

January 1 – Sunday – Circumcision of Christ, Tone 3
Luke 2:20-21, 40-52

Jesus Is Savior: Saint Luke 2:20-21, 40-52, especially vs. 21: “His name was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.” Shepherds tending flocks near Bethlehem are told by an angel, “There is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior” (vs. 2:11). Their hearts stir at the news; they see the hosts of heaven praising God, who extends His peace to mankind.

The shepherds go quickly to Bethlehem to see the wonder for themselves. Each detail corresponds to the angels’ words. Yes, a savior is born to us, among us, in a city with royal heritage, that we might be saved from ourselves. They joyously return to their flocks on the hillsides around Bethlehem.

We are not surprised to learn that they glorify and praise God as they depart, for “all the things that they had heard and seen [in Bethlehem, were] as it was told them” (vs. 20). The Child lies in a manger – a feeding trough – wrapped in swaddling cloths. Further, the shepherds share what is reported by Mary, His mother, and Joseph, her betrothed: an Angel instructed them to call the Child by the name Jesus, the very name given to Him at His circumcision (cf. Lk 1:31 and Mt 1:25).

Let us be sure not to miss the evangelist’s point: on the eighth day, the Child receives the Hebrew name *Yeshua*, which means “savior” (in Greek, *Jesus*). Saint Luke is underscoring the fact that Jesus’ birth is no random event. God is fulfilling His purpose from eternity. The shepherds learn this truth at the time of His birth (Lk 2:11). Saint Luke wants us to understand that God comes to us humbly, as a man, in order to save His creation gone astray. He is salvaging the race He formed in His own image. The Evangelist weaves this message into his entire Gospel.

We learn from Scripture how our God continually intervenes on behalf of the poor, corrupted human race. He chooses one people, one nation, to announce salvation to all nations. He saves them repeatedly, freeing them “from the hand of the Egyptians” when they were slaves (Ex 14:30). As the Prophet Moses tells them, God advances “to fight for you against your enemies, to save you” (Dt 20:4). Their neighbors learn this truth: “Our God is the God of salvation, and the pathways leading forth from death are those of the Lord’s Lord” (Ps 67:21); “He saved them for His name’s sake, that He might make known His mighty power” (Ps 105:9).

God has a greater plan: He will save all nations by removing the reproach of death from everyone on earth (cf.: Is 25:7-8). First, He alerts Israel to this coming salvation, and His people learn to say, “The horse is prepared for the day of war, but help is from the Lord” (Prv 21:30). Then God reveals that He “will raise up for David . . . a King [who] shall reign. He will understand and bring about judgment and righteousness on the earth” (Jer 23:5).

This king for all nations, born in David’s lineage, is the Lord Jesus, the very Child that captures the shepherds’ hearts in Bethlehem (Lk 2:15). “And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom” (vs. 40), for the grace of God is upon Him. Even as a youth, He amazes Joseph, Mary, and everyone in the Temple with His wisdom and knowledge of spiritual truth (46-47).

The Seed of salvation who came forth from the Virgin’s womb is indeed the Savior of the world. As He matures, Christ Jesus fulfills the name given Him before His conception. “Glory to Thine ineffable condescension, O Word!” (Festal Hymn of the Circumcision).

Eternal God, as Thou didst give Thine Incarnate Son the holy name of Jesus to be the sign of our salvation, implant also in our hearts the love of Him who is the Savior of the World. – Lutheran Book of Worship

January 2 – Monday of the Twenty-ninth Week after Pentecost

Luke 20:27-44

Denying Resurrection: Saint Luke 20:27-44, especially vs. 27: “Then some of the Sadducees, who deny that there is a resurrection, came to Him. . . .” An unusual double negative appears in this passage in the original Greek. Saint Luke uses the word *antilegontes* to indicate “those who deny” – literally, “those who speak against” – and then adds a second negative “there is no resurrection.” This double negative, which is largely lost in translation, underscores the strict opposition of the Sadducees to belief in resurrection. Many other Jews did believe in a resurrection at the end of time (see Jn 11:23-24) and thus some of the scribes hasten to say, “Teacher, You have spoken well” (Lk 20:39).

In our day, the Sadducees find their equivalent in the pundits who reject any reality except the tangible world. Both the Sadducees and modern materialists deny resurrection. They drink deeply from an objectivist wellspring. Saint Cyril of Alexandria aptly characterizes such secularists when he describes the Sadducees as persons who “attach great importance to their wretched fancies” and “imagine themselves possessed of such knowledge as no man can gainsay” (Homily 136, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, p. 540). Thus, when the Lord challenges the fanciful tale of the woman married to seven brothers (vss. 29-32), He is exposing the faulty assumptions of all who deny resurrection in every age.

First, the Lord addresses the materialistic bias of those who deny resurrection. Those who reject the spiritual dimension of existence think solely in terms of the physical realm and cannot imagine any condition or state beyond what can be measured and tested objectively. The Lord Jesus begins His correction of this fallacy by pointing out that although “the sons of this age marry and are given in marriage” (vs. 34), those in the age to come do not marry, “nor can they die anymore” (vs. 36). Saint Theophylact explains: “Here, there is marriage because there is death. . . . There, where death has been abolished, what need is there of marriage?” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Luke*, p. 266).

Second, the Lord Jesus shows that every materialist, from Sadducees to down to the contemporary secularists, consistently excludes God. Western societies prefer the separation of Church and state, allowing little or no public mention of God. Note how the Lord speaks about “those who are counted worthy to attain that age” (vs. 35): they are “sons of God” (vs. 36). Our Lord acts supremely as the One who counts men worthy of that age, for by Him “the dead are raised” (vs. 37). Yet in their challenge (vss. 28-33) the Sadducees never even once mention God.

Of course once we thrust God out of the picture, every event and problem must be calculated in terms of tangible objects and relationships. The Mosaic Law serves as the Sadducees’ objective measure for everything. They reason that there is no resurrection because Moses does not mention it in the Law. (Moses’ teaching provides the framework for the problem of the seven brothers in verse 28; see Dt 25:5-10.)

The Lord Jesus replies by referring to God’s first appearance to Moses (Lk 20:35-38). The very basis of our knowledge of the resurrection stems from the revelation in the burning bush (Ex 3:1-6). At that time, God declares Himself to be “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Lk 20:37). Christ uses this statement to argue that our God “is not the God of the dead but of the living” (vs. 38).

Today, the Church relies on recorded revelation when she declares to all: “Christ is risen!” To believe in resurrection is to affirm that there exists a realm beyond tangible measures of output – one that is known to the heart.

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

January 3 – Tuesday of the Twenty-ninth Week after Pentecost

Luke 21:12-19

To Overcome Persecution: Luke 21:12-19, especially vs. 19: “*By your patience possess your souls.*” This portion of Saint Luke’s Gospel covers a period of the Lord’s ministry just prior to His Passion. At this time Christ seeks to prepare the Church for the persecutions that will afflict His followers (vs. 12). He foretells oppression, arrest, abuse, jail, trial, and betrayal by family and friends – even torture and death (vss. 16-17). His goal here is to help us triumph in the midst of our trials. He solemnly promises to help His faithful witnesses and martyrs – and that promise never fails.

Twenty centuries of Christian history confirm every word of these important teachings of the Lord. Even if we do not experience the raging torrents of the oppression He describes, let us realize that persecution is never the exception but rather the *norm* of discipleship. It sweeps down upon many of our brethren around the world, for the tides of intolerance and opposition to the Gospel often rise to flood stage. We would do well to pay attention to the Lord, learning how to *possess our souls* even in the more serene eddies of life through disciplined patience and practice.

How do we possess our souls by patience? Surely, first of all, we must recognize the unruly nature of the soul. Only if we are watchful can we understand the depth of the struggle required to change the soul’s nature. Saint John Climacus compares the soul to a greedy kitchen dog running from one garbage can to the next. If we make even a moderate attempt at unceasing prayer, we discover at once that we are indeed *dull of hearing*, babes who need milk rather than solid spiritual food, “unskilled in the word of righteousness,” and too often dabbling in vain discussions of “the elementary principles” of Christian faith (see Heb 5:11-6:1).

How then do we break the tyranny of the passions? According to Saint Maximos the Confessor, such freedom comes only from the Holy Spirit. We must love and practice self-control by “first curbing passions of the soul and . . . second, those of the body” (*Philokalia* vol. 2, p. 59). Our desires must be surrendered one by one until we reach what the Fathers call *dispassion*. We steadily subdue the passions with the help of the life-giving Spirit, receiving in return the peace of soul that equips us for those seasons when we shall be asked to witness – when persecution of the faith will require a stand. The Lord gives us words and wisdom that no adversary can contradict or silence (Lk 21:13-15).

Dispassion is a blessed state that enables the Christian to face even betrayal by his own family and dearest friends. Dispassion is the impregnable redoubt from which God’s love sallies forth. That love may embrace hatred and overcome it, or it may be crowned with the victor’s wreath reserved for the Church’s blessed martyrs and honored confessors. Dispassion affords that grace from God whereby “not a hair of your head shall be lost” (vs. 18).

Once we understand that the true battle lies within us, then even if a time comes when we are abused and killed, nothing will be lost. Let us receive these precious truths from the passionless One. He brings “many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings” (Heb 2:10) “that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil” (vs. 14).

Christ sends each of us the Holy Spirit to help us gain this passionlessness and possess our souls. We have the resources of His kingdom. Let us begin! Christ is among us!

“Deliver me from them that persecute me, O Lord, for they are stronger than I. Bring my soul out of prison, that I may confess Thy Name.” – Psalm 141:9-10

January 4 – Wednesday of the Twenty-ninth Week after Pentecost
Luke 21:5-7, 10-11, 20-24

The Destiny of Jerusalem: Luke 21:5-7, 10-11, 20-24, especially vss. 23-24: “For there will be great distress in the land and wrath upon this people. And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” During the days immediately before the Lord Jesus’ arrest, He is invited to admire the magnificence of the great Temple in Jerusalem. This temple is the third, and greatest, of the national shrines erected by the Jews for worship under the Old Covenant.

The Lord speaks of what will befall the Church after His Passion and Resurrection, and also prophesies that the Temple and Jerusalem itself will be razed. Church Fathers such as Saint Cyril of Alexandria link these warnings to Israel’s rejection of Jesus as messiah and to the leadership’s complicity in His death: “For He forewarned them that however worthy the temple might be accounted by them of all admiration, yet at its season it would be destroyed from its foundations being thrown down by the power of the Romans, and all Jerusalem burnt with fire, and retribution exacted of Israel for the slaughter of the Lord. For . . . such were the things which it was their lot to suffer” (Homily 139, *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, p. 554).

We know that between AD 33 and the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 the very signs that the Lord describes in today’s reading came about. Battles took place between kingdoms within the Roman Empire (vs. 10). There were earthquakes, famines, and outbreaks of plagues (vs. 11). Eventually, Jerusalem fell under siege by the Roman legions led by Vespasian and was ultimately conquered by his son Titus (vs. 24). Later in their careers, both of these military leaders became Roman emperors.

Ironically, many Jewish pilgrims ignored Titus and his legions as they were approaching Jerusalem. They headed into the city for the Passover celebration, confident that the city would remain invincible under the hand of God. From an Orthodox Christian perspective, and as history proves, these pilgrims were foolhardy. The Lord Jesus warned them to flee when the armies came, for “Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles” (vss. 20-24). Anyone with a bit of historical knowledge must read verse 22 – “For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled” – in a sober light indeed.

Are those days completed? Is the last chapter written for Jerusalem? Let us briefly review the years from Christ’s birth to the fall of Jerusalem under Titus. In 4 BC the murderous Herod the Great died. Herod’s three surviving sons were appointed to rule over portions of his kingdom. Archelaus (Mt 2:22), to whom Jerusalem and Judea were assigned, proved so inept that the Romans removed him in AD 6. A series of Roman procurators then assumed control, one of whom was Pontius Pilate.

In AD 41 Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great, briefly ruled Judea and Jerusalem. Although he died horribly in AD 44 (see Acts 12:23), Agrippa’s reign stirred up Jewish nationalism, which was further inflamed by a series of political blunders by the Roman procurators. When the procurator Florus raided the Temple treasury in AD 66, full-scale rebellion broke out. The revolt ended, four years later, with the Temple’s utter destruction and the enslavement or dispersal of Jewish survivors.

