

May 1 – Thomas Sunday (Second Sunday of Pascha), Tone 1
Fourth Reading at the Vigil for Great & Holy Saturday – Jonah 4:1-11

A Reluctant Prophet, continued: *Jonah 4:1-11, especially vs. 3:* “*And now, Master, Lord, take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.*” In the final chapter of Jonah, the flawed character of the son of Amittai is fully exposed. We see a dark bitterness in the heart of God’s reluctant prophet. When he flees rather than preach in the Assyrian city of Nineveh, God forgives his disobedience. He saves him from drowning by sending a great creature that swallows Jonah and then miraculously casts him back onto dry land. After all that, Jonah goes to Nineveh where God blesses his preaching with success. Yet still he remains angry, sullen, and grieved.

We thus read the Book of Jonah as a warning not to fall into the prophet’s error. God relents from His need to overthrow Nineveh when He sees that the people of the city had “turned back from their evil ways” (Jon 3:10). Yet Jonah, as the opening line of this chapter tells us, “was deeply grieved and was troubled” (4:1). Is it not strange that a man so blessed by God should become so distressed when his mission succeeds?

Let us examine in more detail the first verse of chapter 4, especially the verbs *lupe* (grieved) and *synecho* (troubled). While *lupe* expresses grief, it may also suggest “vexation” and “anger.” Similarly, *synecho* also implies “confusion” or “frustration.” Translations based on the Hebrew text strongly favor “angry frustration” – for example, the Revised Standard Version reads: “It displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.” He is annoyed and petulant because the result of his preaching is not to his liking.

Our Septuagint text next describes the prophet climbing a nearby hill to keep watch “until he might observe what would happen to the city” (vs. 5). He goes up, he sits down – and he grumbles. Jonah’s anger is obvious when he scolds God: “I saw the need to flee to Tarshish; because I knew You to be compassionate and merciful, long-suffering and abundant in mercy, and willing to change your heart concerning evils” (vs. 2). We can imagine him railing against the Lord: “Of course, You forgave them! How could You forgive the Ninevites, of all people?” Jonah has neither love nor compassion for the Ninevites, but God does.

The disgruntled prophet reflects a view common among the people of Israel who repeatedly chafed under the encroaching power of the Assyrian Empire. His outburst matches the psalmist’s cry to God: “Lift up Thy hands against their pride at the end, against the things which the enemy hath wickedly done in Thy holy place. . . . How long, O God, shall the enemy utter reproaches?” (Ps 73:4,11).

The final vignette with the gourd (Jon 4:6-10) that shades the prophet until it is eaten by a worm reinforces our sense of Jonah’s bitterness. Observe Jonah’s actions: first he flees to Tarshish to avoid complicity in God’s compassion and mercy toward the Assyrians, whom he finds utterly repugnant. Then he himself receives God’s compassion and mercy, which leads him to submit and preach as God instructs him (3:1-11), yet he still clings to his loathing of Assyrians. Finally God makes His message explicit: “And shall I Myself not take pity upon Nineveh, the great city, in which dwell more than one hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know either their right hand or their left – and many livestock?” (4:11).

The Lord directs us to forgive them that hate us. Saint Gregory of Nyssa asks, “Do you want your debts to be forgiven by God? Forgive them yourself, and God will ratify it. For your judgment of your neighbor, which is in your power, will call forth the corresponding sentence upon you. What you decide for yourself will be confirmed by the Divine Judgment” (*Homily on the Lord’s Prayer*, p. 73).

Our Father, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. –Lord’s Prayer

**May 2 – Monday of Thomas Week (Second Week of Pascha)
Fifth Reading at the Vigil for Great & Holy Saturday – Joshua 5:10-15**

Partake Ye: Joshua 5:10-15, especially vs. 10: “Then the children of Israel kept Pascha on the fourteenth day of the month at evening, to the west of Jericho, across the Jordan in the plain.” In keeping with the words of Saint John Chrysostom’s paschal homily (“Ye that have kept the fast and ye that have not, rejoice today; for the Table is richly laden),” this vigil reading points to the divine provision that we receive at Holy Pascha through the grace and triumph of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We celebrate the Pascha of the Lord, for “Christ is risen, and life is liberated”! We are encouraged by this verse, as we are by Saint John’s words, to “fare ye royally. . . . The calf is a fattened one. Let no one go away hungry. Partake ye all of the cup of faith. Enjoy ye all the riches of His goodness.”

What can we learn from ancient Israel’s Pascha? Let us begin by visualizing Israel’s situation and the setting of this particular Passover. God’s holy people are now in the land promised by God. They have crossed the Jordan River and camped on the plain near the fortress of Jericho. The celebration of Passover described in this passage strikes a note never known before. The first paschal meal was eaten in Egypt by slaves on the run, in the dark of night, with death sweeping the land and yet passing over the children of Israel. But this Passover meal requires the labor of neither planting nor harvesting: “They ate of the unleavened and new wheat of the land” (vs. 11). During their forty years in the wilderness they had been miraculously sustained by manna, but now they taste the fruits of *promise*, of a land to become their own.

This reading prompts us to celebrate our Passover in Christ in a similar manner. “Let the peoples give Thee praise, O God: let all the peoples praise Thee” (Eisodikon of Pascha). Those with unfettered hearts celebrate Pascha in the knowledge that we enjoy a true foretaste of our *Promised Land*. We have indeed passed through the waters of Jordan to partake of the glorious Table of the Lord. “Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast” (1 Cor 5:7-8). We eat with the risen Christ, no longer in slavery to sin and death. “Christ is in our midst! He is and He shall be!” We share in the feast that the Lord spreads before us. “Fare ye royally on it,” indeed!

Ancient Israel eats the Passover meal under the walls of Jericho (Jos 5:10), a bastion to be taken in their first battle. Joshua reports that conquering the land will require years of struggle, with some conflicts ending in failure and most in success. Likewise, many battles lie ahead of us, but today we eat and celebrate in the knowledge that the tide is turned against our great enemies. “O Christ our Savior, we were but yesterday crucified with Thee: glorify us with Thee in Thy Kingdom” (Paschal Canon, third ode).

Near the end of our reading Joshua, leader of the people of God, encounters “the chief captain of the host of the Lord” (vs. 14). The great Archangel Michael, his “sword drawn in his hand” (vs. 13), stands before the mortal captain of the Lord’s people. Joshua boldly draws near and asks, “Are you for us or on the side of our adversaries?” (vs. 13). As Saint Nikolai of Zicha reminds us, we “must not rely on . . . our own equipment, but on Him Who fights for us” (*Prologue from Ochrid*, vol. 3, p. 96). The powers of heaven are arrayed before us and with us – to fight for us, if we will. Like Joshua, let us reverence them and forever seek, as he does, to know only God’s will (vs. 14).

“Let us cleanse our senses that we may behold Christ shining like lightning with the unapproachable light of Resurrection while we sing to Him the hymn of victory.” – First Ode of the Paschal Canon

May 3 – Tuesday of Thomas Week (Second Week of Pascha)

Sixth Reading at the Vigil for Great & Holy Saturday (part one) – Exodus 13:20-14:30

God Delivers: Exodus 13:20-14:30, especially vs. 30: “So the Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.” These verses from Exodus recount the deliverance of God’s ancient people by a miraculous passage through the Red Sea and the accompanying destruction of Pharaoh’s pursuing army. Israel’s transit represented a release from slavery to freedom, from chattel bondage to ethnic identity. It marked the emergence of the people of God onto the stage of history – and the beginning of a desert struggle to realize the freedom that God had given them. For us, it foreshadows our baptismal passage into life in Christ with all its struggles, defeats, and victories.

The principal message of this portion of Exodus may be summed up in two words: *God delivers*. The children of Israel cross over an impassable obstacle, the Red Sea that borders Egypt. They enter the Sinai wilderness to begin their forty-year struggle to actualize the freedom God has bestowed upon them. The Holy Fathers of the Church note that this liberation at the Red Sea typifies our release into life in Christ, for God always delivers in the presence of true faith in the Lord Jesus.

As Saint Gregory of Nyssa says: “The people itself, by passing through the Red Sea, proclaimed the good tidings of salvation by water. The people passed over, and the Egyptian king with his host was engulfed, and by these actions this sacrament [the baptismal mystery] was foretold. For even now, whensoever the people is in the water of regeneration, fleeing from Egypt, from the burden of sin, it is set free and saved” (*On the Baptism of Christ*, p. 522). The champion on behalf of His people is God Himself; He delivers. We who pass through the waters to new life do well to look deeply into this Exodus account to discover what is packed into those two words, *God delivers*.

Reading attentively, we readily notice the actions of Moses and his people, of Pharaoh and his forces. Above all, however, the actions of God repeatedly shape the saga and yield deliverance to that horde of runaway slaves: “God *led* them” (vs. 13:21). God *told* them to “camp at the village between Migdol and the sea, opposite Baal Zephon . . . by the sea” (vs. 2). In addition, God *discloses beforehand* that He will “harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them; and I will be glorified in Pharaoh and over all his army” (vs. 4). At the critical moment in the unfolding events, God *intervenes* and “shook off the Egyptians in the midst of the sea” (vs. 27).

It is this very Lord our God who *leads* us into the waters of baptism, for He calls us to “wash ye, be ye clean; and put away evil things from your souls” and He “bestowed upon us from on high a new birth through water and the Spirit” (prayers at baptism). Likewise, God *directs* us “to walk in all [His] commandments, and to fulfill those things which are well pleasing unto [Him]; for if a man do those things, he shall find life in them” as did Israel of old (prayer at the reception of a catechumen). And God *discloses* all “the eternal good things” that shall be ours if we endeavor to prove ourselves children of the Light.

The greatest blessings of the life in Christ come when we trust God, faithfully undertaking the wilderness trials and struggles that follow our death and rising with Christ – our passage through the laver of regeneration to sonship in the fountain of life. Truly Christ our God graciously *intervenes*, as ever, to “make us all victors, even unto the end, through [His] crown incorruptible” (chrismation prayer). It is up to us to fear the Lord and believe in Him, even as ancient Israel did before us (vs. 31).

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Alleluia! – Gal 3:27

May 4 – Wednesday of Thomas Week (Second Week of Pascha)

Sixth Reading at the Vigil for Great & Holy Saturday (part two) – Exodus 14:31-15:19

Two Songs of Praise: *Exodus 14:31-15:19, especially vs. 1:* “Now Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to God and spoke, saying: ‘Let us sing to the Lord, for He is greatly glorified. Horse and rider He has thrown into the sea.’” The Song of Moses is pure, unbounded praise and worship of God. The prophet and seer records the joyful song of those lately redeemed from slavery – the children of Israel. By His own hand, God hurls horse and rider into the sea in defense of His chosen people, whom He guided to a new destiny in a new and holy habitation of His choosing.

The Great Doxology of the Orthodox Church has much in common with the Song of Moses. Both are spontaneous outbursts of joy from thankful hearts. The Song of Moses served ancient Israel in a manner similar to that in which the Great Doxology serves the Church today. Praise is given to God and His acts of deliverance proclaimed. Pledges are made to God as Lord, petitions are offered for His continued aid against enemies. The essential difference between the two songs lies in the degree of God’s self-revelation, which is the watershed separating the Old and New Covenants.

The Song of Moses attributes glory to God by pouring forth unrestrained praise for marvels (vs. 11), a calling (vs. 13), redemption (vs. 13), and a future sanctuary. However, that glory is always linked with renown – the glory of this world. He is compared to the gods of the nations, who are not like the Lord (vs. 11). His fame brings terror to the nations of Moab, Edom, Philistia, and Canaan (vss. 14-15).

By contrast, the Great Doxology links glory with light: “Glory to Thee Who hast shown us the light.” Its words express the New Covenant mystery described by Saint Makarios of Egypt as “the effulgence of celestial light in the vision and power of the Spirit” (*The Freedom of the Intellect [the Nous]*, p. 347).

Moses perceives the glory of God in mighty actions such as plunging enemies into the sea (vs. 4), gathering the waters (vs. 8), and guiding His people “in strength” (vs. 13). The Doxology teaches, in the spirit of the Holy Fathers, that in God’s “light shall we see light.” The difference between the two songs reflects the limitations of the first covenant even as it points to the boundless possibilities of the Christian mystery.

The Great Doxology praises God for taking away the sin of the world, having mercy upon us, and receiving our prayers. The New Covenant marvels reflect the divine mercy by which God heals souls of those who have sinned against Him. We are called to set our hope on God. Our redemption is from sin, a blessing achieved ineffably by the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the whole world. The Gospel joy is the true promise from God that He will be the fountain of life and our refuge from generation to generation.

Moses bids the people of Israel to join him in a pledge to God, to sing to the Lord always (vs. 1), to be guided as His people (vs. 13), and to become the Lord’s planting on the mountain that God’s hands have prepared for them (vs. 18). When we take the Great Doxology on our lips, we likewise pledge to God that we will submit to His teaching, do His will, seek healing from Him, and know Him as our holy, mighty and immortal God whose name is praised and glorified forever.

