and *kyrio* (Lord). While *pascha* is often translated as Passover, its reference to the Resurrection of Christ is quite recognizable to Orthodox Christians: “Today a sacred Pascha is revealed to us. Pascha new and holy, Pascha mystical, Pascha all laudable, Pascha which is Christ the Redeemer” (First Paschal sticheron).

The present passage from Exodus tells of a night long before the birth of Christ, during the age of the great prophet and seer Moses. On that night the Lord passed through Egypt bringing death to the first-born of the Egyptians, but restraining “the destroyer” from the homes of the people of Israel (Ex 12:23). At the Lord’s directive, the Israelites took of the blood of a lamb and “put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses where they” ate the Passover meal (vs. 7). Since their homes were thus marked, their first-born were defended and delivered by the Lord God Himself – unlike the Egyptians.

How then, from this ancient Israelite beginning, did we come to speak of our great Christian celebration of the Lord Jesus’ Resurrection as “Pascha”? The obvious connection lies in the decision to translate the Hebrew word for Passover (*Pesach*) as *Pascha*. This occurred when Moses’ text was rendered into Greek – the translation known as the Septuagint – some 250 years before Christ.

However, there are far deeper connections between the Jewish *Pesach* and the Christian *Pascha* than mere etymology. The Christian Pascha is rooted in the events of that night on which the Lord Jesus, as an observant Jew, ate the Passover with His Disciples. On that occasion He plainly declared the emergence of a new covenant in His blood (Mk 14:16,24).

For this very reason the Apostle Paul describes the Lord Jesus as “Mediator of the new covenant, and . . . the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel” (Heb 12:24). The apostles who touch the risen Lord after His Resurrection, having first witnessed His crucifixion and then His triumph over death, perceive the blood shed by the Lord as the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophetic promise (Jer. 31:31-32): “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah – not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt” (Heb 8:8-9).

“Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast” (1 Cor 5:7-8). Saint John the Forerunner identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29). He is an “unblemished” Passover sacrifice (see Ex 12:5), for “not one of His bones [was] broken” (see Jn 19:36; Ex 12:10).

The Passover of ancient Israel led directly to the Pascha of Christ our Lord! As with the feast of Passover for the Jews, so Pascha truly is the crown of the year for Christians. Just as Moses instructed the children of Israel to partake of the Passover in a state of readiness for their departure from Egypt (Ex 12:11), we who celebrate Christ – the living and risen Pascha – need to make ready by seeking “those things which are above, where Christ is. . . . not on things on the earth” (Col 3:1,2).

We praise Thee for Thy glorious Resurrection, for Thou art the very Paschal Lamb which was offered for us, and hath by Thy death destroyed death and restored to us everlasting life. – Preface of Easter

April 28 - Bright Thursday (First Week of Pascha)

Fourth Reading at the Vigil for Great & Holy Saturday – Jonah 1:1-16

A Reluctant Prophet: *Jonah 1:1-16, especially vs. 3:* “*But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.*” God called the Prophet Jonah to speak for Him during the reign of Jeroboam II (793-753 BC), who was one of the most powerful rulers of the northern kingdom of Israel. Scripture reports that Jeroboam “rescued Damascus and Hamath of Judah for Israel” (4 Kgs 14:28) – restoring a considerable territory, formerly part of the Kingdom of David, from Syrian domination. However, Jeroboam’s restoration was not a matter of chance, but “in accordance with the word the Lord God of Israel spoke through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher” (4 Kgs 14:25).

In light of this history the present account seems surprising, for it portrays Jonah as a reluctant prophet. When God directs him to “arise and go to Nineveh, the great city, and preach in it” (Jon 1:2), he is loath to fulfill this mission. Apparently, he has no desire to see the Ninevites repent and escape the divine judgment they deserve because of their “wickedness” (vs. 2), for he strikes *twice* upon a plan to flee “from the presence of the Lord” (vs. 3) and travel to far away Tarshish, in Spain.

Like many of us today, the reluctant Jonah desperately seeks every possible way to escape God. How many devices we employ to avoid the Lord’s claim on our lives! Our refuges are many and varied: sensual pleasures; great ideologies; inverted religions with designer gods who promise a carefree life; wealth, power, and other passions. Still, God’s hand is always moving upon us. The wise man acknowledges, along with the Prophet and Psalmist David, “Whither shall I go from Thy Spirit? And from Thy presence whither shall I flee? If I go up into heaven, Thou art there; if I go down into hades, Thou art present there” (Ps 138:6-7).