Orthodox Christians, who form the new Israel, have lived through two millennia since that time. In light of present-day events, we may well wonder whether the *days of vengeance* for Jerusalem are completed. The city is once again in hands of a Jewish government and torn by waves of religious and ethnic unrest. Once again, massive international armies hover nearby. What will be the next chapter? God knows!

Salvation is of the Lord, and Thy blessing is upon Thy people. – Psalm 3:8

January 5 – Thursday of the Twenty-ninth Week after Pentecost

Luke 21:28-33

Whom to Believe? Luke 21:28-33, especially vss. 32-33: “Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.” Our modern world encourages us to prepare for the future through retirement accounts, good education for our children, and insurance to protect our valuables against foreseeable risks. These plans, however, are designed for “time-limited” hereafters, for they encompass a period that lies just over the horizon in terms of the days, months, and years ahead.

Compare this timeline with the words of the Lord Jesus concerning the future: “Heaven and earth will pass away” (vs. 33). How do we prepare for the end of the universe, which includes space, time, and all of creation? Into which future shall we pour our primary energy in this life? Shall we invest in near probabilities and the years of our limited existence, or in the everlasting and unending Kingdom of Heaven? Note that the scope of this question encompasses even our notions of estate planning.

The real question is, who do we believe? Do we choose to follow the world and its options, or the Lord Jesus and His eternal promises? The world prefers to ignore what Christ says. Secular men call it mere pious talk or religious jargon. They discount eternity as a vague prospect far removed from the measurable future and having no bearing on foreseeable events.

However, dismissing concerns about the ultimate end of *all things* is contrary to the Lord Jesus’ advice. Our Savior is firm and definite – He desires us to be alert to the signs of the ultimate conclusion of *all things* (vss. 32). He repeats the admonition to be watchful twice (vss. 28, 30-31), saying in effect, that our perspective is urgent and crucial. We die only once, and then judgment is our lot (Heb 9:27).

Blessed Theophylact of Ochrid enjoins us to never lose our perspective on this world and its time-bound concerns, but to trust the words of God our Savior, for “He shows that He holds the Church in *greater* honor than all creation, for if all creation is changed, then no part of it outlives or is superior to His words and the Church of the faithful, which shall not pass away” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Luke*, p. 276).

As we examine Christ’s words more closely, note the Lord’s emphasis on looking and observing: “Look up, lift up your heads” (Lk 21:28); “look at the fig tree, and all the trees” (vs. 29); “when they are already budding you see and know” (vs. 30).

What does Christ mean by these repeated instructions to *look* and *see*? In the Garden of Gethsemane He says to the disciples, “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation” (Mt 26:41). Likewise, He directs us to watch inwardly – to look into our hearts. We must labor to free our hearts from degrading passions and worldly thoughts. “When Jesus perceived their thoughts, He answered and said to them, ‘Why are you reasoning in your hearts?’” (Lk 5:22). He stresses the need for us to watch within. According to Blessed Theophylact, “The first coming of the Lord was for the re-fashioning and rebirth of our souls, so the second coming will be for the rebirth of our bodies” (p. 275).

Let us look within for the coming of the Holy Spirit, for He will help us cleanse our souls. Now is the time to concentrate on the inner life. When the Lord comes, will we be found worthy of the renewal of our souls and bodies?

We can remain alert, ever waiting for the Lord’s return, by focusing on the inner movements that cause us to sin. As we struggle to please Him, a healthy fear of the Lord grows within us and reveals whatever separates us from Him. “Glory to Thee, Who hast shown us the light.”

O Christ, our ruler, guide, and God, increase and multiply Thy mercy upon us that we may so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal. – Collect for the Third Sunday after Pentecost

January 6 – Friday – Theophany of Our Lord Jesus Christ
Matthew 3:13-17

Christ's Baptism: Matthew 3:13-17, especially vss. 14-15: “John tried to prevent Him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by You and are You coming to me?’ But Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’” While John the Forerunner lived silently in the desert, the Lord Jesus remained quietly at Nazareth. Then, the Evangelist Luke tells us, “the word of God came to John” (Lk 3:2). He begins “preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” (vs. 3). It is now “time for the Lord to act,” as the deacon proclaims to the priest at the start of the Divine Liturgy.

Accordingly, the Lord Jesus comes “from Galilee to John . . . to be baptized by him” (Mt 3:13) – not to observe, talk, or listen to him, but to be baptized. Since the baptismal rite offered by the Forerunner is for *repentance* (Lk 3:3), we encounter an apparent contradiction. Jesus accepts a ritual signifying personal repentance, yet we know that our Savior “was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15)!

Why, then, does the God-man invert our expectations by seeking John’s baptism of repentance? Why does He ritually unite His sinless humanity with our corrupt humanity? Why subject His Light to our darkness and sin? Saint John, filled with the Holy Spirit, perceives this contradiction, and he “tried to prevent Him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?’” (Mt 3:14).

Christ understands that the humanity He is saving must be fully assumed. He is not repenting in baptism, but rather uniting His all-pure Self to our corrupt nature in order to restore us to Himself. His pure humanity acts as a bridge from God’s holiness to our sinfulness. As Saint Paul explains: “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor 5:21).

At the Lord’s baptism “the whole universe is watered by mystical streams,” according to Saint Sophronios of Jerusalem. With the entry into the waters of God the Word, the created world is “lighted from on high. . . . The land and the sea have divided between them the joy of the world, and the world hath been filled with rejoicing. The waters saw Thee, O God, the waters saw Thee; they were afraid. Jordan turned back when it beheld the fire of the Godhead coming down and descending upon it in the flesh” (Great Blessing of the Waters; see also Ps 113:3-5).

The Lord Jesus fulfills the purpose of His baptism on a magnificent scale – it is an act cosmic in scope. Men are restored to God as He unites Himself to our race in Jordan’s waters. Along with us, the “whole creation,” which “groans and labors with birth pangs together until now” (Rom 8:22), experiences the wondrous process of renewal.

In the mystery of Christ’s baptism, the earthly waters immersing His Body are transformed. They become a means by which the Holy Spirit is conveyed to us. At our baptism, the Spirit acts through water to unite us to Christ. Part of Christ’s purpose, when He receives baptism, is to prepare the earth’s waters for our new birth in the Spirit (Jn 3:5).

The capstone completing the arc of God’s intention is the descent of the Holy Spirit. At Jesus’ baptism, God the Father affirms: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Mt 3:17). The mystery of the Holy Trinity is disclosed for the first time by this revelation of the divine nature in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Christ’s baptism is an eternity-filled moment; it also marks the first instance, within the limits of time, when the glory, nature, and purpose of the Godhead are revealed to men.

Great art Thou, O Lord, and wondrous are Thy works, and no word sufficeth to hymn Thy wondersthis change hath been wrought by the right hand of the Most High. – Baptismal Liturgy; Great Blessing of the Waters

**January 7 – Saturday – Synaxis of the Holy Forerunner and Baptist John
John 1:29-34**

Testifying: Saint John 1:29-34, especially vs. 34: “I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.” Hebrew prophets such as Isaiah declared the word of God to His ancient people, thus enabling Israel to witness faithfully among the community of nations. When “all the nations are gathered together” (Is 43:9), God declares to Israel, “You are My witnesses . . . and My servant whom I chose, that you may know and believe, and understand that I am He. Before Me there was no other God, nor shall there be after Me” (vs. 10).

“In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed” (Gn 22:18), God promises to the Patriarch Abraham. With this promise, Israel is given to understand that “all the ends of the earth shall remember and shall turn unto the Lord, and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before Him” (Ps 21:27). However, Israel does *not* testify to the nations but rather withdraws into herself, satisfied to be God’s chosen.

Christ our God now gives the Church the mission of testifying to Him. He commissions the new apostolic community to “make disciples of all the nations” (Mt 28:19). The great model in the Gospels for such testimony is the Forerunner John. He reveals how to prepare the peoples of earth to receive the Savior and Lord of all.

Saint John announces that the Messiah is present among the people, although He is still unrecognized: “There stands One among you whom you do not know” (Jn 1:26). In like fashion the Church is to testify to the Savior’s presence among the earth’s peoples. Our worship proclaims the reality of “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (vs. 29). We are to exhibit His presence in our lives so that others will awaken and turn to Him.

The Church has two structures for testifying: parish churches and monastic communities. How great is the need for active, worshiping communities in every city and town! Local congregations, however, are only one voice of evangelical outreach. They need the witness and support of the monasteries. As an ascetic, Saint John follows a solitary life in the desert in order to testify to Christ. He sends his disciples to follow the Lord Jesus in the world (vss. 37-39).

The Forerunner testifies that the Lord Jesus is God’s gift to the world: “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (vs. 29). Yet even today Christ’s life-giving and healing mysteries are little known – witness the burgeoning today of the mental health profession. Let us strive to “give to the Lord the glory due His name” (1 Chr 16:29) as our living testimony of Him, and let a Christ-centered life “tell of all [His] wondrous works” (Ps 25:7).

Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos observes how desperately “contemporary man, tired and discouraged by the various problems which torment him, is looking for rest and refreshment . . . He is seeking a cure for his soul. . . . Orthodoxy . . . [aims to] heal man and guide him to God” (*Orthodox Psychology*, p. 15).

Saint John, prophet of the desert, calls us to answer this desperate need by our living, prayerful, ascetic witness to the healing power of the Orthodox faith. As Archimandrite Sophrony says, “It is not enough to be convinced in one’s mind of the divinity of Christ. . . . We must make the maximum effort to live according to His word . . . we must follow up with a prolonged prayer of repentance” (*On Prayer*, p. 46).

Let us testify to the Savior in our attitudes, words, and deeds. Our world does not need theories concerning Christ, but rather the testimony of *lives* that reveal the Lord. There is hunger for the God whom Saint John describes: “This is He of whom I said, ‘After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me’” (vs. 30).

O Blessed Forerunner, thou didst show us the Lamb that taketh away the sin of the world. Implore thou Him that we also may manifest Him Who sanctifies the true nature of man. – Vespers for the Synaxis of the Holy Forerunner and Baptist John

January 8– Sunday after the Feast of Theophany, Tone 4

Matthew 4:12-17

Saint John as Forerunner: Matthew 4:12-17, especially vs. 12: “Now when Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, He departed to Galilee.” The Church gives a variety of titles to John, son of Zacharias and Elizabeth: forerunner, prophet, baptist, and servant. His title of Forerunner is especially noteworthy. Although Holy Scripture does not apply this term to Saint John directly, it makes clear that his role in the first century is to prepare men and women for commitment to the Lord – a ministry he still provides.

Two thousand years ago, Saint John’s preaching and baptizing signaled that the time had come for the Lord Jesus to emerge from private life in Nazareth and commence His public ministry (vs. 3:13). Likewise, the prophet’s imprisonment was a sign for Jesus to “depart to Galilee” (vs. 4:12) and begin preaching, discipling, and healing. The Forerunner’s prophecy *forecasts* the Lord’s ministry, which will illumine men with the Holy Spirit. His message and work *foreshadow* Christ’s emphasis on repentance. Ultimately, the prophet’s execution *foretells* the saving death of our Savior on the Cross.

When John is questioned about himself and his mission, he states plainly that he is a messenger, nothing more. As the Forerunner, he comes to announce One “coming after me [who] is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (vs. 3:11).

In the present reading, the Evangelist Matthew indicates that the Lord Jesus causes “a great light” to dawn “upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death” (vs. 4:16). The Holy Spirit empowers the Lord’s preaching by illumining the hearts of His hearers. Through the Spirit’s power, Christ’s parables, healings, and teachings move the hearts and minds of those who listen to Him. When the Lord Jesus declares the presence of the Kingdom, the Holy Spirit causes divine light to shine within them, freeing them from the kingdom of sin and death and drawing them into His Kingdom of light.

The Holy Forerunner also foreshadows the message of the Lord, warning the people to prepare their hearts for the mighty One of God. Even before the Messiah’s arrival, men are to change their lives through active repentance (vs. 3:2). When Christ begins His ministry, He likewise emphasizes repentance as the starting point for new life in Him (vs. 4:17). Repentance is the very gateway to the Gospel, the healing response completed by the Lord’s saving Death and Resurrection and by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Forerunner casts the shadow, and the Lord Jesus creates the saving reality.