Help us to preserve the earnest of the Spirit pure and undefiled unto the Day of Christ! – Baptismal prayer

May 5 – Thursday of Thomas Week (Second Week of Pascha)

Seventh Reading at the Vigil of Great and Holy Saturday – Zephaniah 3:8-15

Waiting Upon the Lord: Zephaniah 3:8-15, especially vs. 8: “‘On account of this, wait for Me,’ says the Lord, ‘until the day of My rising up as a testimony.’” The Prophet Zephaniah, a contemporary of Jeremiah, was descended from a king of Judah. Like his fellow prophet of the seventh century BC, he saw signs of divine judgment gathering against the kingdom. His prophetic declarations reveal the cause: “Her rulers are in her as roaring lions, and her judges are in her as wolves of Arabia that remain until morning. Her prophets borne by the wind, men who are scoffers, the bearers of the spirit, are men who are scorers. Her priests profane the holy things and live contrary to the law” (Zep 3:3-4).

The subsequent vision that the Lord gives Zephaniah reveals that one day God will correct the wrongs among His people. That future *day* of the Lord’s making is notable in four ways. It will be a gathering from all nations (vss. 8,10); God’s people will be purified (vs. 9) while only a remnant, “gentle and humble,” will be left (vs. 12); and finally, God, the true “King of Israel” (vs. 15) will dwell in the midst of His renewed people. Here we have a portrait of the age ushered in by Christ, a day providing a foretaste of the great Judgment Day when our victorious Lord Jesus shall return to complete His work fully.

“My judgment shall be for the gatherings of the nations” (vs. 8). After two millennia, we see nations still being gathered by the Lord. In 1860, for example, the newly ordained Hieromonk Nikolai was assigned to serve the small Russian community in Hakodate, on the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido. Fifteen years later, the first Japanese priests were ordained as a result of Father Nikolai’s work. By 1884, just sixteen years after the first catechumens were baptized, the number of faithful had grown to 10,000; twenty years later they numbered 29,000. Despite war between Japan and Russia, converts joined the Church at a rate of 1,000 per year. Archimandrite Nikolai was elevated to Archbishop of Japan in 1906. The Japanese Orthodox Church counted 40,000 members at the times of his repose in 1912 (Cooke, “The Spread of Orthodoxy in Japan”).

This story is being repeated today in Indonesia, India, Latin America, and Africa. All across the globe, the nations are being gathered. “For then I shall transform for the people a language for her generation, for all to call upon the name of the Lord, to serve Him under one yoke” (vs. 9). As converts enter the Church today, they hear prayers offered in their own languages. Despite many cultural divisions, they indeed serve “under one yoke.” People from many distant lands are gathering; they are “no longer haughty upon [God’s] holy mountain,” i.e., the Church (vs. 11).

“I will leave among you a gentle and humble people” (vs. 12). Sadly, ancient Israel did not accept Jesus as the Christ, although a few sought refuge in the name of the Lord. That “remnant of Israel [did] not commit unrighteousness nor speak vanities” (vs. 13) but was transformed into a band of apostolic men and women. No “deceitful tongue [was] found in their mouth,” for they fed many and removed terror from human hearts (vs. 13).

Let us recognize the vibrant Orthodox Church in the portrait that Zephaniah gave us 600 years before Jesus’ birth! “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Cry aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem” (vs. 14) at the coming of the King of Israel. Fear evil no longer (vs. 15)!

Thou didst come into Thy disciples, O Christ our God, Resurrection of all, renewing in us through them an upright spirit, according to the greatness of Thy mercy. – Troparion of Thomas Sunday

May 6 – Friday of Thomas Week (Second Sunday of Pascha)

Eighth Reading at the Vigil for Great & Holy Saturday – Third Kingdoms 17:8-24

Looking for the Resurrection: 3 Kingdoms 17:8-24, especially vs. 24: “Then the woman said to Elijah, ‘Now I know that you are a man of God, and the word of the Lord in your mouth is the truth.’” When Orthodox Christians affirm the Nicene Creed, we say in succession, “I believe in one God, the Father. . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ. . . . in the Holy Spirit. . . . in one holy, catholic and apostolic Church.” Only after those avowals do we add, “I look for the resurrection of the dead.” Our expectations concerning death are rooted in our belief in the Holy Trinity and the Church. As is the case with the widow of Zarephath, our commitment to God is tantamount to affirming that “the word of the Lord . . . is the truth” (vs. 24).

When we take the words of the Nicene Creed on our lips as a life-declaration, we go beyond believing that there *is* a God to believing *in* God who made heaven and earth, who became incarnate for our sake, and whose Spirit is active within men and women of the Church. The Church is not merely *interesting*; it is the life of worship from which we dare not withdraw.

To believe that God exists may be engaging, but to say “I believe *in* God” is quite another matter. To *believe in* means to “commit ourselves, each other, and all our life unto Christ our God.” We make this sort of statement in order to submit ourselves wholly to Him in whom we believe. If we are prudent, we submit only after careful consideration, having good cause – and above all out of trust. In committing we take the risk of being wrong, for when we say “I believe in,” we stake “our *whole* life.”

After committing the fabric of our lives “unto Christ our God,” next we “look for the resurrection of the dead.” That is a natural consequence of our belief. Let us look at the experience of the widow of Zarephath. She goes outside the city gates to gather a little firewood to cook a final meal. She does not need a great deal of wood, for her larder has dwindled down to “a handful of flour in a bin, and a little oil in a jar” (vs. 12). She anticipates that after eating this last bit of food she will die of starvation.

Ah, but observe that she has not lost her sense of hospitality! She has water to share with a thirsty stranger, and she sets about to bring this gift to Elijah (vs. 11). The prophet then challenges her with a tiny gospel of life, including assurance that she need not fear (vs. 13). He holds out a thread of hope in return for risking the food that remains to her and her children: “The bin of flour shall not be used up, and the jar of oil shall not run dry, until the day the Lord sends rain upon the earth” (vs. 14).

Here is a first-hand call to have belief *in*. “So the woman went and did it” (vs. 15). Faith is a contagious gift, and God supplies abundant cause to strengthen her faith in Him.

“Thus she and he and her children ate for many days. The bin of flour was not used up, and the jar of oil did not run dry” (vss. 15-16). Such is the way the Lord works: we trust a little and He supplies much, giving us sufficient cause to *believe in* Him.

However, a shock follows when her son dies. What went wrong? Notice how death awakens her guilt and the knowledge of her sin (vs. 18). Not even Elijah has an answer for this, but he takes the child, retreats to his room, and “crie[s] out” (vs. 20). Having committed his life to God, he does what he can – he prays (vss. 20-22).

Thanks to this prayer, the mother receives her child back alive (vs. 23). She now affirms her belief *in* God: “I know that you are a man of God, and the word of the Lord in your mouth is the truth” (vs. 24). God, the Life-giver, provides a wealth of causes to “look for the Resurrection!”

As Thou didst appear to Thy disciples, the doors being shut, O Life-giver, so lift the locks from the doors of our faithlessness that we may shout, “Thou art our Lord and our God!” – Hymn of Thomas Sunday

May 7 – Saturday of Thomas Week (Second Week of Pascha)
Ninth Reading at the Vigil for Great & Holy Saturday – Isaiah 61:10-62:5

The Bride Awaits: Isaiah 61:10-62:5, especially vs. 62:5: “As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so the Lord shall rejoice over you.” The solemn Holy Week services are filled with anticipation of what is yet to come. First of all, the services are held in advance of their usual order. Each evening during Holy Week, for example, the next morning’s office is served “in anticipation” – that is, the morning Orthros service is celebrated the evening before. The same pattern occurs with Vespers. On Great and Holy Saturday this service, which is normally sung at sunset, is celebrated in the morning as part of the Vesperal Divine Liturgy.

Furthermore, the very language of the Holy Week services anticipates Pascha. The Resurrection is mentioned repeatedly in the hymns, scriptural readings, and liturgical texts. Already on Lazarus Saturday we already references such as this one from the Orthros Canon: “When Thou wentest before, O my Savior, and verified Thy glorious Resurrection, Thou didst deliver Lazarus from hades.” And at Sixth Hour of Great and Holy Friday, just before the reading of the Suffering Servant passage (that glorious “Fifth Gospel” in Isaiah 52:13-54:1), we hear this verse: “And as our Savior was suffering, He cried, saying, Father, forgive them this sin, that the Gentiles may know My Resurrection from the dead.”

Today’s reading from Isaiah anticipates the Ninth Vigil reading on Great and Holy Saturday, which yearns “to enter fully into that which is certain to come.” Isaiah’s prophecy is truly a proclamation of the Resurrection! The message of joy and salvation bursts forth in verses 61:10-11. Even the grammar is in present tense, speaking of the Resurrection in poetic images *out of due time* (1 Cor 15:8). What *will* become true, when the Lord rises from the dead, is described by the prophet as already present and fulfilled.

Centuries before the Resurrection, Isaiah proclaims that “the Lord . . . clothed me with the garment of salvation” and “adorned me with ornaments like a bride” (vs. 10). A careful reading discloses that Isaiah is not speaking of himself, but rather as the voice of the future Church gathered around her risen Lord. For out of His Church the Resurrected Lord “cause[s] righteousness to rise up, and exceeding joy before all the Gentiles” (vs. 11).

As the prophecy continues, the triumphant Christ affirms His people’s acclamations. For the sake of His Church, He asserts that “I will not rest, until My righteousness goes forth as light, and My salvation burns like a lamp” (vs. 1). All of the Lord’s subsequent remarks (vss. 2-5) are likewise directed to His Church.

Like Isaiah, we live simultaneously in time and beyond time. Even as we mourn at Christ’s death and burial, we rejoice – for He is risen. The Gentiles (the multitudes of people in the world today who are still outside the Church) shall one day see righteousness, for righteousness is the heritage of all men in Christ. As the people of God, we bear a “new name” (vs. 2): “Israel” and “Jerusalem” have become the Church, the Body of Christ, God’s people gathered to their Lord. When Isaiah speaks of our royal calling in Christ – we are “the diadem of a kingdom in the hand of your God” – he anticipates the apostles’ teaching that Christians are “a royal priesthood” (1 Pt 2:9). The Bridegroom to whom we sing joins us in this Pascha to rejoice over us (vs. 5). We are no longer “called Forsaken, and . . . Desert” but rather “My Will, and . . . the Inhabited Earth” (vs. 4).

The King of the ages, having fulfilled the mystery of the Passion, hath rested, keeping the Sabbath in the tomb. Let us hail Him: Arise, O God and Judge the earth; for Thou dost reign for evermore, O Thou Who possesseth the countless and great mercy. – Praises of Great and Holy Saturday Orthros

May 8 – Sunday of the Myrrh-bearing Women (Third Sunday of Pascha), Tone 2
Tenth Reading at the Vigil for Great & Holy Saturday – Genesis 22:1-18

The Truly Obedient Man: Genesis 22:1-18, especially vs. 16-17: “By Myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you did this thing, and for My sake did not spare your beloved son, I will certainly bless you. . . .” Saint John Chrysostom draws attention to the Lord’s words in these verses, whose meaning is easily overlooked: “Consider, I ask you, the Lord’s loving-kindness: ‘for My sake you did not spare your beloved son . . .’ and yet he takes him away alive. . . . You see, as far as intention is concerned, the patriarch stained his right hand in blood, plunging his sword into the child’s throat and consummating the sacrifice” (*Homily on Genesis* 47.17).

The act was not carried out, and still God responds to the offering of Isaac *as if* it actually occurred. What is the meaning of this? Plainly Abraham displays true obedience to God.

A fundamental truth must be grasped if we are to appreciate the depth of the mystery of obedience to God. What is it that makes Abraham truly obedient without contradiction? Saint Silouan pinpoints the key: “The obedient man has surrendered himself to God’s will” (Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, p. 420). Saint John Climacus adds a second point: “Obedience is absolute renunciation of our own life, clearly expressed in our bodily actions” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 4.3, p. 21).

Here we have it: God spoke, and Abraham acted as directed. A willingness to respond to God instantly and fully marks Abraham’s character throughout his life. At the very start we find this account: “Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Get out of your country, from your kindred and from your father’s house, to a land I will show you. . . . Then Abram departed as the Lord said to him” (Gn 12:1, 4).

One might argue that God early reveals Himself to Abraham, but careful reading shows that Abraham obeys God even before the Lord openly shows Himself. Note this sequence of events: first, God sends him away from his own country; then, he comes “to the place of Shechem” (Gn 12:6). There he “built an altar to the Lord, who appeared to him” (vs. 7).

Do you recall the prayer to God the Holy Spirit, which proclaims that He is “everywhere present and fillest all things?” Exactly! The truly obedient man lives responsively before the presence of God, whether seen or unseen. Abraham does not need an apparition of God. He hears God and he obeys – not only at the beginning, upon hearing God’s earliest command, but each and every time. He obeys even when a strange divine command comes, contrary to all reasonable expectation, concerning his son.