Poor Jonah would have done well to heed David’s humble admission: “If I take up my wings toward the dawn, and make mine abode in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there shall Thy hand guide me, and Thy right hand shall hold me” (Ps 138:8-9). Like Adam, everyone at one time or another seeks to hide from God. Our strategies fail, however, for “my bone is not hid from Thee, which Thou madest in secret” (Ps 138:14).

The prophecy of Jonah is more a testimony to the persistent will of God than it is an account of a man who would escape His will. Faced with menacing waves and the plight of the innocent sailors, Jonah freely admits that he is the cause of their problem. “For the men knew he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them” (Jon 1:10).

Note that the sailors are better prepared than Jonah to accept the mercy and forgiveness of God! He fled from God in the first place in order to avoid seeing God’s mercy and forgiveness extended to the Ninevites. The gracious sailors, on the other hand, try desperately to save the timorous and disobedient Jonah, but are unable “to return to the land . . . for the sea arose and grew even more tempestuous against them” (vs. 13).

Let us observe how the prophet escapes the web he has woven by fleeing from God. Although Jonah is the cause of the problem, he also knows that in him lies the solution: he must die to himself. He tells the sailors frankly, “Take me up and cast me into the sea, and the sea will grow calm for you, for I know this great tempest is upon you because of me” (vs. 12). And even as they follow his counsel and cast him overboard, the sailors continue to submit their lives to God: “Please, O Lord, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life, nor bring righteous blood upon us” (vs. 14).

In every hour of the day, reveal Thy will to us. Teach us to treat all that comes to us throughout the day with the firm conviction that Thy will governs all. – Prayer for the Beginning of the Day

April 29 - Bright Friday (First Week of Pascha)

Fourth Reading at the Vigil for Great & Holy Saturday – Jonah 2:1-11

A Reluctant Prophet, continued: *Jonah 2:1-11, especially vs. 10:* “*But with a voice of thanksgiving and praise, I will sacrifice to You.*” The Prophet Jonah’s prospects at the end of the first part of this prophecy seem to be inevitable death by drowning. However, this fate is contravened in today’s passage after he is swallowed by a great sea creature (vs. 1). This event turns out to be a reprieve at the command of God, to whom he prays, “You heard the cry of my voice” (vs. 3).

The principal section of the second chapter of Jonah consists of his psalm of praise and thanksgiving to God, and begins immediately after the brief opening narrative (vss. 1-2). His gratitude is freely stated as he acknowledges the Lord who hears his voice (vs. 3). Jonah frankly admits the hopelessness of his plight when he found himself cast into the sea (vss. 4-7a). Next follows his cry for help, which includes his description of God’s deliverance (vss. 7b-8). The prophet concludes his hymn of praise with a petition for a new life. He rejects the false way of self-reliance that nearly resulted in his destruction, and solemnly vows to continue his life in praise and thanksgiving thereafter (vss. 9-10).

This psalm illumines the prophet’s entire narrative and enhances our appreciation of the Book of Jonah as a whole. The message in the psalm, which is set apart from the narrative of the book, stands alone as a beautiful canticle of praise to sanctify anyone who takes it upon his lips in time of trial. Truly, Jonah provides a spiritual legacy to those who face destruction and death – whether physical or spiritual or both – and who find salvation in the grace of God.

Compare the way in which Jonah speaks of God in the first chapter with the manner in which he addresses Him in the second: “I am a servant of the Lord” (1:9) versus “the Lord my God” (2:3); “the Lord God of heaven” (1:9) versus “as much as I vowed, I shall offer up to You, to You, the Lord of Deliverance” (2:10). Now all detachment from God is absent – now the prophet speaks to the Lord directly in a personal prayer of thanksgiving.

The true protagonist of the Book of Jonah is God the Lord. He offers His saving message to us through the type of His reluctant prophet, Jonah. We are invited to take Jonah’s words on our own lips, to make them our paschal hymn of praise. When the Book of Jonah is read during the Great Vigil before Pascha, verse 2:1 connects us directly to the three days during which our Lord lay in the tomb and deepens our anticipation of Christ’s Holy Resurrection. In the sixth ode of the Paschal Canon we hear: “Verily, O Christ, into the deepest abyss of earth Thou didst descend, and didst break the unyielding everlasting bars which held men prisoner; and on the third day Thou didst rise from the tomb as Jonah from the whale.” Compare this triumphant cry with the prophet’s words: “I descended into the earth, the bars of which are everlasting barriers; yet let my life ascend from corruption, O Lord, my God” (vs. 7).