Finally, Saint John is a forerunner of Christ’s saving Passion, for his unjust death serves as a type or foreboding of the Lord’s sacrificial death on the Cross. After Christ is baptized, Saint John angers Herod Antipas the Tetrarch (a title indicating that he rules one fourth of that region). Referring to Herodias, formerly the wife of Herod’s brother Philip, John says to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have her” (vs. 14:4). Although Herod arrests and finally executes him, Saint John never hesitates to speak the truth honestly as a servant of God (vss. 3:7-10).

John’s death witnesses to the sad fact that we all too often prefer lies and murder to the truth – and even to Truth Himself. The Lord Jesus preaches in an equally forthright manner (e.g., Mt 23) for three short years, then a coalition of religious and political forces decides to silence Him forever through His arrest and crucifixion (Jn 11:47; Lk 23:12).

The Master did forecall thee a prophet, who art more exalted than the law foretold . . . and having baptized Him thou didst appear nobler than them all. – Hymn for the Feast of Saint John the Forerunner

January 9 – Monday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost

Mark 8:11-21

Union and Reason: Mark 8:11-21, especially vs. 15-17: “Then He charged them, saying, ‘Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.’ And they reasoned among themselves, saying, ‘It is because we have no bread.’ But Jesus, being aware of it, said to them, ‘Why do you reason because you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive nor understand? Is your heart still hardened?’”

Saint Mark severely condenses his account of Jesus’ ministry – those three years in which the Lord preaches, enlists and trains disciples, casts out demons, heals, and replies to the charges of the scribes and Pharisees. This period is covered in just ten chapters, followed by an extended Passion narrative.

During those three years the Lord addresses two groups of people in particular, both of whom appear in today’s passage. In case of the Pharisees, He responds to their growing opposition in the form of disputes and challenges (vs. 11). With the disciples, He must overcome the hardness of their hearts, a state manifesting itself in their failure to perceive, understand, and remember (vss. 17-18). In both cases, the process hinges on faith.

According to Saint Maximos the Confessor, “Faith is knowledge that cannot be rationally demonstrated. If such knowledge cannot be rationally demonstrated, then faith is a supranatural relationship through which, in an unknowable and so undemonstrable manner, we are united with God in a union which is beyond intellection” (*Philokalia* vol. 2, p. 190).

“Intellection” refers to learning in the *nous*, the deep center of the heart. As the Lord strives to overcome the hardness of His disciples’ hearts, He aims at a relationship that transcends their attempts to perceive, understand, and remember. His goal is to unite them to Himself “beyond reasoning and intellection.”

If this concept seems difficult to grasp, let us recall how candidates are examined at baptism. What is the main question put to the catechumen? The priest does not ask, “Do you *perceive, understand, and remember* your catechetical training?” Not at all! Rather, he asks, “Dost thou *unite* thyself unto Christ?” When the candidate responds, “I believe in Him as King and God,” he is neither reasoning with his mind nor understanding with his heart. He reaches out and takes hold of Christ, who grasps him by the hand.

For the disciples, indissoluble union with the Lord does not happen until after the Resurrection. The living Lord approaches them, and “after the Lord had spoken to them. . . . they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them” (Mk 16:19-20).

The Pharisees are prevented by their own preconceptions from union with Christ. They see a man assuming God’s role (Mk 2:5-7), consorting with sinners (vss. 15-17), and flaunting the Law (vss. 3:2-6). What else can they do but “dispute with Him, seeking from Him a sign from heaven, testing Him” (vs. 8:11)?

To attain a living faith in Christ as God, it is not enough to see Him remove a fever (vss. 1:30-31), forgive and heal a man (vss. 2:11-12), calm a storm (vs. 4:39), or feed a crowd (vss. 8:19-20). It is impossible, for Christ tells us: “Assuredly . . . no sign shall be given to this generation” (vs. 12).

We must meet Him in a new place that lies beyond the scope of reason, outside the confines of our darkened and hardened hearts. He takes hold of us and unites us to Him in “a supranatural relationship,” if we dare to accept Him. We reach out, but He unites. “How is it you do not understand” (vs. 8:21)? This union is God’s reasonable gift beyond reason.

Sweetest Jesus Christ, long-suffering, Jesus, heal the wounds of my soul, Jesus, and make sweet my heart, O Greatly-Merciful One, that being saved by Thee, I may magnify Thee. –Supplicatory Canon to Our Lord Jesus Christ

January 10 – Tuesday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost

Mark 8:22-26

Gaining Faith: Mark 8:22-26, especially vss. 24-25: “*And he looked up and said, ‘I see men like trees, walking.’ Then He put His hands on his eyes again and made him look up. And he was restored and saw everyone clearly.*” Both today’s gospel and the passage for tomorrow touch on aspects of faith in Christ. These two passages help us explore the true meaning of faith in the Lord Jesus and how we are to cultivate our trust in Him.

In today’s account of the blind man, we see the Lord Jesus healing in stages. The man’s relationship with the Lord reveals that growth in faith is an incremental process. At first, the blind man needs only a tiny bit of trust in Christ: he permits others to bring him near the Lord.

Being healed from the grim darkness of sin – against which we all struggle – requires that we come near to the Lord. Only then can He lead us beyond the secure and the familiar, thereby enlarging our faith. If we take risks with the Lord’s help, He heals our doubt. He assists us in taking little steps, for a tiny risk brings greater faith. Let us see how this happens.

The Lord’s pure light within us enhances our vision as never before. And yet, as today’s passage shows, the sight that we gain is still incomplete because we are limited, finite, and sinful. The blessing comes to us because the Lord never ceases to cultivate faith within us. He presses on to establish, purify, adorn, and enlighten our faith.

Another miracle occurs when God illumines the eyes of our heart: our vision of others grows clearer. Such enlightenment may disturb and astound us, leaving us uncertain. Yet we can be sure that the Lord is creating a new opportunity for faith in Him. What are we to do with our new insight concerning others? Do we go back to our familiar relationships and continue to spend our time with those who make us feel at ease? Instead, the Lord sends us to our *house* (vs. 26). We are to enter our home: the Church, the holy community of the faithful, where men and women “worship [Him] in spirit and in truth” (Jn 4:24).

At each step our faith is a freely chosen act. We agree to come to Him. Initially our decision may rely on people we trust: a spouse, parents, friends, or a wise and loving pastor. We do not see clearly at first. In time, however, we discover that it is actually the Lord Jesus whom we trust, for He shines through the faithful. Participation in the life of the Church brings us face to face with Jesus Himself.

The evangelist tells us, “He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the town” (Mk 8:23). The *town* represents the security provided by the senses: the familiar smells, sounds, touch, and words of others. However, the Lord leads the blind man *out of town*; he must come to depend on Christ alone.

Our healing and illumination as Orthodox Christians means leaving behind our familiar, natural, comfortable ways of thinking in order to receive new truth and a new way of life. In the words of Saint Clement of Alexandria, we “fling ourselves upon the majesty of Christ” so that He will take us to faith, leading us beyond what is comfortable (*Stromata* 5.11).

Finally, let us never forget that we remain blind – at least, we do not see perfectly – even after the Lord heals one aspect of our lives. The life in Christ is a process of continuous growth in faith. As we pray, receive the Holy Mysteries, and study Scripture and the Fathers, His light grows in us. He continues to take us beyond the familiar, to heal us in small steps, until we are finally able to bear the Light. Then He sends us back home, into the Church and community.

To Thee I come, O Christ, blinded in my soul’s eyes, crying unto Thee in repentance, “Thou art the Light of transcendent radiance to those who are in darkness.” – Kontakion of the Sunday of the Blind Man

January 11 – Wednesday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost

Mark 8:30-34

The Faith to Follow: Mark 8:30-34, especially vs. 31: “And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” This passage straddles the two major portions of Saint Mark’s gospel. It falls between the account of the Lord Jesus’ early ministry (vss. 1:1-8:30) and His final disputes with the religious leadership, followed by His Passion, Death, and Resurrection (vss. 8:31-16:20).

Immediately preceding this passage is the record of a discussion concerning Jesus’ identity, which concludes with Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ (vs. 8:29). The Lord then directs His disciples to “tell no one about Him” (vs. 30). Instead, He speaks of His coming Passion, the Resurrection, and the cost of discipleship. These themes dominate the remainder of Saint Mark’s narrative.

The new teaching that the Lord introduces here is sobering: “The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again” (vs. 31). Note the ambiguity of the term used by the Lord Jesus to refer to Himself. “Son of Man” might be intended as a title, but it was also a common Semitic way of referring to oneself. In any event, the term *Son of Man* effectively conceals His identity as Messiah from the multitudes. Only the disciples are allowed to absorb the truth of His identity as Messiah – but with an apparent contradiction in the form of His imminent Passion.

Although He shares this message at first only with the disciples, the word “openly” suggests that is afterward given to the crowds (vs. 32). The people hear Jesus say publicly that He is going to suffer, die, and rise on the third day. The Lord appears to be preparing both His disciples and the multitudes for the reality of a suffering Messiah who embraces pain and death in order to overcome them.

Along with information about what lies ahead, the Lord issues a warning: each of His followers should be prepared to take up his own cross (vs. 34). In truth, following the Lord always entails a readiness to suffer with Him and for Him. We are to live as Christ directs – even to the point of suffering and death – without compromise. The Church has a glorious history of witnesses (martyrs) who refused to bend to death. The faith to follow Christ has also produced a radiant company of confessors – those who suffered, but did not lose their lives, for Christ’s sake.

Let us never doubt that suffering comes inevitably to every disciple who follows Him in faith. Holy Tradition affirms the “suffering of the heart,” which includes contrition and the “joyful sorrow” of repentance, that deep truth of the Orthodox Christian life. Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos bluntly states the importance of this pain: “A Christian life without pain is bogus. Pain of the heart is essential for salvation” (*Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 181).

Saint Paul reminds us that “we have an altar,” a “sanctuary,” and a “high priest for sin”: the Lord Jesus who “sanctifie[s] the people with His own blood. . . . Therefore let us go forth to Him” (Heb 10-13). Whether our suffering is physical, psychological, or spiritual, God receives it on His holy, heavenly, and ideal altar.

Our present day “comfort culture” encourages us to flee from pain. Saint John Chrysostom, a confessor of the faith, contradicts this worldly wisdom. He observes, “By their trials the righteous flourished. For the soul is purified when it is afflicted for God’s sake” (*NPNF First Series*, vol. 12, p. 40). To follow Christ is to choose to suffer for the priceless fruit of the Holy Spirit (see Gal 5:22-23).

O Christ our God, help us to become bolder in denying ourselves and following Thee.

January 12 – Thursday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost

Mark 9:10-16

New Ground: Mark 9:10-16, especially vs. 10: “So they kept this word to themselves, questioning what the rising from the dead meant.” As Christians, we find ourselves on a learning curve called discipleship, which is aptly illustrated in this passage from Saint Mark. During the Lord Jesus’ lifetime He introduces the disciples to a series of amazing revelations concerning Himself. For the sake of all mankind He leads His followers into the heart of the ineffable Mystery of Christ (Eph 3:4) – the true faith.

The Lord firmly establishes the basic outlines of this true faith in the hearts of those who will become His apostles after the Resurrection. Only God could achieve what the Lord Jesus does in three brief years with these “most wise fishermen.” In retrospect we can see how His work was fulfilled and carried on by the Twelve, then in turn by those who were formed around them by the working the Holy Spirit.

The Fathers of the Church subsequently refine the apostles’ message, adding greater precision without making substantial changes to the apostolic message. That message, of course, comes under assault from deluded heretics obsessed with false doctrines and practices. The Fathers defeat these successive threats against the true faith.

The Gospel of Mark now turns to its final dominant theme: the Passion of the Lord Jesus. The message of the Resurrection also begins to appear at this juncture. The disciples receive not only a new and strenuous Gospel, but also the triumphant and hope-filled word of Jesus’ *rising from the dead* (Mk 8:31).

In the teaching of the Resurrection we encounter a substantially new and powerful ground for a living faith in Christ. The Resurrection completes the Lord’s three-pronged revelation that begins with the Incarnation and Passion. The Resurrection constitutes the glorious “mystery of Christ, which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men” (Eph 3:4-5).