What saves *us* from delusion and keeps us from responding to other voices, either within or around us, that we imagine to be from God? The Church provides pastors as our guides. Listen again to Saint John Climacus: “When motives of humility and real longing for salvation incite us to bend our neck and entrust ourselves to another in the Lord . . . we ought first to question and examine, and even, so to speak, test our helmsman, so as not to mistake the sailor for the pilot, a sick man for the doctor” (*Ladder* 4.6, p. 22). Our clergy are fallible, of course, but God establishes them within the Church to guide us in hearing His voice free of human confusion.

Unlike Abraham, we also have a mother in the Church and in Holy Tradition, which include Scripture and the time-tested teachings of the Holy Fathers. God gives us these gifts so that we, like Abraham, may voyage on the sea of great perils – this fallen world – with our hearts constantly open to the Lord’s voice.

If we harbor doubt, let us turn to our pastors for help in becoming obedient to God. They, too, are striving to live openly before God and under the authority of their superiors. Thus we have good reason to trust the word God speaks to us through them. First and foremost, however, God requires our willingness to arise, depart, and go to the place of which He speaks (Gn 22:3).

Lord, guide me in the way of Thy righteousness . . . make straight my way before Thee. – Psalm 5:7

**May 9 – Monday of the Week of the Myrrh-bearing Women (Third Week of Pascha)
Eleventh Reading at the Vigil for Great & Holy Saturday – Isaiah 61:1-9**

Seven Windows: Isaiah 61:1-9, especially vs. 1: “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because of which He anointed Me. He sent Me to proclaim good news to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to preach liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. . . .*” When the Lord Jesus reads this passage from Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth, He opens seven windows for those who would look. Let us consult Isaiah’s prophecy to behold what Christ reveals.

The words of this passage are doubly prophetic. They are given to Isaiah the Prophet because they concern the coming of Christ – and then, in the days of their fulfillment, they are applied by the Lord Jesus Himself to those whom He calls through all of time. This is what Christ discloses to us through the first window.

Through the second window, the risen Christ, who trampled down death by death, discloses comfort for “all who mourn” (vs. 2): the gift of “glory instead of ashes, the oil of gladness to those who mourn,” which transforms us into “the planting of the Lord for glory” (vs. 3). His Church is blessed to view even death in the light of this glory.

The third window (vs. 4) that Christ opens gives us impetus to “renew the desert cities” that our sins have destroyed. There, “all are dust, all are ashes, all are shadows. But come, let us cry aloud unto the deathless King” (Orthodox Funeral Service), who reveals the renewal of what has “laid waste for generations” (vs. 4) if we follow the Life-giver who can restore us.

Through the fourth window (vs. 5), our risen Lord reveals our new family, the Church. Among us we find many who are not of our own blood, language, and culture. They come from every race, clan, and society, but we no longer count them as *foreigners* and *aliens*. They are our new family, laboring beside us to renew hearts, souls, and lives to the glory of God as our brothers and sisters.

Next Christ points through the fifth window to reveal that we are His gathering, His Church, “priests of the Lord and the ministers of God” in Him (vs. 6). As His “royal priesthood” (1 Pt 2:9), we have every reason to praise Him who calls us out of darkness.

Now look through the sixth window – what does our Lord reveal? The “land” from which we were excluded is opened to us “a second time, and eternal gladness shall be upon [our] head” (vs. 7). We are offered Paradise as our inheritance if we accept the word of the good thief (Lk 23:43) and call out to Christ our God to remember us in His Kingdom.

Lastly, having revealed His glorious prospect through the first six windows, the risen Lord takes us to the seventh window in the final verses of this passage. Christ our God, “the Lord, who loves righteousness and hates robberies of wrongdoing,” now reveals that He has the power to give us the spoils of those who rob us – to “give their labor to the righteous and . . . make an everlasting covenant” with His Church (vs. 8).

The opportunity is ours; what shall we do? Shall we “be known among the Gentiles [nations]” so that “all who see [us] shall know these are the seed blessed by God” (vs. 9)? Our Lord sets this vision before us this day. Whenever the people of God serve Christ worthily as His Church, those who receive grace from God indeed become such a blessed seed. For two thousand years the risen Lord has demonstrated this truth over and over. Now it is our turn, if we will.

It is the Day of Resurrection, be illumined for the feast, and embrace one another. Let us speak, brothers, even unto those who hate us, and forgive all for the sake of the Resurrection. And so together let us cry out: Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death; and upon those in the tombs bestowing life. – Paschal sticheron

**May 10 – Tuesday of the Week of the Myrrh-bearing Women (Third Week of Pascha)
Twelfth Reading at the Vigil for Great & Holy Saturday – Fourth Kingdoms 4:8-37**

Death of a Vision: 4 Kingdoms 4:8-37, especially vs. 28: “So she said, ‘Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not tell you not to deceive me?’” When the treasured child of the Shunammite woman dies suddenly, his mother hastens to the Prophet Elisha and “[takes] hold of him by the feet” (vs. 27). This ancient custom of clasping the feet denotes both submission to higher authority but also urgent petition. It is worthy of close study.

Abigail, wife of the arrogant Nabal, fell at the feet of David and begged for the life of her husband (1 Kgs 25:23-31). Queen Esther fell at the feet of her husband, King Ahasuerus, to prevent the genocide of her people (Est 8:3-8). In like fashion, a slave begged redress for a small debt from the highly trusted servant of their common master (Mt 18:26). The Prophet Isaiah, looking ahead to the Messiah, tells God’s People that “Kings shall be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers. They shall bow down to you with their faces to the earth, and lick up the dust of your feet. Then you will know that I am the Lord” (Is 49:23).

However, the vast majority of instances of this behavior recorded by Scripture center on the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. The lame, blind and maimed are laid at His feet (Mt 15:30); the Myrrh-bearers clasp His feet outside the empty tomb (Mt 28:9). We see the same behavior from Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue (Mk 5:22), the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mk 7:25), the liberated demoniac (Lk 8:35), and Mary of Bethany (Jn 11:32). Even more astounding, as the disciple Peter’s reaction makes evident, is the role-reversal by the Lord Jesus when He washes His disciples feet (Jn 13:5-11).

In today’s account of the Shunammite woman, we see her fall at the feet of the Prophet Elisha on two occasions (4 Kgs 4:27, 37). The first time she clasps his feet occurs after the death of the son whom she had received, by the grace of God, through the prophet’s intervention. She chides Elisha, “Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not tell you not to deceive me?” (4 Kgs 4:28). In this first clasping, the element of petition is dominant, though it is not the only feature of the woman’s action. With the second clasping, however, she displays a beautiful outpouring of gratitude to God and His holy prophet.

Gratitude, of course, is the dominant feature of several of the New Testament accounts of those who fall at the Lord Jesus’ feet – in particular the sinful woman (Lk 7:37-38), the leper who is cleansed (Lk 17:15-16), and the Myrrh-bearers (Mt 28:9). In all of these instances, we observe the rich measure of gratitude expressed after a vision from God, previously lost, is restored. For example, the leper returns to give thanks to the Lord Jesus after his miraculous healing. Having discovered that God did not abandon him to the wasting of leprosy, he falls at Jesus’ feet in the recognition that caring is a central feature of God’s nature. Joy is kindled in his heart; let the other nine go their way, but he is obliged to give thanks to God in the way open to him.

Lastly, let us consider what transpired for the Myrrh-bearers. When they encounter a radiant angel, a stone rolled back from the tomb, and military guards stricken like dead men, the women must reconsider the hope they had placed in Christ. They had believed in Jesus, but then watched Him die on the Cross. Now He stands before them in the flesh and their vision is fully restored (Mt 28:9)!

Come let us worship and fall down before Christ. Save us, O Son of God, Who art risen from the dead, who sing to Thee, Alleluia! – Hymn at the Little Entrance

**May 11 – Wednesday of the Week of the Myrrh-bearing Women (Third Week of Pascha)
Thirteenth Reading at the Vigil for Great & Holy Saturday – Isaiah 63:11-64:5**

A Resurrection Icon: Isaiah 63:11-64:5, especially vs. 11: “Then He remembered the days of old, He who brought up the shepherd of His sheep from the land. Where is He who put His Holy Spirit in them?” In these verses Isaiah pours forth a group of burning questions that deeply trouble the great prophet. At the same time, he presents us with a joyous and prophetic icon of the Resurrection. First, the prophet asks God how He Who “led Moses with His right hand, the arm of His glory” (vs. 12), could allow His chosen people to fall so low. “Where are Your zeal and Your strength; where is the multitude of Your mercy and Your compassion, so as to be patient with us?” (vs. 15). He continues, “Why have you led us astray, O Lord, from Your path, and hardened our hearts so as not to fear You?” (vs. 17).

Although in the opening verses Isaiah questions how God could abandon His people, he does not refrain from begging the Lord to return “for the sake of Your servants, for the sake of the tribes of Your inheritance, that we may inherit a small portion of your holy mountain” (vss. 17-18). As if to remind the Lord of this fact, the prophet then mentions that God is fully able to act as He did of old. Should God choose to “open heaven, trembling shall take hold of the mountains before You” (vs. 20). In the end Isaiah admits that yes, “we sinned; therefore we went astray” (vs. 4), but he proclaims, “From of old we have not heard, nor have our eyes seen any God but You, and Your works which You shall do for those who wait for Your mercy. For mercy shall meet with those who do righteousness” (vss. 3-4).

The Holy Fathers observe that the questions burning in the heart of Isaiah were fully answered by the coming of Christ. Listen, for example, to Theodoret of Cyrus: “The prophetic text . . . is making mention of the event that was the crossing of the Sea: foreseeing that [ancient Israel would] be deprived of the divine solicitude . . . according to the prediction” that God would “forsake [His] vineyard (Is. 5:6).”

Yet Theodoret insists that the questions raised should lead the faithful in Christ to realize that “just as the people, pursued by Pharaoh and the Egyptians, passed through the sea under the leadership of Moses, in the same way, when the devil and the demons were waging war, Christ our Master broke the gates of death, passed over them Himself, and is now leading human nature to freedom. Hence,” Theodoret continues, “the divine apostle applies these words to Christ: ‘He who brought up from the earth the Great Shepherd of the sheep’” (Heb 13:20). He urges us to perceive that Moses himself was the servant and type, and now the Lord Jesus has come as “the true ‘shepherd Who gave His life for the sheep’” (*Commentary on Isaiah 63.12, in Isaiah Through the Ages*, p. 932).

Take note that Isaiah’s questions are answered for the faithful if we recognize that they form a verbal icon of the Resurrection. “He overpowered the water by His presence” (vs. 12) corresponds to the grave and death. Christ Jesus the true Shepherd is risen from the dead. Isaiah asks, “Where is He who put His Holy Spirit in them?” (vs. 11). We answer, “Christ is in our midst; He is and He shall be,” for He baptizes His own with water and the Holy Spirit. At the sea, “He brought them through the deep like a horse through the desert, yet they did not grow weary” (vs. 13).

The Pentecostal fire of “the Spirit came down from the Lord” to guide us (vs. 14). Thus the Lord is leading His people still, making for Himself “a glorious Name” (vs. 14). God Incarnate reveals His *zeal* and *strength* (vs. 15). He shows us the “multitude of [His] mercy and [His] compassion, so as to be patient with us” (vs. 15).

Let God arise, and let His enemies be scattered; and let them who hate Him flee from before His face. Today a sacred Pascha is revealed to us: Pascha which is Christ the Redeemer. – Paschal stichera

**May 12 – Thursday of the Week of the Myrrh-bearing Women (Third Week of Pascha)
Fourteenth Reading at the Vigil for Great & Holy Saturday – Jeremiah 38:31-34**

The New Covenant: *Jeremiah 38:31-34, especially vs. 31:* “‘Behold, days are coming,’ says the Lord, ‘when I shall make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. . . .’” Jeremiah boldly prophesies that God will form “a new covenant” with His people. Seven centuries later, on the night in which the Lord Jesus “was betrayed, or rather, gave Himself up for the life of the world,” He proclaims that New Covenant “to His holy disciples and apostles” when he says, “Drink of this, all of you: this is my Blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you and for many, for the forgiveness of sins” (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom).

Notably, the Apostle Paul chooses to quote this prophecy of Jeremiah in Hebrews 8:8-12. In doing so, he declares that Christ mediates “a better covenant . . . established on better promises” than the former covenant (vs. 6). Jeremiah’s prophecy reveals 1) *what* the fault was under the Old Covenant; 2) the divine *remedy* for that fault; and 3) the *means* by which God achieves this remedy for those who embrace the New Covenant.

What was the main limitation imposed by the former covenant? The instructions for worship that Moses received on Mount Sinai did not, in themselves, “make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience” (Heb 9:9). As a moral and social law with directives for worship, the Old Covenant could not address the inward souls and hearts of God’s people. The latter might carry out the outward forms of the Covenant and yet remain far from God and their fellow members. Laws and rules do not necessarily provide for inner formation but only tell us what to do, how to behave, and what proper actions to take. As impersonal instructions, they are subject to interpretation, evasion, and infraction. The Lord Himself observes to Jeremiah that His people are not living “according to the covenant I made” (Jer 38:32). Instead that Covenant had become a matter of pride for them, and a pretext for disdaining others.