May we who are risen in the Lord now join with Jonah in exclaiming to our Savior, “May my prayer be brought to You, into Your holy temple” (vs. 8). May we never “follow vanity and lies [and] forsake [our] own mercy” (vs. 9). Let all reluctance be swept away “with a voice of thanksgiving and praise” (vs. 10). As people of the Eucharist, we offer sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving and make our vows to the *Lord of Deliverance* (vs. 10). “Come, glorify Christ risen from the dead!”

O Christ Savior, we were but yesterday buried with Thee, and we shall rise with Thee in Thy Resurrection. Glorify us with Thee in Thy Kingdom. – Paschal Canon

April 30 - Bright Saturday (First Week of Pascha)

Fourth Reading at the Vigil for Great & Holy Saturday – Jonah 3:1-10

A Reluctant Prophet, continued: *Jonah 3:1-10, especially vs. 5:* “*And the men of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least.*” The terse style of the Book of Jonah forces the reader to imagine the developments that takes place between the major events. For instance, we are told virtually nothing of Jonah’s actual preaching in Nineveh, only that he spoke “according to the message” God previously gave him (vs. 2). We recall that God instructed Jonah to “arise and go to Nineveh, the great city, and preach in it; for the cry of her wickedness has come up to me” (Jon 1:2). After Jonah finally enters the city, he proclaims, “Yet three days and Nineveh shall be overthrown” (3:4).

The abbreviated narrative emphasizes the simple faith of the Ninevites, for “the men of Nineveh believed God” (vs. 5). The Ninevites respond to Jonah’s prophecy with a true and God-pleasing repentance. They affirm that God’s judgment concerning their spiritual state is correct (vs. 5). They evince true sorrow for their wrongs (vss. 5-7), cry *fervently* for their sins (vs. 8), and effectively end their wrongdoing: “They each turned back from their evil ways” (vs. 8).

A glance at the historical record suggests that conditions in the Assyrian Empire served to encourage such swift repentance on the part of its citizens and leaders. The country’s military had been weakened by the loss of important forts at Carchemish, Militene, and Commagene. Furthermore, the Assyrian chronicles record a total solar eclipse during the month of June. Nineveh’s own omen texts predicted that, following a solar eclipse, “the King will die, rain from heaven will flood the land. There will be famine” [and] “a deity will strike the King and fire consume the land” (Stuart, *Commentary on Hosea-Jonah*, p. 491).

Upon hearing Jonah’s words, the Ninevites take full responsibility for “the wrongdoings of their hands” (vs. 8). They do not attribute their faults to God but rather give themselves over to His will (vs. 9). Our God is never deceived by show. He perceives that the Ninevites have truly turned from their evil ways and stays His hand from that harsh judgment for which the Ninevites had prepared.

Be attentive to what the Lord is teaching us in this passage from the Book of Jonah. It is not Jonah the people of Nineveh believe; rather, they take God at *His* word. The prophet fulfills his duty at last by going to the great city and declaring God’s word to its pagan people – and the Ninevites believe God. There is no record of any discussion between the Ninevites and Jonah; they simply submit to the Lord. May we ever be careful to repent in the manner the Ninevites!

The Orthodox Christian life is always characterized by repentance. Even now, amidst the joy of the feast, listen to these Paschal verses: “Let us be illumined for the feast and embrace one another. Let us speak, brothers, even unto those that hate us, and forgive all for the sake of the Resurrection.” We are forever called away from our unforgiving and evil ways, and from the wrongdoings of our hands, just as were the Ninevites (vs. 8).

Should we be careless enough to think that God will be impressed merely by the awesome solemnity of our celebration of Great and Holy Pascha, we will be in danger of missing the message offered by Scripture. Why do the Ninevites believe God? Because they know that He sees into their hearts! May we, like them, repent and be saved!

Make us worthy, O Master Who lovest mankind, to partake of Thy dread mysteries: unto forgiveness of sins, pardon of transgressions and inheritance of the kingdom of heaven. – Priest’s prayer from the Divine Liturgy