We have opportunity to do more than merely read about past events by entering the learning curve of apostolic faith and applying the Gospel truths to every aspect of our lives. We begin by celebrating the Incarnation, for it infuses the Lord’s Passion and His bodily Resurrection with saving power for mankind. Precisely because Christ took on every aspect of humanity, we have firm ground for our hope that He will restore our nature in its entirety: body, soul, and spirit. The Fathers uphold the apostolic truth that God the Word became man so that men, by grace, could become what God is by nature.

Just as the Lord Jesus prompts the first disciples to question the meaning of His rising from the dead, He likewise urges us to consider what may be accomplished in us through the gift of the Holy Spirit. He gives the apostles a mandate of deification that extends to every Christian. This mandate undergirds our ongoing struggle to reach theosis.

The Resurrection and the Incarnation connect us to the saving message of the Cross and Passion. “We preach Christ crucified,” says Saint Paul, “to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:23-24). We receive the message that God “made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor 5:21).

This message not only affirms our suffering but, more importantly, it empowers our faith. We are to “walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection” (Rom 6:4-5).

Death hath been spoiled. Christ God is risen, granting the world Great Mercy. – Troparion of the Resurrection, Tone Four

January 13 – Friday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost

Mark 9:33-41

The Heights of Humility: Mark 9:33-41, especially vss. 35-36: “And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.’ Then He took a little child and set him in the midst of them.” In verses 8:34-38, Saint Mark sets forth the Lord Jesus’ requirement for union with Him: take up your cross and follow Him. Today’s passage reveals two key aspects of *taking up the cross* – self-denial and service to others.

According to Saint Theophylact of Ochrid, the Lord links the honor one receives from Him with the humbling of oneself: “The Lord does not forbid us to desire to become His favorites, for He wants us to desire advancement in the spiritual life. But He does not want us to grasp for honors and privileges, but rather to reach the heights by humility” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Mark*, p. 78).

Note how the Savior develops His teachings concerning humility: He begins with the required attitude. “To be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all” (vs. 9:35). Christ dramatizes this point by setting a child in the midst of the disciples (vs. 36). We know that this child indeed followed Christ’s example of humility, for Holy Tradition identifies him as Saint Ignatius of Antioch. He later became a bishop and joyfully embraced a martyr’s death in the arena.

Without question, the Lord became the “last of all and servant of all” (vs. 35). By birth He “made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant” (Phil 2:7). He entered human society as a member of the lowest class, took His first breath in a cave used to shelter livestock, fled home as a refugee, grew up unknown in a carpenter’s shop, and accepted “a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” (Mk 1:4), thus making Himself “who knew no sin to be sin for us” (2 Cor 5:21).

His associates were the outcasts of society: “Many tax collectors and sinners also sat together with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many, and they followed Him” (Mk 2:15). In the end He was executed with common criminals, “one on His right and the other on His left” (vs. 15:27).

For Gregory the Great, Christ’s humility on the Cross aids us in attaining humility: “Since it is competent for Divine Power not only to make good things out of nothing, but also to refashion them from the evils that the devil had committed, the humility of God appeared among men as a remedy against this wound inflicted by the proud devil, so that those who had fallen through imitation of their haughty enemy might rise by the example of their humbled Creator.”

As for being last of all, Saint Gregory warns: “There are many in the Church who scorn to be little ones and . . . do not cease to be great in their own sight in place of humility. . . . They claim their heavenly country – and yet they do not love it” (Manley, *Wisdom Let Us Attend*, p. 609, 565).

Archimandrite Sophrony declares: “God . . . set no limits for any of us on the spiritual plane. . . . We are called to eternal life in the Kingdom of our Father which is in heaven.” Yet, as the Lord states, “entry into the Kingdom inevitably entails suffering. Many decline the Father’s gift of love precisely because the utmost effort is required” (*On Prayer*, p. 59)

We are to bear our cross as did the Lord, whether it means abstaining from pleasure, meeting a neighbor’s need with compassion, or suffering wrongs on behalf of others. Likewise, we are to defer to those who serve the Lord with unobtrusive deeds of kindness and love, as Christ did. Let us not fear the life in Christ which is ours. If we can be as little children of our Father, we establish ourselves with the Prodigal Son, who said: “I . . . am no longer worthy to be called your son” (Lk 15:21). Let God, if He wills, raise us to the heights by humility.

O Christ God, Thou hast dwelt in a cave, and a manger did receive Thee: Glory to Thy condescension, O Thou Lover of mankind who hast revealed to us the heights of humility. – Vespers Verse for the Nativity

January 14 – Saturday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost

Luke 14:1-11

Vainglory: Luke 14:1-11, especially vs. 7: “So He told a parable to those who were invited, when He noted how they chose the best places. . . .” This sentence appears simple on the surface, but it holds a command directed to the Christian heart and mind. Our Lord takes note of *how* we choose, not merely *what* we choose. This is a sobering thought, “for man does not see as God sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord sees into the heart” (1 Kgs 16:7).

Jesus Christ *sees* the preferences of dinner guests and also *notes* them, marking how those choices are made within the guests’ hearts. In the original, the verb translated as “to note” suggests an intentional focusing, which highlights the double meaning of *note* or *mark*. Christ our God sees within us, taking into account our motives, intentions, desires, and actions – the whole picture.

The factors laid bare before His gaze include our process of decision-making, the motivations that prompt us, and the hidden wrestling with our urges, both noble and corrupt. Other people may guess at what is taking place within us, but the Lord knows; He misses nothing, inwardly or outwardly.

Vainglory drives the dinner guests seated with the Lord Jesus at the Sabbath meal in today’s Gospel account. Saint John Climacus describes this complex, insidious passion as follows: “The sun shines on all alike, and vainglory beams on all activities. For instance, I am vainglorious when I fast; and when I relax the fast in order to be unnoticed, I am again vainglorious over my prudence. When well-dressed I am quite overcome by vainglory, and when I put on poor clothes, I am vainglorious again. When I talk, I am defeated, and when I am silent I am again defeated by it. However, I throw this prickly pear, a spike stands upright” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 22.5, p. 133).

The Lord, with access to our hidden inner life, knows full well how subject we are to vainglory. How then shall we make “a good defense before the dread Judgment Seat of Christ”? The parable in today’s Gospel offers a prescription for healing from the Lord. The good news is that, by joining ourselves to Him, we may overcome vainglory.

First, we must deliberately face the demon of vainglory and call it by name. When this fiend suggests that “the best place” is ours (vs. 8), let us heed Saint John Climacus: “Do not take any notice of him . . . for it is difficult to drive away a dog from a butcher’s counter” (*Ladder* 22.19, p. 134) That we should give up the *best place* (vs. 8) in favor of the “lowest place” (v. 10) is not a casual suggestion offered by the Lord Jesus. Rather, He is graciously showing us that we have the freedom to choose, thereby keeping the “dog” away from the counter. We are blessed by the Lord with the gift of choice.

If we think we have done well by choosing a lower seat, let us rebuke this thought as demonic. We need only confront the thought with our debt to Christ to understand that there is no merit in making the right choice. In Christ we find compassion and kindness flowing to us from the God who wishes us to “be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:17).

If perhaps we are ashamed of taking the *lowest* place, let us give thanks to God. He is providing us with an exercise in blessed humility. The word *humility* – from “humus” (earth, dirt) – reminds us from whence we came. It is part of our nature as God fashioned us. By His grace, however, we “are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:26). Having tasted “the glory that is above,” we are filled with a light that enables us freely to “despise all earthly glory” (*Ladder* 22.9, p. 35). Humiliation is the Lord’s gift for freeing us from vainglory.

O Christ, All Glorious, Thou hast assumed humiliation and exalted the human race with illumination and immortality: Enlighten Thou me in all humility and save me from vainglory. – Fifth Sunday of Lent

January 15 – Thirtieth Sunday after Pentecost, Tone 5

Luke 18:18-27

To Inherit Life: Luke 18:18-27, especially vs. 18: “Now a certain ruler asked Him, saying, ‘Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’” The man who puts this question to the Lord Jesus is requesting specific guidelines to aid him in attaining his goal. This ruler addresses the Lord Jesus modestly, calling Him “Good Teacher.” He uses the subjunctive – a humble, tentative form of the verb – when asking whether he *might inherit*. He does not presume on God; he understands that one receives eternal life only if God deems one worthy. Furthermore, he understands that God has expectations of him that he must fulfill, if he is to entertain even the hope of everlasting life.

The longing to inherit eternal life burns in the heart of every true believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. When a catechumen is received into the Church, we pray that he or she may “fulfill those things which are well pleasing” to God, for these very things assure us of finding life. Our goal is to be inscribed in God’s “Book of Life” – to become the “heirs of eternal good things.”

In this passage from Saint Mark’s Gospel, the Lord graciously shows us, step by step, what we must do to attain to eternal life. If we truly desire eternity, we will obey the commandments of God. The Lord Jesus reminds the young ruler of this truth. He treats obedience as a given, as if to say to him, “I assume, naturally, that you are keeping the divine commandments, which contain God’s laws for all mankind.”

Note that, of the six commandments that concern our relationships with others, the Lord Jesus refers to only five (vs. 20). He omits the final commandment, “You shall not covet” (Dt 5:21). As it turns out, this commandment is the very one the ruler finds problematic.

Because he is blind to his inordinate attachment to material goods, the man is able say with confidence, “All these things I have kept from my youth” (Lk 18:21). He understands the requirement that we obey the divine commandments – to a point. But when the Lord personalizes the tenth commandment with the proposition that he sell all his worldly goods, “distribute to the poor, and . . . come, follow Me” (vs. 22), the man suddenly sees the central moral failure in himself.

The revelation that material wealth controls his earthly life and prevents him from attaining eternal life comes to this ruler as a rude shock. In that moment of revelation we find another key guiding us toward eternal life. When God discloses our attachments, our inordinate loves, and the idolatrous bondages in our lives, He is urging us to *sell all* – to do whatever is necessary to rid ourselves of anything holding us back from life in Him.

Eternity boils down to choices: do we place discipleship ahead of all other affections, or not? For this reason self-examination is critical for us as Orthodox Christians. We must ask ourselves, “Have I done my duty to those to whom duty is owed? Have I failed to forgive? Have I indulged in impure thoughts or actions? Have I wished to acquire what is not mine? Have I been careless with truth?”

There are many ways in which we hold back and avoid pleasing the Lord. He calls us to break the power that all other attachments hold over us and to follow Him (see vs. 22). Once we grasp the depths of the Lord’s demands, we ask, “Who then can be saved?” (vs. 26).

Our Savior reveals the third and essential key for inheriting eternal life: to admit that salvation – the inheritance of eternal life – is “impossible with men” (vs. 27). And yet, by God’s grace, salvation *is* possible for us. We inherit eternal life when we obey the Lord Jesus Christ and receive His help in letting go of whatever separates us from Him.

Make us all victors, even unto the end, O Lord, through Thy crown incorruptible, for Thine it is to show mercy and to save us, and unto Thee do we ascribe glory! – Chrismation Prayer

January 16 – Monday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost

Mark 9:42-10:1

Trial, Temptation, and Sacrifice: Mark 9:42-10:1, especially vs. 49: “*For everyone will be seasoned with fire, and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt.*” In today’s Gospel reading the Lord Jesus confronts his disciples with the demanding side of life in Christ. The admonitions in these verses thus provide us with a manual of great value for fighting the good fight.

Attaining eternal life demands an uncompromising purity and faithfulness. God sets these virtues as a precondition for delivering us from hell whose “fire is not quenched” (vss. 44, 46, 48). Painful choices confront us, sooner or later, if we pursue this way. Events will force us to decide whether “the sufferings of this present life are . . . worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us” (Rom 8:18).

We encounter the same demands in this reading as those faced by the three holy youths before the fiery furnace (Dan 3:16-18). Further, the Lord Jesus uses language identical to that of the Apostle Peter when he refers to “fiery trials” (1 Pt 1:7; 4:12). Saint Peter asks if we will stand with Christ, no matter what the cost. Do we wish to be healed of sin despite the pain of the treatment? Will we trust that God is true to His word? Will we be faithful in our own words and deeds?