Notice what God promises next through the prophet: “I will surely put My laws into their mind and write them on their hearts” (vs. 33). Interiorizing God’s law is essential to the New Covenant, and this is precisely what we find in the teaching of Jesus. He directs His disciples toward a change of heart and mind, toward repentance and inward renewal, without in any way annulling God’s commands under the Law and the Prophets (Mt 5:17). To enter into covenant with God, we must turn within and address our inward life in order to purify the state of heart and soul. The whole of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7) is concerned with this very need.

There is, of course, a major problem with the greater covenant that God promises Jeremiah (and which the Lord Jesus teaches so vigorously): fallen human beings will surely fail in their efforts to “be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect (Mt 5:48). Yet under the New Covenant God also declares, “I will be merciful to their wrongdoings, and I will no longer remember their sins” (Jer 38:34).

Mercy characterizes our life under the New Covenant, for we know and perceive it as part of the Lord’s ministry. Indeed, He offers us forgiveness of sins regularly and forcefully in these Eucharistic words: “This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Mt 26:28).

Forgive me all my sins, O God, that with a pure heart, I may partake of Thy deifying mysteries, wherewith every man who eateth and drinketh thereof with a pure heart is enlivened. – Prayer of preparation for Holy Communion

**May 13 – Friday of the Week of the Myrrh-bearing Women (Third Week of Pascha)
Fifteenth Reading at the Vigil for Great & Holy Saturday (part one) – Daniel 3:1-24**

The Preface: *Daniel 3:1-24, especially vss. 23-24:* “These three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego fell bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. But they walked about in the midst of the flame, singing to God and praising the Lord.” Among the hymns of the Church is a large set of compositions called canons, regularly sung during Orthros. These canons frequently allude to the three fearless youths who were thrown into the furnace at the command of King Nebuchadnezzar.

Each canon is divided into nine odes, eight of which are drawn from the Old Testament. We always find the songs of the three young men dancing in the fiery furnace (“Prayer of Azariah” from Daniel 3:25-50 and the “Hymn of the Three Young Men,” 3:51-70) in the Seventh and Eighth Odes. However, because of the great length of these odes when sung with their accompanying verses, we usually hear each canon only in abbreviated form, that is, restricted to its *eirmoi* (first verses).

At various seasons of the Church year, the various *eirmoi* contain a rich typology that expresses the Church’s teachings. Thus the *eirmoi* of the Seventh and Eighth Odes found in the various canons teach us about the Holy Trinity, the Lord’s nativity and baptism, God’s call to purify our lives through fasting, the Lord’s Passion, and so on.

The canons sung on the Elevation of the Cross and the Feast of the Ascension, for example, eloquently draw our hearts and minds to the Holy Trinity: “O ye youths, equal in number to the Trinity, bless the Father, the God Creator; praise the Word which did condescend and turn the fire to a dewy breeze; and exalt more and more the all-holy Spirit, Who giveth life to all for evermore.” Here, the three young men serve as types of the “tri-radiant sign of divine headship.”

At the Nativity of Christ, we learn that “the youths who were cast of old into the fire and remained unburned, were a sign of the womb of the Maiden who gave birth supernaturally.” The Theophany Canon reveals that “the furnace of Babylon [held] a strange secret when it overflowed with dew. . . . Jordan was about to receive in its courses the immaterial Fire, and was to contain the Creator baptized in the flesh. . . .”

As we prepare for the Great Fast, the Canon of the Pharisee and the Publican points us toward deeper repentance, just as the miracle of the three youths moves Nebuchadnezzar to say, “Blessed is the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego” (Dan 3:95).

On the first Sunday in Great Lent, the vision of the flames “in the land of Persia” ignites in us a “fervor of true worship.” We are invited to join the youths in singing, “Blessed art Thou in the temple of Thy holiness, O Lord.” As we enter into Holy Week and the events of the Lord’s Passion, the *eirmoi* of Great and Holy Friday give us a valor like that of Joseph of Arimathea, who “beholding the God of all dead and naked . . . sought Him and arrayed Him, shouting, O ye youths, bless Him. praise Him ye priests; and ye nations, exalt Him more and more unto the end of ages.”

Our Lord Jesus is the very one who saved “the children from the furnace, when He became Man, suffered like unto a mortal, and, with His sufferings, invested the mortal with the beauty of incorruption. . . . To [the risen Lord] alone be blessing and glory.”

Glory to Thee, who hast shown us the Light. We worship Thee O Lord, heavenly King, God the Father Almighty; O Lord the Only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ; and the Holy Spirit. – Great Doxology

**May 14 – Saturday of the Week of the Myrrh-bearing Women (Third Week of Pascha)
Fifteenth Reading at the Vigil for Great & Holy Saturday (part two): Daniel 3:25-50**

The Prayer of Azariah: Daniel 3:25-50, especially vs. 28: “*The judgments You made are true, according to all You brought on us and on the holy city of our fathers, because in truth and judgment You did all these things on account of our sins.*” Saint John Chrysostom, writing about the three young men thrown into the furnace at Babylon, observes that Azariah is quite correct when he admits that he, along with his companions and all of ancient Israel, has sinned. “This it is to have a contrite heart. . . . So even after they had fallen into the furnace, they were exceedingly humbled, even more so than they were before. For when they saw the miracle that was wrought, thinking themselves unworthy of that deliverance, they were brought lower in humility” (*Second Homily on Philemon*, p. 553).

Azariah responds to the God-given miracle of survival with the words, “You did all these things on account of our sins” (vs. 28). His inner state ought to capture our attention even as we acknowledge, with Saint John Chrysostom, that Azariah indeed displays a *contrite* heart. What characterizes such a heart? His prayer, which we examine in this reading, reveals the essence of what God teaches concerning true contrition.

First, like Azariah, we are to confess to God that He alone is blessed, worthy of praise, true and glorified (vss. 26-27). Saint John Chrysostom goes on to warn us that “many are elated on account of their humility but let us not be so affected. . . . Such was the Pharisee . . . but not so the Publican” (Lk 18:13). We must remain wary of such elation, for just as “the spirit of despair rejoices at the sight of increasing vice,” according to Saint John Climacus, so “the spirit of vainglory at the sight of increasing virtue” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 22.3, p. 132).

Second, let us affirm that every calamity, deprivation, or misfortune that befalls us in this life is, according to God’s measure, just and right. Such an assertion may be hard for us to swallow, but that reaction only indicates how far we need to grow before we can say without reservation, as does Azariah, “You did all these things on account of our sins” (Dan 3:28).

Third, we do well to confess to God that our whole life is permeated by sin. Even at our best, “we sinned and acted lawlessly to depart from You” (vs. 29).

Fourth, if we should receive the grace to see our entire life – especially our motivations – through God’s eyes, we will come to admit that “neither did we treasure or do as You commanded” (vs. 30). May we find courage to pull back the many layers of our self-justification and self-approval.

Fifth, let us frankly concede that we have nothing to say in self-defense before God. “It is not for us to open our mouth, for this has become a shame and disgrace to Your servants” (vs. 33). As the Prophet Isaiah says, “We all are become as unclean, and all our righteousness is like a filthy rag” (Is 64:5). Such is our true spiritual condition.

Sixth, even as affirm our pitiful condition we do not despair but offer this single plea to God: “We are following You with all our heart. . . . Deal with us according to Your kindness and according to the abundance of Your mercy (Dan 3:41,42). Finally, true contrition prompts us to beseech God concerning even those who have done us wrong. We ask that He would graciously bring them to the knowledge that He alone is “the Lord God and glorious over all the inhabited earth” (vs. 45).

These seven cries are the primary steps toward a contrite heart, one that God assures us He “will not despise” (Ps 50:17). May the Lord grant us the grace as he does to Azariah, that we may find humility in ourselves in whatever state we are in this life.

Behold my weariness. Forgive me all my sins, O God of all, that with a pure heart and fearful mind and contrite soul, I may partake of Thine all-pure mysteries and be enlivened. – Prayer before Holy Communion

**May 15 – Sunday of the Paralytic (Fourth Sunday of Pascha)
Fifteenth Reading at the Vigil for Great & Holy Saturday (part 3) – Daniel 3:51-94**

Hymn of the Three Young Men: *Daniel 3:51-94, especially vs. 57:* “*Bless the Lord, all you works of the Lord, and sing a hymn to the Lord, and exalt Him beyond measure unto the ages.*” Saint Nicholas Cabasilas teaches that the saints, as they glorify the Lord, “can never praise God enough; they do not consider their own thanksgiving sufficient. . . [for] they desire that men and angels should unite with them in praising God, so that their debt of gratitude to Him may be a little more worthily paid, owing to the increase in the number of those who praise Him.”

Saint Nicholas adds that “the holy sons of Azariah, who by the grace of God overcame the flames of the fiery furnace, bear witness to this” same truth: “It was fitting that they should give thanks to God for their miraculous and unexpected delivery; but they did not consider their own praise and acclamation sufficient – they called to their aid the angels and every race of man, the heavens, the sun, the stars, the earth, the mountains, inanimate beings – in short, the whole creation” (*Commentary on the Divine Liturgy*, p. 107).

Let us, therefore, embrace the truth that we are blessed to join the three young men in giving praise to God “ever-existing and eternally the same, Thou and Thine only begotten Son and Thy Holy Spirit . . . who didst bring us from non-existence into being” (Orthros Canon of Pentecost). Indeed, as the Apostle Paul admonishes us, “in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thes 5:18). Likewise, Saint John Chrysostom cautions us not to remain spectators at the Divine Liturgy, nor in any aspect of this present life. All voices of the Church – angels, archangels, priests, archpriests, deacons, men, women, and children – are meant to unite in praise of God.

The text of the “Hymn of the Three Young Men” naturally divides into three parts. First there is an offering of praise, exalting God who alone is worthy of all glory, honor, and worship (Dan 3:52-56). This passage reminds us that, throughout all time, God has not ceased “to do all things until He should bring us back to heaven and endow us with His kingdom which is to come” (*Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom*). This portion of the hymn joins our praises to those of the heavenly tabernacle where the Lord is seated “upon the cherubim” (vs. 55), the “throne of [His] Kingdom” (vss. 54).

The next and longer section of the prayer (vss. 57-82) invokes all of creation to join in the praise of God. Is this possible for every creature, even the stars of heaven, the rain and dew, wind, fire, and heat? We learn from these verses that the entire created order is actively engaged in God’s praise. Created things are not, as contemporary materialists imply, mere matter to be manipulated for our wants; these fellow creatures are ever extolling God’s wonders. According to Saint Hippolytus of Rome, “The three youths in the furnace . . . showed [created things] to be all the servants of God” like us (*Ante-Nicene Fathers* 5, p. 191). May we, then, approach all matter with the reverence due to fellow worshipers of God.

In the concluding verses, the three young men address the Church: “Bless the Lord, O Israel, and sing a hymn to Him” (vs. 83). Praise is not restricted to the clergy alone (vs. 84), but for all who are “servants of the Lord” (vs. 85), the “spirits and souls of the righteous” (vs. 86). Indeed, we are all called to “give thanks to the Lord, for He is good” (vs. 89). Indeed, as we sing in the Divine Liturgy, “it is meet and right to worship Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: the Trinity, one in Essence, and undivided.” Let us ever lift our hearts and voices to the Lord, “for His mercy endures for ever” (vs. 90).

We hymn Thee, we bless Thee, we worship Thee, we glorify Thee, we give thanks unto Thee for Thy great glory, O Lord King, heavenly God. – Great Doxology

May 16 – Monday – Kellia Reading – Jeremiah 20:7-13

Signs for Awakening, continued – Deception, Ridicule, and Faith: *Jeremiah 20:7-13, especially vss. 9-10:* “His word was like a burning fire in my bones. I am weakened on all sides and no longer able to bear it. For I heard the censure of many who gathered round, saying, ‘Let us . . . confront and conspire against him.’” In this passage Jeremiah describes the consequences of choosing to devote his life to God. Every servant of Christ should study the prophet’s insights to better understand what is entailed in the life of every believer, disciple, and servant.

Jeremiah accuses the Lord of having *deceived* him (vs. 7). The Hebrew word for “deceive” may also infer *seduced*. Some of us, perhaps, may find that our relationship with the Lord Jesus demands more of us than we initially understood. Perhaps you feel you were lured into the faith by fascination with Christ. That’s understandable – He is amazing!

Jeremiah reveals that he struggled against being a prophet: “You seized me and prevailed” (vs. 7). If we, like Jacob, wrestle with God, He will win – but also He will bless. Jeremiah’s use of the word *prevailed* shows that our struggle with God involves losing *and* winning. The Lord is stronger than we are, yet He is compassionate and full of mercy. Best of all, He does not abandon those who join themselves to Him.

Earlier, Jeremiah gives some inkling of the price he paid for declaring God’s message; he is “condemned and at variance with the whole earth” (vs. 15:10). Now, he speaks of being “mocked continually” as “a laughingstock” (vs. 20:7). Let us take note: the faithless often will laugh at our faith.

The prophet is reproached by others because he acts on the word of God (vs. 8). It is one thing to be laughed at for believing, and yet another to be upbraided and rebuked. The reactions against Jeremiah prompt him to consider withdrawing from the public square: “I will not name the name of the Lord, nor speak anymore in His name” (vs. 9). To live the faith honestly may well *weaken* our initial resolve to be faithful.

Yes, it is difficult to live the faith, especially when we find ourselves isolated, mocked, and reproached by those who want no part of our religion. There may be a sinister side as well, when former friends conspire against us as they do with Jeremiah. There may come a time when they will watch our every move in order to *be avenged on* us (vs. 10).

The resistance to Jeremiah’s persistent preaching of impending doom for his country leads to surveillance. People are watching “his intention [to] see if he can be deceived, for we will prevail against him and be avenged on him” (vs. 10). Such constant watching, with the aim of defaming our witness, may stir up strong feelings of fear and caution. Let us pray about it!

Although he is under pressure to stop speaking of doom, Jeremiah continues just as God has directed him. As a result he is mocked, criticized, spied on, and greeted with hostility. Yet he knows they “were unable to discern anything they could use against” him, and for this reason they “were greatly ashamed” (vs. 11). Let us take courage and obey the Lord, but be prudent as well!

Jeremiah is imperfect in his desire for revenge, for only Christ is perfect and all-forgiving. The Lord understands our desire to see “vengeance upon them” (vs. 12), but let us leave such action to Him. Instead, God calls us to “sing to the Lord” and praise Him (vs. 13). If Jeremiah sings praise to God for rescuing his soul from the hand of evildoers, then surely God wants the same from us. Do not hesitate to trust and praise Him!

O glorious Prophet Jeremiah, thou knowest our tribulations and failings before God. Intercede with the merciful Lord that He grant us a good confession and true faith.

May 17 – Tuesday – First Reading at Vespers for Mid-Pentecost – Micah 4:2-3, 5; 5:2-5, 8

Ruler of Israel: Micah 4:2-3, 5; 5:2-5, 8, especially vs. 4:2: “For out of Zion the law shall go forth and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” The Prophet Micah, in mystical harmony with Isaiah (Is 2:3-4), foresees a world-changing era in which many of the earth’s nations and peoples will come to the House of the Lord to learn His ways, receive His judgment, and find peace among themselves. What a wonder such an event would be for this war-blighted planet! Nevertheless, we have already seen a partial fulfillment of the prophet’s words.

Prophet Micah was Isaiah’s contemporary. The words of both men were penned some eight centuries before the Incarnation of the Son of God. To Isaiah’s similar message, Micah adds this unique prediction of the birth of Jesus: “And you, O Bethlehem, House of Ephrathah, though you are fewest in number among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to me the One to be ruler of Israel” (Mi 5:1).

Indeed, Christ our God has come forth out of eternity as “a Governor of Nations, from the Virgin Maiden Incarnate . . . who shall govern His people, the new Israel. Let us, therefore, raise unto Him magnification!” (Royal Hours of the Nativity). Now, as we arrive at Mid-Pentecost and meditate on Micah’s word, our knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord surely makes our praise greater and even more joyous.

Christ is risen and among us! Today many nations sing exultantly, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob” (vs. 4:2). Our understanding of Micah’s words is illumined by the coming of Christ. We know that *Zion* refers to the Church of God, as does the phrase “the house of the God of Jacob.” *Jerusalem* (4:2) likewise has a double designation as reflected in our Paschal hymn: “Shine, shine, O new Jerusalem; for the glory of the Lord hath risen upon Thee. Rejoice and exult now, O Zion, and thou, O pure one, Theotokos, rejoice at the Resurrection of Thy Son.”

Today Christ Jesus judges peoples on every continent across the face of the earth. A new law, that of the Gospel, is revealed in and through the Church. Those who are hungry to learn peace and truth may “walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever” (vs. 4:5) – they are being fed. Even strong nations have been rebuked and brought into His courts in praise. Militant peoples have been healed and formed anew by the power of His truth.

Prophet Micah’s words confirm to the faithful that the Holy Infant in the manger is the very Messiah who comes forth to “be ruler of Israel” (vs. 5:1), for His *going forth* into His creation is at “the appointed time for her to give birth” (5:2). Christ the Eternal One humbles Himself for our salvation. Men under the Old Covenant long awaited His coming, as the Prophet indicates. Indeed, the Virgin gives birth so that “the remnant of their brothers will return to the sons of Israel” (5:2).

Now, two thousand years later, Christ still shepherds “His flock in the strength of the Lord, and they will dwell in the glory of the name of the Lord their God, for now they will be magnified unto the ends of the earth” (vs. 5:3). Be assured that neither enemy nor power, false religion, or ideology – not even the gates of hell! – shall prevail against His Church (Mt 16:18). Against all such Assyrians, the Lord shall ever raise up His faithful shepherds to thwart God’s enemies (Mi 5:4). Christ’s Church, the true remnant of Jacob (vs. 6-7), remains to this day with her hand always *exalted* in the Lord (vs. 8).

In the midst of the Mosaic Feast, O Christ God, Master and Maker of all, Thou didst say, Come ye, and receive the water of immortality. Wherefore we cry, Grant us Thy great mercy. – Hymn for Mid-Pentecost

May 18 – Wednesday – Feast of Mid-Pentecost

Second Reading at Vespers for Mid-Pentecost – Isaiah 55:1-3, 6-13

Relief for Thirst: Isaiah 55:1-3, 6-13, especially vs. 55:1: “*You who are thirsty, go to the water, and all who have no money, go and buy wine and fat, and eat and drink without money and price.*” The prophet insists the thirsty must “go to the water” (vs. 1). In a similar vein, the Lord Jesus invites those who thirst to “come to Me and drink” (Jn 7:37). In both cases a feast is set forth that satisfies souls and gives life to the thirsty (compare Is 55:2 and Jn 7:38). The difference between the prophet’s command and Christ’s invitation lies in that to which the thirsting soul is directed.

Note first where this water is located, and what kind of water is meant. In the Gospel invitation we have no doubt where we should go to slake our thirst: “Come to *Me* and drink” (Jn 7:37). Christ makes Isaiah’s command both inviting and personal. How do we respond to this command? How do we reach Him and gain relief?

Prophet Isaiah points the way when he says “go to the water” (Is 55:1). Theodoret of Cyrus clarifies Jesus’ invitation, lest we miss the point: “Behold what he has shown here . . . it is thanks to all-holy baptism that ‘we are justified freely,’ according to the divine apostle, by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus’ (Rom 3:24)” (*Isaiah Through the Ages*, p. 816). Recall that in Holy Baptism we are filled “with power of [the] Holy Spirit, in the unity of...Christ,” becoming “members and partakers of the death and resurrection of Christ our God” (Service of Holy Baptism).

The prophet teaches us much more: first he reveals the *cost* of joining ourselves to Christ, a price that may not be measured in monetary terms. Union with the Lord Jesus is freely given to those who thirst – *if* they will extend His feast to others by directing them to Him: “Freely you have received, freely give” (Mt 10:8).

As Ambrose of Milan makes clear, “He who paid the price of His blood for us did not ask a price from us, because He redeemed us not with gold or silver but with His precious blood. Therefore, you owe that price with which you have been bought. Even though He does not always demand it, you still owe it. Buy Christ for yourself, then, not with what few men possess, but with what all men possess by nature but few offer on account of fear. What Christ claims from you is His” (*Isaiah Through the Ages*, p. 817) – that is, your soul which is made in the image of the Son of God.

Next, Isaiah reminds us not to be deterred from expending our labor in this life, nor should we waste our efforts on the wrong tasks. To clarify what we are to avoid and toward what end we are to strive, the prophet speaks these words of the Lord: “Listen to Me and eat good things, and your soul will delight in good things” (Is 55:2). We must purify the ears of our hearts that we may hear the Lord speaking to us, guiding us, and saving us from false choices as He directs us to His green pastures beside the still waters.

Nor should the final point in verse two be missed. Let us turn to Christ and make the effort to sustain our intimate union and fellowship with Him. God encourages us with the promise of *good things*. Our Lord yearns to pour out His healing grace – His very presence – upon us, for He says, “Incline your ears and follow My ways. Listen to Me, and your soul shall live in good things; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, the holy and faithful things of David” (vs. 3).

O Christ God, Master and Maker of all, we kneel to Thee, crying out in faith, saying, Grant us Thy mercy and compassion; for Thou art the Fountain of life. – Kontakion of Mid-Pentecost

May 19 – Thursday – Third Reading at Vespers for Mid-Pentecost – Proverbs 9:1-11

A Dinner Invitation: Proverbs 9:1-11, especially vs. 5: “Come, eat my bread and drink the wine I mixed for you. . . .” “We are also in the likeness of God if we . . . are conscious of wisdom and spiritual knowledge, for these are within Him and He is called Wisdom and Logos” (*Philokalia* vol. 4, p. 143). Thus, we begin our contemplation of this passage from Proverbs by recognizing that it is God the Word – the Logos, personal Wisdom – who issues the invitation to this heavenly banquet.

Like all good invitations, Wisdom’s message tells us *where* to gather for the banquet: at the house supported by seven pillars (vs. 1). These *seven* pillars in Wisdom’s house signal that this is the place where God is present personally to “cure our wounded hearts and give health to our souls that lie in the bed of sin and death” (Vlachos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 59). Here He serves all who accept His invitation – in His very own house, the Church (1 Tim 3:15).

Wisdom’s announcement then tells us *what* will be offered at the feast: “bread and . . . wine I mixed for you” (Prv 9:5). Milk satisfies babes, but Wisdom’s life-giving food enables us “to discern both good and evil” (Heb 5:14). When Wisdom sets before us the gifts of bread and wine, we recognize this banquet as the Church’s holy banquet. According to Christos Yanaras, “The bread and wine of the Eucharist are not neutral objects which serve for the nourishment and survival of the mortal individual, but they are the creation which is communicated and received as a life-giving relationship with the Father, they are what is created in a unity of life with the uncreated, they are the Body and Blood of Christ” (*Elements of Faith*, p. 124).

Should any doubt remain in our hearts, Wisdom’s invitation clearly reveals the banquet as the Eucharistic meal by speaking of the specific *location* within the Church where the rich foods are offered to us: she “prepared her table” (Prv 9:2). Wisdom is calling us to that “sacred and spiritual table” from which we receive “the heavenly and dread mysteries” (*Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom*).

Wisdom also identifies those to *whom* the banquet is offered, and those for whom it is *not* appropriate. If you have been attracted to folly but yearn to leave it behind, then God’s invitation is for you, for Wisdom plainly states: “Forsake lack of discernment, and you shall live; seek discernment so you may live, and keep straight your understanding with knowledge” (vs. 6). Discernment – especially in the moral sense – is key, including the repudiation of wickedness and baseness and the pursuit of purity and righteousness.

Hence this invitation gives “opportunity to a wise man, and he will be wiser; [instructs] a righteous man, and he shall continue to receive it” (vs. 9). If a person is unwilling to repent and change, however, there is no sense in using this invitation to rebuke him. Such a one will only “dishonor” the messenger who brings the life-saving invitation (vss. 7-8).

How, then, do we gain admission to the feast that Wisdom is offering? We learn that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom, and the counsel of saints is understanding” (vs. 10). Saint Diadochos of Photiki explains that “when . . . through great attentiveness the soul begins to be purified, it also begins to experience the fear of God as a life-giving medicine” (*On Spiritual Knowledge, Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 257-8).

Finally, we discover what benefits follow from attention to our souls. Very simply, “to know the law is characteristic of a good mind” (vs. 10). If you seek purity, the promise is that “you will live a long time, and the years of your life shall be increased” (vs. 11).

O Thou who willingly dost give Thy flesh to me as food, cleanse my soul, and hallow Thou my thoughts. Establish me wholly in Thy fear. – Post-communion prayer

May 20 – Friday – First Reading at Vespers for Ss. Constantine & Helen – Third Kingdoms 8:20-22, 25-28

Prayers Old and New: 3 Kingdoms (1 Kings) 8:20-22, 25-28, especially vs. 28: “*You will hear the supplication of Your servant and of Your people Israel when they pray toward this place. You will hear in Your dwelling place in heaven, and You will be merciful.*” In 959 BC, during the reign of King Solomon, the dynasty of the Davidic kings reached its zenith with the construction of the first permanent temple. At the conclusion of Solomon’s twenty-year building program, grand ceremonies were held to dedicate the new House of the Lord.

The most important rite centered on the Ark of the Covenant. An elaborate procession brought the ark into Jerusalem and up to Mount Zion, where it was placed in the most sacred and holy precinct of the Temple, accompanied by offerings of countless sacrifices from all present (3 Kgs 5:1-8:9). In response, God filled the Temple with a majestic cloud of His glory so that the priests “could not stand there ministering” (3 Kgs 8:11).

King Solomon then led the nation in a dedicatory prayer, of which today’s reading forms the introduction. Reminiscent of many of our Orthodox prayers, this invocation includes seven elements worthy of any petition seeking God’s blessing and aid.