These verses make it clear that we do a disservice to the faithful and to nonbelievers alike if we suggest that the Christian life is free of trial, temptation, and sacrifice. The good news is that the Lord is “faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it” (1 Cor 10:13).

In the face of the demands our Lord makes, we must establish boundaries with the world. Since trials and temptations are certain, it is urgent that we make preparations for facing them. Setting boundaries helps us deflect the assaults against our faith that threaten our integrity. Boundaries in the depths of the heart can fend off temptations.

Alcoholics, for example, keep liquor out of the house. The sexually tempted keep a covenant with their eyes and guard their thoughts (Job 31:1). According to Blessed Theophylact of Ochrid, “The Lord exhorts those to whom offense is given to guard themselves against those who are always ready to offend and to tempt. Whether it be your foot, hand, or eye, which cause you to fall, which means, even if it is one of your closest friends or relatives, in close relationship to you either by kinship or by necessity who causes you to fall, cut him off, that is, reject that friendship or kinship to him” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Mark*, p. 80).

How does one prepare for the inevitable pain and fire that we encounter? When we set a boundary around our life, we find help in making many day-to-day choices. The technique is simple: we think about our pitfalls ahead of time. In this way we manage to pass by the doorways leading to those situations that spell certain defeat.

Of course, the enemy still finds ways of slipping past our defenses and pressing his fiery trials upon us! The Lord warns us that “everyone will be seasoned with fire” as He predicts the trials we face in this life (Mk 9:49). However, if we practice small, undramatic acts of faithfulness we are much more likely to survive when the tests by fire sweep in.

The Lord and His prophets and apostles lived in a culture that often used salt to ratify everyday agreements. Salt symbolizes fidelity and constancy. When the Lord Jesus announces that “every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt,” He tells us that genuine trials cannot be successfully met without fidelity and constancy. The way to be ready for fire is to train ourselves in the practice of stability. The Holy Spirit offers this gift to the earnest, struggling Christian. Our Lord identifies the salt of faithfulness as a means to “peace with one another” (vs. 50).

O Lord . . . lead me in the right path because of mine enemies. – Psalm 26:13

January 17 – Tuesday – Saint Anthony the Great

Luke 6:17-23

Blessings of Asceticism: Luke 6:17-23, especially vs. 20: *“Then He lifted up His eyes toward His disciples, and said: ‘Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.’”* Our God-bearing father Anthony reveals to us the blessings born of asceticism. This son of well-to-do Christian parents in Egypt displayed from his youth a singular desire to devote himself completely to the Lord Jesus. When he heard the Holy Scriptures read in Church, he immediately applied those teachings to himself in the most direct and practical manner.

His parents died when he was twenty, leaving to him the family fortune. When Anthony heard the Gospel of the rich young ruler (vss. 18:18-30), he gave away all his worldly possessions. He fully embraced the ascetic way and, through twenty years of struggle, defeated every temptation. He limited his diet to bread, salt, and water, eating no more than once a day, sometimes every other day, and frequently even less often. He lived in absolute solitude in order to maintain unceasing prayer and overcome every imaginable demonic will.

By the grace of God, the ascetic calling manifested by Saint Anthony ignited the monastic movement within the Church and provided a visible witness to the blessings that accompany utter self-surrender to the Lord. Today, Orthodox monastics continue to demonstrate the blessings which flow from a life of poverty, hunger, tears, and austerity. These consecrated souls provide us with living models of what Christ teaches in Luke 6:20-23.

We are to read these verses with care if we wish to attain true riches in Christ. Otherwise, we will blindly embrace fleeting pleasures and follow a consumer ethos ever ready to delude us into buying “the real thing.” The Lord Jesus teaches that those who choose poverty are blessed with the Kingdom of God (vs. 20). Secular society asserts the opposite, promoting convenience and comfort through abundance and repeatedly emphasizing our “need” for things to fulfill our lives. The Orthodox funeral service reminds us that “all mortal things are vanity and exist not after death. Riches endure not, neither doth glory accompany on the way: for when death cometh, all these things vanish utterly.”

In our modern climate of consumerism, bereft of a strong monastic witness, how do we find blessing in poverty like Saint Anthony? We have many opportunities to pursue asceticism, even amidst the swirl of consumerism. Nothing prevents us from cutting back on conveniences, simplifying our lifestyle, and doing with less that we may give to the poor.

The Lord further teaches us the blessing of hunger (vs. 21). The Fathers of the Church insist on the necessity of fasting – not for monastics alone, but for all the faithful. Our Orthodox Church has never sold out to the cultivated palate, but still teaches discipline for the stomach as a necessity for every Christian. We may find it challenging at times to fast from meat, dairy, fish, wine, and oil every Wednesday and Friday and during the four seasonal fasts. Yet God promises us spiritual blessings if we faithfully and diligently keep these disciplines insofar our health, our doctors, and the Church’s wisdom permit.

Finally, Christ instructs us to “weep now” in repentance (vs. 21) so that we may rejoice with the widow of Nain, Jairus, and the friends of Tabitha. Weep now, in order to receive joy and healing from our Savior! We are to make time for prayer and struggle against the demons who aim to disrupt and mislead us. By allowing our priests to guide us in self-examination and confession, we unleash the power of cleansing tears.

O Christ our God, implant in me the fear of Thy blessed commandments that I may trample down all carnal desires, and enter upon a spiritual manner of living. – Priest’s Prayer Before the Gospel Reading, Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

**January 18 – Wednesday – Saints Athanasios and Cyril, Patriarchs of Alexandria
Matthew 5:14-19**

Fulfillment: *Saint Matthew 5: 14-19, especially vs. 17: “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.”* God may be unstintingly lavish and extravagant, but He is never wasteful. Both His creation and His saving works disclose this truth. In speaking of His munificent design for the world, the Church Fathers employ the term *economia*, a Greek word that draws the heart and mind toward God’s rich generosity and His desire to complete, ennoble, and uplift our lives – in the Lord’s own words, *to fulfill us* (vs. 17).

The Lord Jesus is God’s fulfillment of mankind. By coming among us and joining Himself to our race, our King and our God has forever renewed our flesh and revealed the gracious *economia* of God. “For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Col 2:9). He is the capstone of the lavish divine plan for creation and all of history. How so?

First, the Lord yokes His coming into the world to Holy Scripture (vs. 17) – in this case, to the Old Testament writings. In a preliminary way, these scriptures contained the basic elements of God’s design for our fulfillment. Speaking of the Lord’s coming in the flesh, Blessed Theophylact notes that “the painter does not destroy the sketch but rather completes it.” By His Incarnation, the Lord Jesus became the ultimate expositor of Scripture, the finisher and the goal of the divine plan or *economia*. He is the first man who carries out the will of God the Father completely, on behalf of all men, so that those who come after Him might also fulfill God’s will.

As the great expositor of Scripture, Christ reveals the essence of God’s written word. “You have heard that it was said to those of old. . . . But I say to you” (Mt 5:21, etc.). Our Lord takes us beyond the formal keeping of the letter of the Law and into the heart of God, the author of Scripture. Christ enables us to read the Scriptures through the mind of the Almighty Creator Himself. The essence of Scripture is to reveal the Uncreated Word, who inspired the human authors of Scripture, and to reveal Him as Scripture’s fulfillment.

For instance, in His command to do no murder, the Lord desires us to not only restrain our deadly impulses but to also draw closer to our brothers. Our surges of hatred and anger are bedewed with grace (Mt 5:22-26). Speaking of God’s commandments, the Apostle Paul says, “If there is any other commandment, [they] are all summed up in this saying, namely, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law” (Rom 13:9-10). Christ, the divine expositor, calls us to “love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12), i.e., to actively express love for the good of others.

With his actions, Christ fulfills *economia* as the divine finisher. The Old Testament merely reveals the shadow of Him who was still to come. The righteous could ponder the mystery of the Messiah, “which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men . . . [but would be] revealed” (Eph 3:5). Sin and death had long interrupted and disfigured God’s design for mankind. Then the Word became flesh. Through His suffering, dying, and rising in triumph over death, He opened the pathway to the restoration of humanity.

The Lord Jesus Christ keeps the Law perfectly, thus becoming the Doer of the Law. “For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him Who sent Me” (Jn 6:38). By His obedience He reverses Adam’s transgression, creating in Himself a new humanity that unites the human will to the will of God. According to Saint John Chrysostom, “This is the marvel, that He not only Himself fulfilled [God’s will], but He granted this to us likewise.”

O Eternal King, Thou didst cleanse the substance of mankind, anointing and perfecting it by the communion of the Spirit, thereby translating it to life immortal. O Lord, glory to Thee!

January 19 – Thursday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost

Mark 10:17-27

Worlds Apart: Saint Mark 10:17-27, especially vs. 17: “Now as He was going out on the road, one came running, knelt before Him, and asked Him, ‘Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?’” This earnest man obviously does not grasp the nature of the journey upon which the Lord Jesus has embarked – the one leading to Jerusalem, the Passion, and the Cross. So intent is the Lord upon His destination that His disciples are amazed as He presses ahead (vss. 10:32-34). The earnestness of the inquirer, on the other hand, is demonstrated by his unusual behavior: he runs rather than walks up to the Lord; he kneels before a rabbi, which is not a customary behavior; and he addresses the Lord in a way practiced by neither Jews nor Greeks, calling Him “good.”

As the account unfolds, the gap between the Lord Jesus and the man becomes more and more evident. To overcome the man’s obsession with “inheriting” eternal life, the Lord confronts him with difficult demand: renounce all and follow Him to execution (vs. 21). This demand reduces the man to grief and he walks away (vs. 22).

The petitioner in our Gospel believes that mortal man can rationally understand and follow the way to eternal life. The Lord knows better! The man is deluded, for he believes that God expects more from men than what is revealed by the Law if we are to inherit eternal life (Dt 30:19). In other words he assumes that sinners, by their own efforts, can win eternal life.

The Lord Jesus, who gave the Law, reminds him that God’s standards never change (Mk 10:19). Christ our God is well aware that He alone makes eternal life possible (vs. 27). The two perspectives are worlds apart.

The Lord Jesus reveals another basic error when He responds to being called *good*. The Lord turns back the question, asking “Why do you call Me good?” (vs. 18). The man believes that the famous rabbi standing before him, Jesus of Nazareth, is a man like himself who knows the secret of eternal life. Christ, however, rejects the assumption that any human being can be considered good. Only *God* is good (vs. 18). According to Saint Hilary of Poitiers, the Lord “would not have rejected the attribute of goodness if it had been attributed to Him as God” (*Treatise on the Trinity*, NPNF Second Series, vol. 9, p. 160).

The idea that a human being is capable of discovering and following the path to eternal life is central to many world religions, but entirely foreign to the revelation of the true God. From the Lord’s first stated requirement for life (Gn 2:17), to the apostolic declaration “that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us . . . is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ” (1 Jn 1:2-3), God shows that He alone extends the mystery of eternal life.

No esoteric knowledge is required from the earnest seeker who desires eternal life. Through His Holy People – Israel and the Church – God reveals to mankind “what is good. Or what does the Lord seek from you, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and be ready to walk with the Lord your God?” (Mi 6:8). Yet the man who runs to the Lord seeks a human answer, an error which the Lord exposes by quoting the Law (Mk 10:19). Saint John continues: “I write no new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning” (1 Jn 2:7).

The distance between the Lord Jesus and this man in his delusion becomes clear when Christ exposes his sin. Truly, what the Lord requires (Mk 10:21) is addressed to all of us. Knowing the state of the man’s heart, the Lord places this demand before him in unavoidable terms. The man chooses to turn away, believing himself incapable of doing what is required to obtain eternal life. Sadly, he does not wait to hear the Gospel caveat: “With men it is impossible; but not with God; for with God all things are possible” (vs. 27)!

O Master, by the judgments which Thou knowest, save me Thine unworthy servant. – Royal Third Hour of the Nativity

January 20 – Friday – Saint Euthymios the Great
Luke 6:17-23

The Mindset of the Disciple: Luke 6:17-23, especially vs. 17, 20: “And He came down with them and stood on a level place with a crowd of His disciples and a great multitude of people. . . . Then He lifted up His eyes toward His disciples, and said: ‘Blessed are you. . . .’” Although a large crowd is present to hear the Lord and be healed by Him – ready, possibly, to follow Him – the Lord Jesus specifically “[lifts] up His eyes toward His disciples” (vs. 20). He describes how to acquire the blessedness of discipleship (vss. 20-23), outlining the proper mindset toward material goods, physical appetites, God, and one’s social status.