The first of Solomon’s petitions glorifies the “Lord God of Israel [for] there is no God like You in heaven above or on earth below” (vs. 21). It is similar to the address made during the Divine Liturgy to the Lord our God, calling Him “ineffable, inconceivable, invisible, incomprehensible, ever-existing and eternally the same.”

Next Israel’s king speaks of God’s faithfulness to those “who keep Your covenant and Your mercy” with the royal house, promised by God and fulfilled with His hands (vs. 21). This passage is much like our liturgical recognition that God has endowed us with His “Kingdom which is to come.”

Third, Solomon recalls specifics of God’s promises to His “servant David my father” that are now “fulfilled . . . as today” (vs. 22). The form is much like the words of remembrance in the Divine Liturgy, when we recall God’s saving acts in “the cross, the grave, [and] the third day resurrection.

Recognizing the temerity of his request, King Solomon raises the question: “But will God indeed dwell with men on earth?” (vs. 25). He now comes face to face with the divine mystery by which the Holy Spirit acts on our behalf to make “this bread the precious Body of . . . Christ.” Solomon then refers again to God’s faithfulness, recognizing that God will “hear the supplication of Your servant” (vs. 28) even as we acknowledge that He will help us and “all mankind.”

The importance of giving thanks to God for all that He faithfully provides is the sixth point that King Solomon makes. We are especially grateful for God’s promise to bless the temples we dedicate to Him: “‘My name shall be there,’ to hear the prayer [His] servant prays in this place day and night” (vs. 27). In the same manner we Orthodox Christians pray for our houses of worship “and for those who with faith, reverence and fear of God enter therein.”

Lastly, Solomon humbly acknowledges that God “will hear the supplication of Your servant and of Your people Israel when they pray toward this place. You will hear in Your dwelling place in heaven, and You will be merciful” (vs. 28). And how do we conclude the Divine Liturgy? Is it not by freely acknowledging that God blesses “those who bless [Him] and sanctifiest those who put their trust in [Him],” preserving “the fulness of [His] Church?”

How shall I, the unworthy, dare to enter Thy holy place, for my garment will denounce me, and I shall be cast out. Cleanse, O Lord my soul and save me, Thou Lover of mankind! – Kairon prayer of the priest and deacon

May 21 – Saturday – Second Reading at Vespers for Ss. Constantine & Helen – Isaiah 61:10-62:5

A New Day: Isaiah 61:10-62:5, especially vs. 10: *“Let my soul rejoice exceedingly in the Lord, for He clothed me with the garment of salvation and the tunic of gladness.”* This passage from Isaiah expresses the Church’s joy, relief, and abundant gratitude to God for the accession of the God-crowned sovereign, Constantine, to the imperial throne. After three centuries of persecution and repression, a bright springtime for God’s people had arrived.

The Lord worked through the generous heart of Constantine to grace the Christian faithful who had lived for so long under the threat of torture and death. Indeed, “the Lord [caused] righteousness to rise up, and exceeding joy before all the Gentiles” (vs. 11) then living within the vast Roman empire.

God makes His role clear in the next verse, by speaking out Himself: “For Zion’s sake I will not be silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, until My righteousness goes forth as light, and My salvation burns like a lamp” (vs. 12). The Lord here gives to the Church the affectionate names of *Zion* and *Jerusalem* that once applied only to specific places in the Holy Land. And He certainly did act on behalf of the Church through the Roman general Constantine. At a critical moment in Constantine’s career, he faced a challenger who held sway over the imperial city of Rome. Constantine received a vision in which God commanded him to place the Cross of Christ on his shield and those of his legionnaires. The battle that followed turned wholly in his favor, and he took control of the empire’s capital city.

However, Constantine chose not to establish his capital in old Rome. He turned east to a small city on the Bosphorus called Byzantium. Here he founded a new imperial center free of pagan temples – a purely Christian capital. “You shall also be a crown of beauty in the Lord’s hand, and the diadem of a kingdom in the hand of your God” (vs. 3). There, for a thousand years, a Christian civilization flourished. Though not always perfect, the new society was set on its course by Constantine, who was strongly influenced in turn by his devout mother, Helen. No doubt it was her gracious heart that led him to become the Church’s protector, and she is remembered along with him this day.

Born of humble parentage in 255 AD in Bithynia, Helen married Emperor Constantius Chlorus and bore him a son, Constantine, in 274. Her husband abandoned her in 292 to marry the stepdaughter of Emperor Maximian for political advantage, but when Constantine became emperor in 306 her standing was restored. She left an enduring legacy to the Church by seeking out holy sites at the Mount of Olives and in Bethlehem, locating the Holy Cross, the Tomb of Christ, and the Cave of the Nativity when she was of advanced age. Icons celebrating the Exaltation of the Cross usually depict her because of her devoted labors.

These two saints ushered in a new day for the Church. “With the oil of gladness, Thou, O Christ, in a most marvelous way didst anoint Thy communicants, Constantine and Helen, who, hating every deceit and lie, yearned for Thy beauty; and Thou didst freely grant Thy promised Kingdom of Heaven unto them who at Thine own behest first had ruled on earth in godly piety and true religion, O All-holy Word of God.”

On this day Saint Constantine and blessed Helen, his mother, have revealed the Cross, the Wood worthy of all veneration. For the unworthy, it is dishonor; but faithful rulers have it as a weapon vanquishing their opponents. For our sakes is shown forth as a great ensign. – Orthros verse for Saints Constantine and Helen

May 22 – Sunday – Third Reading at Vespers for Ss. Constantine & Helen – Isaiah 60:1-16, Tone 4

Look to God: Isaiah 60:1-16, especially vs. 15: “Because you were forsaken and hated, and there was no one to help you, therefore I will make you an eternal joy, the gladness of generations to generations.” Prophecy is often difficult to read and appreciate. Yet we recognize that great prophets like Isaiah – men who heard the word of the Lord and understood God’s ways – have much to offer us. A love for poetry, a little knowledge of history, and some time for reflection are all helpful when we approach the prophets. Reading and re-reading a text is also beneficial along with a little tutoring and encouragement. Our efforts to comprehend the prophets’ unique style of writing are rewarded by what we gain when we hear their timeless message.

This portion of Isaiah was written to lift the spirits of God’s ancient people after they had been *humbled and provoked* (vs. 14), when they “were forsaken and hated, and there was no one to help” (vs. 15). Tiny Israel had been scattered among the nations – those peoples who were called *goyim* in Hebrew, *ethne* in Greek, and *Gentiles* in Latin and later in English. A glance at the text reveals how often this word, or an indirect reference to other “nations,” appears (vss. 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 16).

The key to Isaiah’s prophetic word lies in the opening line, which is familiar to us as the text of the beloved paschal hymn: “Shine, Shine, O Jerusalem, for your light is come, and the glory for the Lord is risen upon you” (vs. 1). This verse has also been translated as “be illuminated, be illuminated, O Jerusalem, for your light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon you” (*Isaiah Through the Ages*, p. 884). We hear echoes of the paschal proclamation, “Come ye take light from the Light that can never be overtaken by night. Come glorify Christ risen from the dead.”

The second point about this selection is that it speaks of a major reversal of circumstances – in other words, we are alerted that things are going to be different for us than they have been up until now. Gloom and darkness will be replaced by light (vss. 1-3). In place of the scattering of sons and daughters there will be a gathering (vss. 4,9). Impoverishment will be reversed and wealth will flow (vss. 5-9, 13, 16). Helplessness will be alleviated by assistance from foreigners and kings, so that “your gates shall be opened continually, and they shall not be shut day or night, to bring you the power of Gentiles, and their kings leading them” (vs. 11).

The final point that God conveys to His people is that whatever they have been through is now past. A reminder of that sad history lies in verse 10: “I struck you because of My wrath, and I loved you because of My mercy.” The point is that now we are to look ahead, turning to the Lord for light and relief. Look up, not back: do not regard defeat and loss, but look to Him who is invincible, deathless, and above all merciful to His beloved.

Isaiah’s prophecy alludes to an historical event – the rebuilding of Jerusalem under circumstances that seemed virtually miraculous. The Jews who had been enslaved in Babylon were freed when Babylon fell to the Persians, who encouraged the rebuilding of Jerusalem for political reasons. Christians later applied this prophecy to the situation of the Church after the Roman persecutions ended. The Emperor Constantine’s support of the faith gave rise to a flowering of music, art, and literature. Today the Church likewise enjoys a time of respite after the Soviet repression of the last century, with Orthodox Christianity now a growing, worldwide faith.

Be mindful, O Lord of Thy holy Orthodox Church; confirm and strengthen it, increase it and keep it in peace and preserve it unconquerable forever. Amen. – Prayer of General Intercession

May 23 – Monday – Kellia Reading – Jeremiah 22:10-23

Kings and Prophets – Three Kings: Jeremiah 22:10-23, especially vss. 14-15: “*You built for yourself a well-proportioned house with breezy rooms upstairs, lined with windows, cedar panels, and painted with vermilion. Shall you reign, for you provoked Me as did your father Ahaz?*” This passage refers to three different kings of Judah: Josiah (639-609 BC) and two of his sons who reigned successively after him, Shallum-Jehoahaz (609 BC) and Eliakim-Jehoiakim (609-597 BC). The text sets forth three standards that God applies when assessing leaders.

The first of these standards concerns faithfulness to the bond of love between ruler and people. To be separated from his land and his people is the worst possible destiny for a king. As Jeremiah says, “Weep not for the dead, neither lament. Weep bitterly for him who goes away, for he shall return no more to see his native land” (vs. 10).

In these verses we see the contrasting fate of two kings of Judah whose reigns abruptly ended. The godly King Josiah was killed in the battle of Meggido in 609 BC by the forces of the Egyptian Pharaoh Necho. Josiah’s son Shallum reigned after him for three months before being dethroned. (At his coronation, Shallum assumed the royal name Jehoahaz.)

Although he is chosen to serve as king by his people, Jehoahaz is removed from power and sent into exile in Egypt, ultimately to die there. Why? From God’s perspective, Jehoahaz violates the bond of love with his people by doing what was “evil in the eyes of the Lord” (4 Kgs 23:32).

“Weep not for the dead,” we are told (Jer 22:10), for unlike Josiah, whose body is taken from the battlefield “in a chariot from Megiddo . . . to Jerusalem, and buried . . . in his own tomb” (4 Kgs 23:30), Jehoahaz is removed not only from his throne but also from his native land and people. King Josiah’s body remains in the care of his people, but Jehoahaz is taken off into oblivion.

Next, God evaluates a leader’s policies to see where they fall on the spectrum between justice and injustice. Does he care for the poor, or practice oppression and self-indulgence? The prophet declares, “Woe to him who builds his house without righteousness and his rooms upstairs without judgment, who employs his neighbor for nothing and will not give him his pay!” (Jer 22:13).

These words, along with the rest of the passage, direct a scathing condemnation at Josiah’s son Eliakim, who received the royal name Jehoiakim when he ascended the throne. In order to control him, Pharaoh first held him in jail and then exiled his half-brother Jehoahaz (4 Kgs 23:34).

Concerning a king’s duty to judge for the poor, the Lord asks, “Is this your not knowing Me?” (Jer 22:16). He indicts Jehoiakim for his injustices: “Behold, neither your eyes nor your heart are good for anything except for covetousness and the shedding of innocent blood, and for committing wrongdoing and murder” (vs. 17).

A ruler’s lack of love for his people and his failure in “good judgment and righteousness” (vs. 15) set the stage for God’s third standard: when the Lord speaks, the ruler is to listen (vs. 21). Rulers who heed the voice of the Lord follow His righteous ways readily and thus meet God’s standards. Jehoiakim, however, never did. Hence, the Lord declares: “But he shall be buried with the burial of a donkey, and they will drag him out to be discarded beyond the gates of Jerusalem” (vs. 19).

O Lord our Governor, have mercy upon the leaders of every nation in which Thy people dwell; may they rule with justice, love, and mercy, walking humbly with Thee in all their ways. –Based on Micah 6:8

May 24 – Tuesday – Kellia Reading – Jeremiah 35:1-2, 10-17

Kings and Prophets, continued – Truth and Falsehood: *Jeremiah 35:1-2, 10-17, especially vss. 12-13:* “Go and tell Hananiah . . . ‘Thus says the Lord, “You have broken yokes of wood, but I will make yokes of iron in their place.”’” History records many unexpected events such as the fall of Rome in AD 410, when Goth vandals ravished the eternal city. Constantinople, the new Rome, fell in AD 1453 to the Ottoman Turks, whose leader, Mehmet II, was a mere youth of 21. Paris, supposedly safe behind the impregnable Maginot Line, fell to the Nazis in 1940.

This current passage is set during a time when the people of Judah wonder if Nebuchadnezzar will launch a new campaign to reassert his control over Egypt. The king of Judah and his allies ponder deeply on this question, until God gives direction through Jeremiah.

He tells the prophet, “Make bonds and wooden yokes and put them on your neck” (Jer 34:1). Wearing these yokes, Jeremiah delivers God’s solemn charge to the king of Judah, his courtiers, and the envoys from nearby nations. “I made the earth by My great strength and with my high arm, and I will give it to whomsoever it may seem good in My eyes. I gave the earth to Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon to serve him. . . . But . . . whoever will not put their neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon I will visit with the sword and the famine” (vss. 34:5-6). In other words, Judah and her allies are told submit to Babylon and not to rely on Egypt.