This blessed mindset is composed of the four attitudes described for us in the verses called the Beatitudes. As His disciples, let us compare these attitudes to our present mindset.

Christ begins with “Blessed are *you* poor” (vs. 20), also translated as “*the* poor.” Most translators, taking note of the fact that the Lord Jesus aims His teaching “toward His disciples” (vs. 20), have rendered this line in the second person: “*you* poor.” Poverty, however, is not in itself part of God’s intention for His people (Dt 8:7-9). Our attitude toward material goods, however, may be either blessed or cursed, and poor and wealthy alike may fall short of the mindset of God’s kingdom.

How much emphasis do we place on our relative wealth or poverty? According to Saint Cyril of Alexandria, blessed disciples “care not for wealth, and are superior to covetousness, and despisers of base gifts, and of a disposition free from the love of money, and who set no value upon the ostentatious display of riches” (*Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, p. 129).

We next read this teaching: “Blessed are you who hunger now” (vs. 21). When does God bless restraint in bodily indulgence? In the *Didache*, the apostles insist that we fast “for those who persecute you. . . . [and] abstain from fleshly and bodily desires. If someone hits you on your right cheek turn the other to him also” (Sparks, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 308). If our mind hungers for what is divine, then our desire becomes “a weapon of righteousness wielded solely against the hissing serpent that would persuade [us] to indulge in fleshly pleasure” (*Philokalia* vol. 4, p. 83).

A third aspect of the disciple mindset is to *weep now* (vs. 21). Weeping, as Saint Cyril notes, is “common to all without exception, whether believers or unbelievers” (p. 130). The Lord calls His disciples to a special kind of weeping. “Purify yourself with your tears. Wash yourself with mourning,” says Saint Ambrose. “One who is a sinner weeps for himself and rebukes himself, that he may become righteous, for just people accuse themselves of sin” (ACCS New Testament, vol. 3, p. 105). The true disciple knows “that He who has called us, has called us here to mourn for ourselves” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 7.16, p. 72).

The fourth dimension of the disciple mindset is a commitment of the heart to Christ as King and God so that we may “rejoice . . . and leap for joy” (vs. 23). This joy comes to us even “when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man’s sake” (vs. 22).

With sin rampant in the world, many occasions arise we are hated, excluded, and reviled. Let us be sure, however, that we truly labor “for the Son of Man’s sake” (vs. 22), for we gain nothing if we are hated because of our own misdeeds. “Do you now wish to follow in the footsteps of the saints?” asks Saint Isaac of Syria. “[Or] do you want to travel by some special path of your own, one that does not involve suffering? For this path of God has been trodden from all the ages and through all generations by means of the cross and death” (*Daily Readings with Saint Isaac of Syria*, p. 30).

O Christ Savior, grant that I may have that mind which Thou didst reveal, when Thou didst humble Thyself, wast poor and hungry, wept, and wast hated and excluded as evil.

January 21 – Saturday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost

Luke 16:10-15

Fidelity: Luke 16:10-15, especially vs. 13: “No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.” Christ our God presents us with the stark contrast between fidelity and infidelity, dedication and neglect, or even betrayal. He places the whole of our life “in the sight of God” (vs. 15), raising the issue of our ultimate trustworthiness as God’s servants. How shall we find “a good defense before the fearful judgment seat of Christ,” as we pray during the Divine Liturgy?

The Lord Jesus makes it clear that we are to manage faithfully even the smallest details and responsibilities in this life (vs. 10), for all is subject to His constant and ultimate scrutiny. He examines our fidelity in the ordinary and temporal matters of life as well as our care for the “true riches” of His Kingdom (vs. 11). God judges both our stewardship of the things in His creation and our care for that which, in the words of Saint Cyril of Alexandria, “we may receive . . . which is our own, even that holy and admirable beauty which God forms in the souls of men, fashioning them like unto Himself, according to what we originally were” (*Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, p. 444). We are only stewards of our inner life, never the masters.

The Lord Jesus’ first standard of fidelity is straightforward: “He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much” (vs. 10). We may expect God to evaluate us rigorously, more so even than the Pharisees and scribes. They scrupulously comply with the details of the Mosaic Law, for He notes how careful they are to “tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs” (Lk 11:42). Yet He tells His disciples that “unless [our] righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, [we] will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:20).

How do we measure up to the challenge we face? With the Lord, fidelity is always a matter of the heart. We pay attention to details in life out of joy that we belong to Christ Jesus. “One who performs saving works simply from the fear of Hell follows the way of bondage, and he who does the same just in order to be rewarded with the Kingdom of Heaven follows the path of a bargainer with God. The one they call a slave, the other a hireling. But God wants us to come to Him as sons to their Father” (*Way of a Pilgrim*, p. 36). True fidelity delivers (Mt 21:28-29).

According to the Lord’s second standard for judging the fidelity of His servants, we need examine both our care for the things of this world and for the “true riches” (Lk 16:11). Until we gain steadfastness in handling the lesser things of life that God sets before us, we shall never advance to the care of what He seeks from us in eternity. First we act as sons, joyfully fulfilling what is required in this present life, and then we find a larger duty incumbent on us: “to be faithful unto God, pure in heart, merciful and kind, just and holy; for these things imprint in us the outlines of the divine likeness, and perfect us as heirs of eternal life” (Saint Cyril of Alexandria, p. 444). Now we come to the true riches promised to Christ’s good stewards.

If we evince fidelity with these *true riches*, then we have reasonable hope that God will also entrust us with what truly is “[our] own” (vs. 12). Here Christ speaks of the authentic nature given to us by God. As Saint Paul teaches, God created us “in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:10). Let us do good with fidelity to God, aiming at the divine beauty He yearns to form in us: the gifts of “love, joy, peace, longsuffering” (Gal 5:22) and so much more.

O Lord, help us labor in the mystical field, cultivating faithfully the fruits of repentance. – Orthros for the First Sunday of Great Lent

January 22 – Thirty-first Sunday after Pentecost, Tone 6
Luke 18:35-43

The Creator of Faith: Luke 18:35-43, especially vs. 42: “Then Jesus said to him, ‘Receive your sight: your faith has made you well.’” Reflecting on the Lord Jesus’ healing of the blind man at Jericho, Saint Ephrem the Syrian observes, “Light came into the world to give sight to the blind and faith to those who lacked it” (*Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron*, p. 241). Today’s passage from Saint Luke’s gospel reveals that the Lord constantly is creating faith and saving men and women thereby. It confirms the Apostle Paul’s declaration that the Lord Jesus is “the author and finisher of our faith” (Heb 12:2).

The Evangelist Luke reveals how Christ *authors* faith in human hearts. First He creates a climate conducive to faith, encouraging us to trust in Him. Then He calls on us – and on all who are in need – to trust Him. The passage also shows us how the Lord completes trust in Himself by giving those who come to Him tangible opportunities to express that trust directly. Christ’s grace always is active, working in advance of our trust. The Lord Jesus’ grace creates faith within us, so that we may respond to Him and thus be saved.

The encounter between the Lord and the blind beggar at Jericho thus holds up dual truths: that “by grace you have been saved” and that salvation comes *through faith* – that is, “when faith is exercised” (see Eph 2:8). This portion of Luke’s gospel demonstrates that salvation is synergistic, depending on cooperation between man and God.

Let us review the sequence of events. A blind man hears a multitude passing and asks “what it meant” (Lk 19:36). He learns “that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by” (vs. 37). He reacts instantaneously by crying out to the Lord (vs. 38).

Strange? Not really. The Lord’s fame and notoriety as a healer are already well known by this time. The Lord Jesus has been preaching to the poor and healing various diseases (vs. 4:40), including the restoration of sight to many blind persons (vs. 7:21). His care and compassion attract huge crowds (vs. 8:19). The beggar doubtless knows about Jesus. Perhaps he has heard about Jesus feeding a crowd of 5,000 (vs. 9:12-17) or giving life to the dead (vs. 7:11-18).

Christ continues to perform healings today. As we hear the Gospels read to us, one account after another, we find grounds for trusting Him. Despite the doubt permeating society around us, the wonders of God continue to shine in and through His Church. Truly, Christ our God not only responds to faith in Him but continues to create trust in our own day.

When the blind man cries out irrepressibly, the Lord calls him to Himself (vs. 18:40). The Lord Jesus energizes our faith by calling us to Him when we wish to have Him act in our lives. The Parable of the Importunate Widow describes a woman who drives a judge to distraction until he gives her vengeance. By such illustrations the Lord encourages us to appeal to God (vss. 2-7).

Let us pay close attention to the behavior of the blind beggar, for we too are blind beggars. If we cry out to the Lord from the darkness of our hesitant faith, He will call us to Himself. Let us ignore the voices around us that ask, “What is the use? If God exists, will He reverse or change these conditions?” Or the voice inside that insists, “You are not important enough!” The Creator is not abandoning us to duress and dark doubt. Cry out to Him!

When the blind man stands up and comes before Jesus, the Lord gives him a chance to exercise faith. He asks him, “What do you want Me to do for you?” (vs. 41). Do we suppose that the Lord does not already know what the blind man wants? Of course not – yet the Creator of faith allows *us* to venture in faith to learn how it influences Him. We must take a faltering step and try believing, even if only a little.

O Christ, Creator of all things, grant me the grace of faith always to cry out unto Thee.

January 23 – Monday of the Thirty-second Week after Pentecost

Mark 10:46-52

Blind Beggars: Mark 10:46-52, especially vs. 46: “As He went out of Jericho with His disciples and a great multitude, blind Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, sat by the road begging.” Like Bartimaeus, we are all blind beggars. Who among us is not stationed along the road of this life in order to make a living? Each of us finds our way into what is available for coping with life’s demands. We do so to garner from the passing traffic what we need to survive. Some of us find very comfortable, productive places along the roadway, while other spots do not prove to be so ideal.

The son of Timaeus is accustomed to working his spot along the Jerusalem road, especially during festival seasons when the route is crowded with pilgrims. According to the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, Bartimaeus was blind from birth. With no social services in the harsh first century, he depends entirely on begging to earn his living.

Blindness narrows our options. Which of us can say that he sees clearly all that is coming toward him in life? We do the best we can to discern what may happen, surviving where we are, using what we have, making do with what we hear. As with Bartimaeus, there is a dimension of life we miss by living outside our hearts. This dimension contains the things of the Spirit, and most of us remain blind in that all-important realm.

Those without sight, like Bartimaeus, tune their other senses to what is occurring around them. Bartimaeus not only senses that a greater-than-usual crowd is passing, but also “heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth” (vs. 47). In fact, Jesus is the force who gathers the large crowd now moving past him. The blind man finds no shame in calling out to Jesus, for he has nothing to lose and everything to gain (vss. 47-48).

We, too, are free to assert ourselves and cry out to the Lord Jesus. He is a compassionate God. There is nothing to lose and everything to gain! We know Christ is renowned for lovingkindness, for healing, for hearing even the faint cries of the poor and needy that others ignore. By all means cry out to Him in faith and longing, for He draws near at this very moment!

Note the unfolding of the interaction between Bartimaeus and the Lord Jesus. Cries like the blind man’s are apt to cause Him to *stand still* and command us into His presence (vs. 49). We should avoid praying mindlessly, addressing Him instead out of our need for healing. (And who of Adam’s kin does not need healing from the blight of sin on his life?)

Let us also be of good cheer, knowing that “He is calling you” (vs. 49). Why not cast off our layers of personal protection? For a first-century beggar, such protection took the form of a garment or mantle that sheltered him from the weather and sun (vs. 50). For us, the covering is likely to be our pride, or the desire to look good, or some craving that leaves us begging.

When the son of Timaeus comes before Jesus, His Creator asks him, “What do you want Me to do for you?” (vs. 51). What, indeed! The answer is simple for a blind man – restore my sight! We can be just as straightforward: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of David, have mercy upon me a sinner, a blind beggar before Thee.” If Jesus will heal Bartimaeus’ physical and spiritual sight, do we imagine He will do any less for us?!