Hananiah, whom Jeremiah identifies as a *false prophet*, receives a different word. He reports to the people, “Thus says the Lord: ‘I broke into pieces the yoke of the king of Babylon’” (vs. 35:2). Is Jeremiah’s message wrong? Does his command to submit to Babylon come from the Lord, or from his imagination?

Hananiah then removes the yoke from the neck of Jeremiah and breaks it, saying, “Thus says the Lord: ‘Thus I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon from the necks of all nations’” (vs. 11). Jeremiah hears him, but for some reason he does not counter the false word of Hananiah. Rather, he “went his way” (vs. 11).

Where does a person find boldness to say, “Thus says the Lord”? How can a creature of God—a mortal, finite, limited being—affirm that the words from his mouth are from the Creator of heaven and earth?

Jeremiah’s writings reveal that he is aware of his human limitations. He initially questions the Lord’s call to be a prophet when he says, “I do not know how to speak” (vs. 1:6). Still, he obeys and speaks forthrightly, trusting that the words from his mouth are the word of the Lord “over the nations and kingdoms” (vs. 1:10). He does not challenge Hananiah at first, but after the son of Azur breaks the yoke-bars from his neck, “the word of the Lord [again] came to Jeremiah.” This time, God’s word through Jeremiah is *for* Hananiah (vs. 35:13).

Let us consider prayerfully when someone speaks the word of the Lord. In this case, the proven prophet of God does not say a word; instead, Jeremiah waits (vs. 11). Scripture and Holy Tradition guide us likewise to pray and to wait, allowing the Lord to disclose whether a word is founded on imagination, on a lie, or on true revelation (vs. 15). We may be sure that God will expose every false word and false prophet (vss. 16-17), for God is near and all His ways are truth (Ps 118:151).

O Heavenly King, Comforter, by whom light riseth up in darkness for the godly, save us from false words, that in Thy light we may see light and may not stumble at falsehood. – Prayer for Guidance, from the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer

May 25 – Wednesday – Kellia Reading – Jeremiah 37:10-14, 19-20

The Book of Consolation – Judgment and Healing: Jeremiah 37:10-14, 19-20, especially vs. 14: “*For I will bring about your healing from a painful wound. I will heal you, says the Lord. For you were called Dispersed. . .*” Today’s reading begins with a passage from a section of Jeremiah often referred to as the “Book of Consolation” (chapters 37-40). Jeremiah received these prophecies from the Lord “in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah [587 BC]. . . . The forces of the king of Babylon’s army made a fortification against Jerusalem, and Jeremiah was kept in the court of the prison which was in the king’s house, in which King Zedekiah shut him up, saying, ‘Why do you prophesy, saying, “Thus says the Lord: ‘Behold I give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall take it’”’” (vss. 39:1-3).

Jerusalem had now entered the final days of an eighteen-month siege by the Babylonian army. Other Judean cities already had fallen. Early in the standoff, “the army of Pharaoh came up from Egypt; and the Chaldeans heard the report concerning them, and they departed from Jerusalem” (vs. 44:5). Soon they returned, however, driving the Egyptians back to their land, and resuming the siege until “in the eleventh year of Zedekiah . . . the city was broken apart” (vs. 46:2). King Zedekiah was overtaken in the plains of Jericho and captured. The dire prophecies contained in the early chapters of Jeremiah’s writings were thus fulfilled.

Jeremiah recorded the consoling words of God in the present passage shortly before the breach of the city. He announces the Lord’s compassion for His people and assures them that they will not perish utterly. After long months of siege, the populace is living in famine, disease and dread – they know their beloved Jerusalem will soon be taken. The contrast between these fears and God’s love makes these four chapters an exemplary revelation under the Old Covenant. The word of the Lord prepares his people for the Gospel message of Christ, in which His love and faithfulness to His people will be disclosed in full.

However, the Lord does not sweeten everything He says. All the warnings the Lord provided earlier are coming to pass: “You were painfully treated for healing, but this was no benefit to you” (vs. 37:11). Even more painful is the fact that the nation’s last, short-sighted hope – the Egyptian army – has fled: “All your friends forgot you” (vs. 12).

God is Lord of history, and He ordains consequences for good and for ill. From ancient times to the present, disobedience, apostasy, and immorality bring down judgment, especially when sin has *multiplied*, and *wrongdoings* abound (vs. 12). Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk warns, “Our compassionate God promised to show us His grace and mercy, but He did not promise us the morrow. Let us pay close attention to this and let us awake from sleep” (*Journey to Heaven*, p. 167-8).

Even when we encounter the force of God’s wrath, we may find strength in the knowledge that the very hammers with which the Lord strikes will be judged: “All who devour you shall be consumed, for all your enemies shall devour themselves” (vs. 13). All men and nations are held accountable by God. More, He “will bring about your healing” (vs. 14).

Indeed, let us always refuse to despair, for God remains faithful to His promises. “I will heal you,” the Lord tells us (vs. 14). When we experience the pain of judgment, we should remember that “in the last days, you will come to know these things” (vs. 20). The purpose of the Lord is to be found in whatever happens.

O Lord, help us to treat all that comes to us with peace of soul and with the conviction that Thy will governs all. In unforeseen events, let us not forget that all are sent by Thee. – Prayer for the Beginning of the Day

May 26 – Thursday – Kellia Reading – Jeremiah 38:10-22

The Book of Consolation, continued – Gladness for Sorrow: *Jeremiah 38:10-22, especially vs. 13:* “*I will turn their mourning into joy, and I will make them glad.*” On our journey through this present existence, we experience many faux deaths: a friend departs, a child leaves home, a house burns down, a spouse betrays us, a layoff takes away our income. It is understandable that we mourn these death-like events, for they grieve us. We hurt, and bitterness, panic, and darkness fill our hearts like death. We groan “because of the day of shame” (vs. 19).

We can only imagine the reaction of the Prophet Jeremiah as he sits locked in prison for preaching an unwelcome word from God to his nation’s rulers (vss. 44:11-21). As the weeks and months go by, that dire word is fulfilled before his eyes. The chosen nation suffers defeat, loss of sacred identity, exile, the death of its king, and finally the destruction of the Temple of God.

Then Jeremiah receives from the Lord a new word that speaks to this sorrow: “The Lord redeemed Jacob. . . . from the hand of those stronger than he. They shall come and be glad in the mountain of Zion, and they shall come to the goodness of the Lord” (vss. 11-12). God now addresses defeat with a message of hope, delivered through a prophet who, until now, had tirelessly preached sin and judgment, doom and disaster.

At this unlikely juncture God promises to reverse the pain of living under the dark clouds of defeat. The famine that has devoured the strength of the people of Jerusalem will end. God proclaims a time when the land will flourish for His people with “wheat, wine, and fruit, and . . . cattle and sheep. Their soul will be like a fruitful tree, and they will hunger no more” (vs. 12). The portrait God paints is vivid, as He declares the coming of joy and restoration: “The virgins rejoice in the assembly of young men, and the old men shall rejoice. I will turn the mourning into joy” (vs. 13)!

There is little doubt that exile and enslavement will follow the breach of the city walls and the collapse of Judah’s defenses. Nebuchadnezzar will surely punish this little vassal kingdom for withstanding his might and dignity. One of the worst moments to be endured in the coming debacle is the destruction of the Temple and the end of divine worship. There will be nothing left for the priests. The house of the Lord will be destroyed, and all the vessels and furnishings taken by the pagans.

Yet, at this very moment, God promises to reverse what is coming: “They shall return from the land of their enemies. There shall be an abiding home for your children” (vss. 16-17). He makes His promise clear, waking the people from lethargy and defeat by telling them: “Rouse yourself, O Zion, and bring about vengeance. Be strong in your heart and return by the way you went, O virgin of Israel” (vs. 21).

The message is clear enough – exile and slavery surely lie ahead. And yet God vows: “I will magnify and cheer with wine the soul of these priests, the sons of Levi, and My people shall be satisfied with My good things” (vs. 14). Surely such prophecies seemed hard to believe, but long after the city walls tumbled and the caravans of exiles trekked away east to Babylon, the words spoken by Jeremiah would establish him as God’s true prophet.

The Lord speaks to the people as if the coming captivity has already ended – yet it will be some seventy years until that happens. From the vantage point of history, we know that most of those who went away did not return. Only a few of their children survived and returned after the Medes defeated Babylon. Yet God instructs His people to look to the future: “Return to your cities and mourn. How long, O dishonored daughter, will you turn away? For the Lord has created safety by a new planting. Men will travel about in security” (vss. 21-22).

Redeem the souls of Thy servants from all wrongdoing, O Thou our hope, and save us. – Based on Psalm 33:22

May 27 – Friday – Kellia Reading – Jeremiah 39:36-44

The Book of Consolation, continued – The Everlasting Covenant: *Jeremiah 39:36-44, especially vs. 40:* “I will make an everlasting covenant with them, by which I will not turn away from them. I will put My fear into their heart so they may not depart from Me.” As we read this passage, let us note the caveat which the Lord includes when revealing His lovingkindness toward His people. Before declaring that they will return from exile (vss. 37-42), He first reminds Jeremiah of the message He has given him consistently: “This city . . . ‘shall be delivered into the hands of the king of Babylon by sword, famine and banishment’” (vs. 36).

However, in the next verse, He uses *them* as the object of the verb: “Behold, I will gather *them* out of every land where I scattered them” (vs. 37). We need not look far to determine what God means by the use of this pronoun. By “this city” and “them,” He is referring to the entire people He has chosen (see vs. 38). God cares less for our material constructs such as cities and houses; rather, His love is for His people. They (and we) are His beloved whom He “will gather” (vs. 37).

Let us always keep in mind that we are those very people of whom the Lord God speaks in this Old Testament passage. There is unbroken continuity between the people of ancient Jerusalem and the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. Our history is both modern and ancient; it includes the exile to Babylon and a return to Jerusalem. Literally, our forefathers went through a time of alienation “for our learning” (Rom 15:4) as well as for their correction. Their exile, brought about by the sin of turning away from God, is a sin which any among God’s people may commit, including those of us who name Christ as Lord.

It is not surprising that God should use the historic moment of exile to speak of the great restoration and gathering of His people. For “all we like sheep have gone astray” (Is 53:6), and the Shepherd is searching for us, whether it be in cities like Babylon or other place that we lay to waste by our sins. He means to bring back “the one which is lost until He finds it” (Lk 15:4). God forever speaks of His *everlasting covenant* (Jer 39:40) in Christ Jesus, but especially in seasons of “sword, famine, and banishment” (vs. 36).

Why is this wondrous covenant called *everlasting*? It is the “new covenant in My blood” (Lk 22:20), which we commemorate in the Divine Liturgy. Who gathers at His throne and cries out, “Save us, O Son of God, Who art risen from the dead”? Who prays for “the precious gifts now offered”? Who offers “the holy oblation in peace”? Who dares to “call upon the heavenly God, as Father, and to say, ‘Our Father’”? It is we who “with fear of God, and faith and love, draw near” and hear Him say, “I shall be as God” (Jer 39:38).

Christ Our Lord gives us “another way and different heart” (vs. 39). He gives His holy and life-giving Spirit to “put [His] fear into [our] heart so [we] may not depart from [Him]” (vs. 40). Our good God never ceases “to do good” and to “plant [us] in this land in faithfulness” (vs. 41). At times, He brings “great calamities upon [His] people” (vs. 42). Yet according to His true word, given through the Prophet Jeremiah, He also brings upon His people in every age “all the good things I have spoken” (vs. 42).

However, let us heed what our Lord says concerning *fields* (vss. 43, 44). “Lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!” (Jn 4:35). Our task is to serve our Lord in His harvest, so that all peoples may come to His feast.

Let our mouths be filled with Thy praise, O Lord, that we may sing of Thy glory; for Thou hast permitted us to partake of Thy holy, divine, immortal and life-giving Mysteries. Establish us in Thy sanctification, that all the day long we may meditate upon Thy righteousness. Alleluia! –Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

The Eve of Jerusalem’s Fall – Duplicity: *Jeremiah 41:8-22, especially vs. 16:* “*But you turned away and profaned My name to bring back each male and female servant of his, whom you set free in their soul, to be once again your male and female servants.*” The Babylonian siege imposed severe hardships on the populace of Jerusalem. King Zedekiah proposes to the people “that every man should set his servant free – each male and female servant of his, the Hebrew man and the Hebrew woman – that no man of Judah should be a servant”(vs. 9). The apparent aim is to mobilize the entire population in the war effort.

In any case, “the rulers of Judah and the mighty men, and the priests and the people” (vs. 19) make a solemn covenant to free those in bondage. In the formal ceremony used for “cutting” or making a covenant (see Gn 15:9-17), a calf is divided in two. Those entering the covenant must pass between the two parts (Jer 41:18) before the Lord in His temple (vs. 15).

After the liberation of the slaves, the siege of Jerusalem is temporarily lifted because the Babylonians must confront an Egyptian army advancing toward the city. Although the lull in fighting is simply the eye of the hurricane, the defenders cling to the hope that “the Chaldeans will surely depart from us,” even though the Lord has said, “They will not depart” (vs. 44:9).

Because of this vain hope, the beleaguered people of Jerusalem renege on the covenant they had just made to free those in bonds. They bring “back each male and female servant . . . whom [they] set free” and enslave them once again (vs. 41:16). However, to reject what we promise to another person or to God reaches deep into the essence of sin. It becomes a revolt against the Lord and leaves us open to serious spiritual, psychological, and physical consequences. As we know, the Babylonians forced Pharaoh’s troops to retreat, and then continued their attack, finally breaching the walls and wreaking devastation on Jerusalem.

Let us be aware of these consequences when we make solemn agreements, no matter whether they are vows to God or to our fellow men. All thoughts, actions, and agreements are made in the *sight* of the Lord (vs. 15). Duplicity never escapes His notice. The Lord Jesus warns, “There is nothing covered that will not be revealed, nor hidden that will not be known. Therefore, whatever you have spoken in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have spoken in the ear in inner rooms will be proclaimed on the housetops” (Lk 12:2-3). By our words, contracts, and deeds, we are accountable to God; in the end, we cannot get away with fraud or duplicity of any sort.

God’s laws are founded upon His nature and purpose. To violate another’s trust is sinful, unnatural, and invites disaster (Jer 41:13-14). The defenders of Jerusalem forgot their origins, for they had been slaves in Egypt until God freed them. He expects them never to bind others permanently. He specifically limits servitude, even when it is voluntary: “If your brother with you becomes poor and sells himself to you, you shall not compel him to serve as a slave. But as a hired servant or a sojourner, he shall be with you and work for you until the Year of Remission” (Lv 25:39-40). God sets firm boundaries governing all our words and dealings!

God sets forth the consequences for breaking promises: the farcical gift of liberty would give remission “for the sword, and for death and famine” (Jer 41:17). The divided calf eaten during the covenant ceremonies turns out to be a symbol of men’s bodies, which become food for the birds and the beasts (vs. 20). Consider carefully! Jerusalem’s doom instructs us as to the dire results of double-dealing (vss. 21-22). The Lord’s way is our only salvation from the outcome that duplicity surely brings.

O Master, compassionate King of all, keep us in Thy sanctification; confirm us in the Orthodox faith; preserve our souls in purity and uprightness through saving fear of Thee. – Chrismation Prayer

Self-Will: Jeremiah 43:1-24, especially vss. 3, 24: “Perhaps the house of Judah will hear all the calamities I purpose to bring upon them, so as to turn them from their evil way; and I shall be merciful to their wrongdoings and sins. . . . But the king and his servants who heard all these words did not seek the Lord, neither did they tear their garments.” Again and again, we encounter this phrase in Jeremiah: “The word of the Lord came” (Jer 1:1). Initially, the text states that the word of the Lord came to *him*, but the pronoun quickly changes to *me* (vs. 1:6). Thereafter, throughout Jeremiah, we notice the repeated refrain, “The word of the Lord came to *me*” (vs. 43:1).

The word of the Lord comes to everyone – yes, even to you and me. Many of us will not hear it, however, and with the passage of time many *cannot* hear. Jeremiah’s experience raises the question of whether the word of the Lord is a constant in our lives. When was the last time we heard the Lord? Even if we can say, “The word of the Lord came to me,” let us ask ourselves whether His word holds the same the certainty for us that it does for Jeremiah.

What most often gets in the way of the Lord’s word? It is our self-will. “I will go now.” “I will tell her what I think.” “I will not pray this morning.” Suppose the matter were the other way around? What if the Lord said, “Go later,” or “Tell her what I, the Lord, think.” Suppose the word of the Lord came with the message, “Pray this morning.” Self-will rules our lives quietly, slipping in unnoticed. We do not like being told what to do! We may never say out loud, “I do not like God telling me what to do,” but in fact we often tune Him out.

Jeremiah hears when the Lord speaks. As a result, God shares His struggle with him: “Perhaps the house of Judah will hear all the calamities I purpose to bring upon them, so as to turn them from their evil way; and I shall be merciful to their wrongdoings and sins” (vs. 3). The Lord longs for the people of Judah to hear and then turn away from evil. He does not want to unleash calamities; He would rather be merciful to a repentant sinner, to any who honestly turn *from their evil way*.

To hear the word of the Lord is to be blessed. Then, we hear Him in His suffering. As the Lord Jesus says, “If you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless” (Mt 12:6). Self-will is “hard of hearing.” It does not want to listen to the word of the Lord, nor to know that He desires mercy for us.

The word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah and sends him to the people. He sets a plan in motion (Jer 43:4-6) to accomplish God’s purpose, but each person must *will* it, do it, and not simply mouth his compliance. Let us likewise set self-will aside!

When the people proclaim a fast before the Lord, the conditions are right “in the house of Judah” (vs. 9). Baruch reads the word of the Lord faithfully “in the hearing of all the people” (vs. 10). God’s word is striking, for when “all the rulers” learn of it (vs. 14), they want to hear it for themselves. “And Baruch read it” (vs. 15).

Did they receive what they heard? Not at all! “They asked Baruch, saying, ‘How did you come to write all these words?’” (vs. 17). Of course, it was Jeremiah again (vss. 18-19)! They went directly to “[report] to the king all these words” (vs. 20). Note the use of the phrase “these words,” rather than “the word of the Lord.”

Self-will diminishes our ability to hear. The king and his courtiers would not, and could not, hear. Jehudi reads the words on the scroll and “cast them into the fire” (vs. 23). “The king and his servants who heard . . . did not seek the Lord, neither did they tear their garments” (vs. 24). To hear and to turn means to change our own self-will into these words, “Thy will be done. O Lord, in Thy mercy, help me!”

O Master, open the eyes of our mind to understand Thy Gospel teachings; implant in us the fear of Thy blessed commandments, that we may enter upon a spiritual manner of living. – Liturgical Prayer Before the Gospel Reading

May 30 – Monday – Kellia Reading – Jeremiah 44:1-21

The Eve of Jerusalem's Fall – Walking in the Day: Jeremiah 44:1-21, especially vs. 13-14: “He seized Jeremiah, saying, ‘You are fleeing to the Chaldeans!’ But he said, ‘That is a lie! I am not fleeing to the Chaldeans.’ Yet he did not listen to him. So Irijah seized Jeremiah and brought him to the rulers.” Saint John Climacus says, “If the day in our soul does not draw to evening and grow dark, then the thieves will not come and rob and slay and ruin our soul” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 26.10, p. 162). The “day” in our soul of which Saint John speaks is surely the very day the Prophet David seeks: “Let my mouth be filled with praise, that I may hymn Thy glory and Thy majesty all the day long” (Ps 70:7).

Referring to such a day, the Apostle Paul reminds that we “are not in darkness” but rather “sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness.” He adds, “Let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love” (1 Thes 5:4, 5, 8). We are to allow the “fear of God, and faith and love” to guard our souls against nightfall and darkness, so that no “thieves . . . come and rob and slay and ruin” us.

Reviewing the events recorded in this passage, we note that Jeremiah is surrounded by men whose souls are darkened, men blind to the light of his prophecy. For a time he walks freely, but these men “of the night,” the rulers of Judah, perceive his departure from Jerusalem as nothing more than desertion to the enemy. Deep, bitter darkness obscures their hearts and souls.

Speaking of darkness of spirit, Saint Peter of Damascus observes that those who lack discrimination may exert themselves “enormously, but . . . cannot achieve anything; while the person who possesses [discrimination] is a guide to the blind and a light to those in darkness” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 243). This contrast underscores the vast difference between those who stubbornly “know” that Jeremiah is deserting the city and the true character of the prophet, a man illumined by God who walks as a child of the day!

Darkness prevails in the soul of Irijah the guard (Jer 44:13-14), in the rulers who beat the prophet (vs. 15), and in King Zedekiah who talks to him in secret (vs. 17). Delusion dominates their thinking; they are convinced that the Egyptians will rescue them (vs. 7), and this false belief blinds their souls. They cannot comprehend Jeremiah’s point that if the Chaldeans “left certain wounded men, these men would rise up and burn this city with fire” (vs. 10).

We, like the leaders of Jerusalem, easily fall captive to our fears and succumb to the many delusions that blind so many around us. Let us beseech God to lead us into His day! As the Lord Jesus teaches, only he who walks in the day “sees the light of this world” (Jn 11:9). Based on circumstantial evidence, Irijah concludes that Jeremiah is fleeing to the Babylonians. After all, since Jeremiah said the Babylonians would take the city, he must be running *to* them. Irijah’s delusions hold him in thrall.

The same delusions embitter the rulers against Jeremiah. They see the approach of Pharaoh’s army and the withdrawal of the Chaldeans as signs of God’s deliverance. Controlled by that false belief, they try to beat sense into Jeremiah. The king is intrigued by the prophet, yet he is subject to the same misconception and retains Jeremiah in custody.

As Christians facing a flood of neo-pagan ideals, we too need to learn how to identify false beliefs in order to escape them. Saint Peter of Damascus says, “Pray fervently about everything that we do [and] at least strive to be without rancor and evil thoughts.” We do well to heed the Apostle Paul: “The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness. . . . Let us walk properly, as in the day” (Rom 13:12-13), putting on the Lord Jesus.

Illumine our hearts, O Master, who loveth mankind, with the pure light of Thy divine knowledge. Open our noetic eyes to the understanding of Thy gospel teaching. – Prayer Before the Gospel Reading

May 31 – Tuesday – Kellia Reading – Jeremiah 45:1-13

In the Pit: Jeremiah 45:1-13, especially vs. 6: “So they cast [Jeremiah] into the pit of Malchiah the king’s son, who was in the court of the prison. They let Jeremiah down into the pit where there was no water, except for mud; thus he was in the mud.” The siege of Jerusalem lasted from January of 588 BC until July of 587 BC, interrupted for a brief time in the summer of 588. At that point in time the Babylonians were forced to disengage in order to deal with an Egyptian army advancing against them. During that brief respite in the fighting, Jeremiah was arrested and detained.

The officials of Judah who favor a pro-Egyptian policy prevail: the city must hold out. They do not consider Jeremiah to be a prophet; rather, he is demoralizing the troops as they resist the Babylonian assault on the city. They cry, “Let that man [Jeremiah] be put to death, for by speaking . . . such words, he weakens the hands of the fighting men left in the city and the hands of all the people” (vs. 4).

The weak-willed King Zedekiah has little actual power, so he gives the officials leave to do whatever they wish with Jeremiah (vs. 5). During the hot summer, the water in the cistern at the house of the king’s son has become depleted, so they drop Jeremiah into this waterless pit to die amidst the insects that flourish in the mud (vs. 6).

Take note that throughout this sequence of events the prophet says nothing. Like Christ in the hands of Pontius Pilate (Lk 23), Jeremiah remains silent deep within the pit. Is the voice of the Lord that opposes men’s wisdom to be heard no more? Can the word of God be stifled merely by dropping His prophet into a muddy cistern?

O God, in Thy mercy keep us from such self-assured thoughts and actions! We know in our bones that the word of the Lord never can be swept away, muzzled, or hidden by the fiat of mere mortals. Let us never look the other way, as King Zedekiah does (vs. 7), while others scheme to silence the word of God. Puny men may conclude that their ideas are better than God’s, but woe to those who imagine that they can mute the Lord!

A foreigner – an outsider, a slave in the king’s household, an emasculated man who has no power – is the only person moved in his heart by Jeremiah’s plight. This marginalized man does three simple things that anyone can do who wishes bring unpleasant truth to light. First, he appeals to someone capable of reversing the injustice (vss. 8-9). Next, he proceeds to take the necessary steps to raise the one who speaks truth from the pit (vss. 11-13). Finally, in carrying out the rescue plan, he is careful not to harm the person he strives to help (vs. 12).

We always have the option of speaking up when truth has disappeared from sight. May we always find the courage to address those capable of correcting a wrong whenever truth has been smothered. Every redress of grievances begins when someone exposes what is happening to those in power, whether they be local officials, appointed officers, presidents, kings, directors, managers, or owners. These leaders are in a position to hear our reasoned appeals on behalf of God’s truth.

With others helping, the Ethiopian eunuch assembles a few “old rags and old ropes” (vs. 11) and lowers them to the prophet stranded in the mire. Then he and the thirty men pull Jeremiah out. Ebed-Melech acts as he is able. We, too, can make an effort using whatever tools God sets before us.

Note that in the course of the rescue the eunuch is careful neither to injure Jeremiah nor add to his discomfort. The old rags pad the prophet’s armpits as the men haul him up, freeing him from the mud and restoring him to light and life (vs. 12).

O Master, Christ our God, lift up my downcast mind and heart to Thee, and raise me out of the mire of perdition, lifting me with the sure ropes of repentance and Thy gentle gift of consoling tears, that by Thine aid, I may help in restoring others to Thy light and life. – Canon of Repentance to Our Lord Jesus Christ