Let us come in trust to the same Lord, yearning to receive His healing for all our blindnesses. The power of the Lord is extraordinary. He is able to transform a beggar into a disciple (vs. 52); he turns a disabled man into one capable of the uphill climb to Jerusalem and the Cross. Even we, mired down in our darkness and need, can be transformed.

O Christ our God, who didst lighten the eyes of the beggar Bartimaeus, lighten Thou the eyes of our souls, and reveal us as sons of the day, that we may cry out to Thee in faith! – Sunday of the Blind Man

January 24 – Tuesday of the Thirty-second Week after Pentecost

Mark 11:11-23

Do Not Delay: Mark 11:11-23, especially vs. 11: “*And Jesus went into Jerusalem and into the Temple. So when He had looked around at all things, as the hour was already late, He went out to Bethany with the twelve.*” We live within the flow of time as the events of our lives bear us along. We leave behind situations that once seemed permanent only to confront new demands and circumstances. This onward sweep of life infuses urgency into our daily decisions and actions. We are constantly pressed to accomplish, achieve, arrange, decide, fix.

Delay only compounds our difficulties. Homework must not be put off, for the exam is tomorrow. Relationships cannot be neglected, or we find ourselves collecting bitterness and isolation instead. Dust and disorder quickly overwhelm us. The incessant flux of life forces us to ask ourselves which tasks to address first. What is most important? Which efforts must be set aside so that we may attend to a more urgent concern?

Today’s reading speaks to this flow of time and documents the high cost of delay. Note the double meaning of the phrase “as the hour was already late” (vs. 11) from the opening line. The hour is indeed late, on that particular day; the clock calls for a place of rest, for the night is at hand. But more importantly, the hour of the Lord Jesus’ time in Jerusalem is growing late; soon will come His last night on earth among His own.

It is late in another sense as well. As Jesus goes into the Temple, He “looked around at all things” (vs. 11) and knows the end of Israel’s historical tradition of worship is very near. “Late now being the hour” (the literal word order in the text), the Lord knows that siege and destruction will soon fall upon Jerusalem and its Temple. He must convey these truths to His disciples. Of great importance, also, is the impending judgment on the wayward people of God and their priesthood. Delay is out of the question.

“Late now being the hour,” the Lord comes upon a fig tree. There, for the sake of His disciples, Jesus demonstrates how God still hungers for His people to repent – to bear fruit lest they wither. By now it is clear that most Jews will not accept their Messiah. He comes to His own but it is “not the season” (vs. 13). They will never bear fruit for Him, and thus God will find little fruit of the Spirit in the community of the Old Covenant. Ancient Israel is set to reject the Messiah and its Temple about to be destroyed. All this the Lord perceives in the barren fig tree.

A deep urgency fills the Lord. As a warning and judgment, He enters the Temple and drives out the moneychangers. The two passages concerning the fig tree (vss. 13 and 20-21) are separated by the intervening account of the Temple’s cleansing. We are to read them in the context of the Lord’s knowledge that change – the end of the Old Covenant, the inauguration of the New – is at hand. His message to us is clear: do not delay with God!

Yes, the demands of this present life call for action, but God’s Word calls us to acknowledge His claim on our hearts now. We are to seek Him now, to cleanse our lives now, to “bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Lk 3:8). Let us avoid delay, refusing to offer excuses and choosing “a good defense before the dread Judgment Seat of Christ.” We gain nothing by merely claiming the Orthodox faith, making regular contributions, or helping the needy, for “all that is not done for Christ’s sake, even though it be good, brings neither reward in the future life nor the grace of God in this” (Moore, *Saint Seraphim of Sarov*, p. 169). Do not delay – let us serve and obey Christ now!

O Lord, grant us the grace of a right faith in Thee, that without delay we may apply our hearts to acquire the grace of Thy Spirit and thereby to receive the blessings of the future age.

January 25 – Wednesday – Saint Gregory the Theologian
John 10:9-16

Three Images: Saint John 10:9-17, especially vs. 9, 11, 17: “I am the door. . . . I am the good shepherd. . . .”
The Lord Jesus does not identify Himself in abstract terms, nor does He use convoluted phrases. Instead, He chooses earthly images that are easily understood by the people of any culture. These images serve as profound invitations to the soul and, at the same time, solemn warnings. Together they convey the life-giving essence of the Gospel of our faith, the great good we find in Christ, and the dangers of turning away from Him.

When the Lord Jesus declares, “I am the door” (vs. 9), He indicates that we will find in Him the exclusive gateway for reaching God. When we travel to earthly destinations, we may follow roads and paths that pass through a variety of entrances. But if we wish to enter a space enclosed by four walls, a door usually provides the only access. The Lord refers to such an enclosure in this passage when He speaks of the *sheepfold* (vs. 1), a pen to hold and protect a flock of sheep. If we wish to obtain divine shelter and care, it must come through Him, for whoever “enters by Me . . . will be saved . . . and find pasture” (vs. 9).

A traveler in the Middle East once encountered a shepherd who kept his sheep inside such a fold at night. The enclosure consisted of four walls and a single opening for the sheep to pass in and out. When traveler remarked on the lack of a gate to block off the opening, the shepherd explained, “I am the door; I lay down across the opening after I have brought in my flock.” He further declared that no sheep would walk across his body during the night, nor would any wolves attempt to come inside, for they were deterred by the shepherd’s body stretched across the entryway (Morris, *Gospel According to John*, p. 507).

Twice in this passage Christ calls Himself the *good shepherd* (vss. 11, 14). This image, according to Saint John Chrysostom, refers to the Lord’s Passion and underscores Christ’s sacrifice for “the salvation of the world” (*NPNF* First Series, vol. 14, p. 215). At the same time the Lord Jesus is asking us to consider the personal bond He enjoys with us as His flock, i.e., the Church. We are His own; He will not flee when we are under duress (vs. 12), as He has demonstrated repeatedly in the past. He is continuously present: “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20).

The Lord always “sees the wolf coming” (Jn 10:12) long before we are aware of the enemy’s advance. Because He knows us well (vs. 14), He awakens us to the coming danger and rouses us to prayer, if we will heed His warning. We may rely on Him to prepare us for Satan’s assaults, for He is God who knows all things. He protects us at all times and forever.

In the closing verses, Christ directs attention to His divine nature with these words: “As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father” (vs. 15). Not only is the Good Shepherd always with us, but through Him we enjoy access to God the Father. He sees and understands our condition far better than we do ourselves, assuring us that there is nothing to “hinder us from being saved. . . . Nothing, unless we ourselves revolt from Him,” as Saint John Chrysostom says. What other guarantee do we need so long as we belong to God who laid “down [His] life for the sheep” (vs. 15), “[took] it again” (vs. 17), and watches over us?

O Thou, Good Shepherd of Thy people, grant us to hear Thy voice and to follow where Thou dost lead, for with Thy Father and the Holy Spirit, Thou art our God unto all ages. – Episcopal Book of Common Prayer

January 26 – Thursday of the Thirty-second Week after Pentecost

Mark 11:27-33

The Baptism of John: Mark 11:27-33, especially vs. 30: *“The baptism of John – was it from heaven or from men? Answer Me.”* The Lord Jesus addresses this question to the Sanhedrin, the first-century tribunal of the Jewish nation. He expects us, as His disciples, to answer as well. We, of course, are accustomed to the display of Saint John’s icon adjacent to that of the Lord. We celebrate the saint’s feast days and hear his name mentioned in the hymns of the Church.

However, perhaps we have never paused to answer Christ’s question, or answered it without reflection. Let us be certain that our answer is based on an understanding of the nature of John’s baptism, on what we know about John, and on Christ, who points to the true answer: John’s “baptism . . . was . . . from heaven” (vs. 30).

The baptism practiced by John stands squarely in the ancient tradition of God’s people. It continues the deliverance of Noah and his family from the waters of the great flood (Gn 6-9), Israel’s passage through the waters of the Red Sea and the destruction of Pharaoh’s hosts (Ex 14), and the nation’s triumphant crossing of the Jordan River into Palestine (Jos 1-4). Together, these experiences reveal the constituent elements manifest in John’s baptism: cleansing, repentance, and divine judgment.

These same elements are present in the mystery of baptism as we know it today (Mt 28:19). According to Father Alexander Schmemmann, “Baptism is defined . . . as being the removal of original sin . . . as the sacrament of regeneration . . . as the passage from an old into a new life, and finally as an epiphany of the Kingdom of God” (*Of Water and the Spirit*, p. 10-11). The priest prays that Christ will “show this water to be the water of redemption, the water of sanctification, the purification of flesh and spirit, the loosing of bonds, the remission of sins, the illumination of the soul, the laver of regeneration, the renewal of the spirit. . . .”

Even more significant are the many witnesses who testify that John the Baptist is called by God. “Now his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying . . . ‘And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest’” (Lk 1:67, 76). The people under the Old Covenant “all counted John to have been a prophet indeed” (Mk 11:32). Even John’s enemies acknowledge that “he was a just and holy man” (Mk 6:20). Furthermore, the Forerunner confirms these views with his own testimony (Jn 1:19-27).

From the beginning the Archangel Gabriel prophesies that John will “be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb” (Lk 1:15). This fact is confirmed while he is still an unborn babe. At the sound of the voice of the Theotokos, who carries God Incarnate (Lk 1:44), John leaps within his mother’s womb.

Finally, the Holy Trinity directly reveals that John’s baptism comes from heaven. The God-inspired Evangelist John declares that the Forerunner “was a man sent from God” (Jn 1:6). John is directed by “the word of God” to go into the region around the Jordan and preach “a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” (Lk 3:2, 3). Then God the Father speaks openly to John at Jesus’ baptism: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Mt 3:17).

The Forerunner himself declares that, due to his human limitations, he did not know Christ beforehand. He relies entirely on God, for “He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God” (Jn 1:33-34).

Let us reply without hesitation, “John’s baptism was from heaven, not from men.”

O wise Forerunner, John, thou didst behold the ineffable glory of the Father from on high, and the Son in the waters, and the Spirit descending on Him: pray Him to save our souls. –Vespers for the Synaxis of the Forerunner

January 27 – Friday – Saint John Chrysostom
John 10:1-9

Pay Attention: John 10:1-9, especially vs. 3-4: “The sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.” The verb “to gimmick” describes actions designed to alter or influence outcomes by diverting our attention. As we read the scriptural accounts of various temptations, one thing becomes clear: the devil uses gimmickry. He takes something which we trust – the word of the Lord – and uses it for his own devious and destructive ends. This record of deception is long-standing, although often ignored.

Satan begins by planting a little seed of doubt. “Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat from every tree of the garden?’” (Gn 3:1). There is no need to be concerned, for “you shall not die by death” (vs. 4). He offers a deadly and destructive lie to Eve which directly contradicts the word of the Lord!

When Christ our God is tempted in the wilderness, He encounters repeated gimmicks from Satan, who plies his familiar trade of sowing doubts. “If You are the Son of God” (Mt 4:3, 6) is one example; “All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me” (vs. 9) is another. The devil’s approach is always based on the insertion of an “if” – it is entirely hypothetical, fully conjectural, and certainly destructive.

And what is the retort of the Word of God, who “became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14)? “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve’” (Mt 4:10). Let us take note of what happens in the next verse: “Then the devil left Him” (vs. 11).

The word of the Lord comes to those who listen and pay attention. We read that “the Word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, ‘Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield and will be your exceeding great reward’” (Gn 15:1).

Those who pay attention to the Lord may receive unexpected rewards, even if they do not belong to His people. When God says to Pharaoh through Moses, “I will cause very heavy hail to rain down, such as has not been in Egypt since its founding” (Ex 9:18), some listen: “He who *feared the word of the Lord* among the servants of Pharaoh gathered his cattle into the house” (vs. 20). Those who listen take shelter from the hail, while others ignore the Lord’s word and suffer the consequences.

If we are inside the sheepfold and hear Christ’s voice calling us by name (Jn 10:1-3), then we are truly blessed. We must pay attention, however, for deceptive voices may also be heard. At times even Church leaders have been misled, trusted in false counsel, or relied on their own knowledge. Let us heed the words of the Prophet David: “As for my God, blameless is His way; the words of the Lord are tried in the fire; defender is He of all that hope in Him . . . Deliver me from the gainsaying of the people” (Ps 17:30, 44).

We only *go out* with the Lord when He is *before* us and we recognize His voice (Jn 10:4). We must pay attention when the subtle, conditional *if* is offered, avoiding anything that appears devious. “With the holy man wilt Thou be holy, and with the innocent man wilt Thou be innocent,” the Prophet David reminds us. “And with the elect man wilt Thou be elect, and with the perverse wilt Thou be perverse. For Thou wilt save a humble people” (Ps 17:25-27).

Let us flee from every strange voice that entices, cajoles, and lures us into following a thief, robber, or stranger (Jn 10:5). When we pay attention, we remember that “the voice of the Lord is upon the waters . . . The voice of the Lord in might, the voice of the Lord in majesty . . . the voice of the Lord who divideth the flame of fire . . . The Lord will give strength unto His people” (Ps 28:3, 4, 7, 11).

Anoint Thy servants, unto the hearing of faith, that we may walk in Thy commandments. – Baptismal prayer

January 28 – Saturday of the Thirty-second Week after Pentecost

Luke 17:3-10

The Duty of a Disciple: Luke 17:3-10, especially vs. 5: “And the apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith.’”

Consider for a moment the circumstances that prompt this appeal to the Lord by the apostles. Jesus has been discussing with them how we are to respond to a fellow disciple, or even a person we do not know, who offends us. The gospels make clear the unlimited, mandatory nature of our duty to forgive if we call ourselves disciples of Christ. Our every objection and resistance to forgiving wrongs is ruled out by the Lord who prayed on the Cross, asking God the Father on behalf of those crucifying Him: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Lk 23:34).

Those who are now beginning to plot Jesus’ arrest and execution do not know what they are doing. Had the chief priests, scribes, and Pharisees grasped Jesus’ true identity, it seems hard to believe that they would allow their Lord and Creator to be sentenced to death by Pontius Pilate, who likewise does not understand the import of his actions.

Just as Christ was born secretly, in a cave, His identity as He stands before Pilate is hidden from men’s perceptions. Jesus alone among those witnessing the travesty of His crucifixion realizes the enormity of the crime. The disciples, of course, run like rabbits, except for a few who lurk around the edges to see how it all comes out. Even brave Peter weasels out at his moment of truth, and later weeps over his failure.

When the Lord rises from the dead, He breaks through the blindness of His disciples. He shows Himself to the world as victor over death and every kind of injustice. And He calls us to follow the way of the Cross and forgiveness, which is our salvation.

Since we hear the Resurrection narratives read at Sunday Orthros, week after week, we may not stop to consider the enormity of the event. We may well wonder, in our indifference, how far removed we truly are from those who committed the crimes against our Lord. The Holy Spirit however, allows us a glimpse sufficient to bring us to whatever degree of repentance we can manage.

If we dare to call Christ our Savior, addressing him as “my Lord” or “my King and my God,” then the duty to forgive is ours. We must forego those responses that come to us more easily in the face of offense: sarcasm, an angry retort, sullen withdrawal, the inner pledge to get even, a proud, disdainful smirk.

Every time He tells us “you shall forgive him” (vs. 4), we beseech Him to “increase our faith” (vs. 5). Let us not justify ourselves by insisting that whoever let fly the cutting remark, gave us a nasty dig, or loosed the most bitter cruelty upon us remains unrepentant. The reaction of the transgressor is no concern of ours in the face of Christ’s expectations.

Am I willing to forgive? Do I want to forgive? Can I find it in myself to forgive? These are far more urgent issues for us. Our eternal salvation hangs on our willingness to obey the Lord and on our readiness to forgive. The Master will refuse to deliver us until we have paid all that is due on our account “if each of [us], from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses” (Mt 18:35).

Indeed, let us beg Christ our Lord to increase our faith every time He asks us to forgive. As we regard the one who has struck us down, we look past the dark pit of unforgiveness and bitter death and lift up our hands to the holy place. “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mk 9:24).

Establish me in the path of Thy commandments, and let me not stray from Thy light. – Archimandrite Sophrony, *On Prayer*

January 29 – Thirty-second Sunday after Pentecost (Sunday of Zacchaeus), Tone 7

Luke 19:1-10

To See Jesus: Saint Luke 19:1-10, especially vs. 4: “So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was going to pass that way.” Traveling with His disciples, the Lord Jesus passes through Jericho. This city, located close to the Jordan River and the Dead Sea, is well below sea level. There the Lord meets and heals a blind man, Bar Timaeus (Lk 18:35-43, Mk 10:46-52). On the steep road leading up to Jerusalem, He meets a chief tax collector named Zacchaeus. The common theme in these encounters is the healing of the inner eyes – the illumination – of these two men.

What a blessing comes to us when the Lord Jesus open the eyes of our heart! Saint Nikolai of Zicha describes Christ as a mirror “in which each one of us sees himself as he is. This unique mirror has been given to men for them to see themselves as they are” (*Homilies of Bishop Nikolai Velimirovich* vol. II, p. 336).

The physically blind Bar Timaeus sees himself healed – and indeed he is healed by Christ. Zacchaeus, who is spiritually blind, looks into the mirror of Christ and sees a shriveled, grasping man. However, he also perceives his true nature as a caring, generous man fashioned in the image of God. When Christ opens his inner eyes, Zacchaeus finds the path to repentance and the recovery of his true person, formerly lost in the recesses of his own heart.

We must look closely at Christ in order to find the whole truth about ourselves, discerning the state of our heart and soul. When Saint Peter sees his fishing boat sinking under an enormous catch, the sight of his sin arrests him. He falls to his knees: “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Lk 5:8).

Zacchaeus hears that Jesus is coming and hopes to glimpse the wonderworker and teacher from Galilee. He yearns to “see who Jesus was” (Lk 19:3). Being short, he climbs a tree for a better view, since he cannot see over the throngs of people that line the roadway.

Note, however, the order of the text: it is the Lord who first “looked up and saw” the inquiring publican (vs. 5). Christ sees the little man in the tree, but then He looks deeply into Zacchaeus’ spirit. The Lord Jesus perceives his yearning and openness. As divine Physician, He sees a man who would and could be healed. He thus bids Zacchaeus to “come down” (vs. 5).

“So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully” (vs. 6). By looking into the mirror of Christ, Zacchaeus discovers the “new man,” his true self, reflected back. The little publican had come to loathe the “old man” within himself. He wishes to be rid of him, so he hastens toward Christ that the Lord might enter into his home. Hope is born and He “receive[s] Him joyfully” (vs. 6), for this is the Savior who bestows the “new man” on all who invite Him into their inner life. We who receive Christ will be healed!

The Evangelist notes the grumbling of those who watch the Lord become “a guest with a man who is a sinner” (vs. 7). These onlookers, of course, see only the “old man” (in the form of the hated tax collector) for their hearts are darkened. Trapped in their sins, they fail to see Christ the Physician, nor do they observe Jesus going to meet a patient in need. In their eyes the Lord is merely a fraudulent teacher of lies.

Zacchaeus, however, catches sight of the path leading to healing repentance – not a lonesome remorse, but a dramatic and positive step toward true life. “If we consider well, we see that nothing at all remained of Zacchaeus’ money. Half he gave to the poor, and of the half that remained to him, he gave fourfold to those whom he had wronged” (Blessed Theophylact, *Gospel According to Saint Luke*, p. 248). May Christ our God also show us the way to life-giving repentance, supplying us with the grace to walk therein.

May I ever remember Thy grace, and live unto Thee, our Master and Benefactor. – Post-communion Prayer

January 30 – Monday of the Fourth Week before Lent (Publican and Pharisee)

Mark 12:13-17

The Comprehensible or Incomprehensible God: Mark 12:13-17, especially vss. 14-15: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Shall we pay, or shall we not pay?” We encounter the first of a series of efforts by the Lord Jesus’ enemies to destroy Him (see vss. 11:18, 12:12-13). His opponents, who greatly hate Him, form an unlikely political alliance between the Pharisees, a devout Jewish sect, and the Herodians (King Herod and his worldly courtiers).

This coalition seeks to lure Jesus into treasonous or blasphemous remarks, indict Him, and have Him executed. In this passage, they slyly defer to the Lord’s sovereignty, observing that Jesus “[does] not regard the person of men, but [teaches] the way of God in truth” (vs. 14). Then they ask whether or not God’s people should pay taxes to the idolatrous Roman government.

The question posed by the Pharisees and Herodians appears to concern Caesar and taxation, but its purpose is to force the Lord Jesus to choose between loyalty to God and obedience to worldly government. Christ, in turn, exposes the deep error involved in making God an alternative to Caesar. Such gross oversimplification distorts theology into manageable human concepts – an impossible task. According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa, “every concept relative to God is a simulacrum, a false likeness, an idol” (Lossky, *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p. 33).

The Pharisees and Herodians engage in reductionism, which attempts to minimize a complex reality by obscuring or distorting it. As rational creatures, we are incapable of speaking definitively about God’s essence. The Church Fathers use negative or superlative statements such as “uncontainable,” “incomprehensible,” “all-wise,” “almighty.” Saint Gregory the Theologian states flatly, “To define Him in words is impossible” (Lossky, p. 34). God is not some *thing* capable of being compared to other things; He exists beyond all categories of thought.

We learn what God expects of us only insofar as He reveals His will. Without His help, neither God nor His will are comprehensible. On the other hand, it is quite possible to comprehend what Caesar expects. Every emperor mints coins with his own image. They issue decrees, such as “all the world should be registered” for taxation (Lk 2:1); in other words, they tax.

The motive behind theological reductionism is our vain attempt to manage God. If we *could* reduce God to mere ideas and principles, then we could eliminate the essential unknowability of God. Such simplistic thinking keeps God conveniently in hand, using Him however it wills. The saints never brook such theology. Isaiah records God’s reply to the inquiries of man: “But as heaven is distant from earth, so is My way distant from your ways, and your thoughts from My mind” (Is 55:9).

Saint Mark discloses the Lord Jesus’ answer to reductionism, in which He celebrates the incomprehensible majesty of God. He asks us to stand with the Prophet Jeremiah and reject the self-serving theologies of those who say: “These things are not so. Evil will not come upon us” (Jer 5:12). True faith proclaims, “Though the Mighty One should lay His hand upon me, and already He has begun, I will speak and reason before Him” (Job 13:15).

Teaching us to hope in God, Solomon says: “Gladness continues for the righteous, but the hope of the ungodly perishes” (Prv 10:29). The wicked do not expect God to interfere, yet He frustrates their ways: “You weary the Lord with your words, yet you say, ‘In what way have we wearied Him?’ In that you say, ‘Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and He delights in them,’ or, ‘Where is the God of justice?’” (Mal 2:17). Our ways are never hidden from God, for “His understanding is unsearchable” (Is 40:28).

Thou art God ineffable, inconceivable, invisible, incomprehensible, ever-existing and eternally the same, Thou and Thine Only-begotten Son and Thy Holy Spirit. Glory to Thee! – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

January 31 – Tuesday of the Fourth Week before Lent (Publican and Pharisee)

Mark 12:18-27

Death and Resurrection: Mark 12:18-27, especially vs. 27: “*He is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living.*” Our Lord Jesus speaks of death’s defeat, promising the resurrection of our mortal bodies which is to come. The inescapable lot of mankind is that we all will die. Every one of us will fall in time – every single body to which God gives life must languish and go down into the grave. Nevertheless, the Lord Jesus looks straight into the jaws of universal death and affirms the witness of Holy Scripture, opposing those who, like the Sadducees, “say there is no resurrection” (vs. 18).

The Lord confirms the declaration of the Prophet Isaiah, who is moved by the Holy Spirit to proclaim: “The dead shall rise up; and those in the tombs shall arise. Those in the earth shall be glad, for your dew is a healing for them” (Is 26:19). Christ our God ultimately demonstrates this victory for us with His Resurrection.

In refuting the Sadducees’ fanciful tale of a woman married in serial fashion to seven brothers, the Lord Jesus teaches us three truths about the resurrection. First, the promise of the resurrection of the body depends upon the nature of God as Life-giver. Second, mankind’s rising from the dead will occur as part of a general resurrection at a future time, after each one dies. Third, each mortal body shall be raised, as Saint Paul says, to *newness of life* (Rom 6:4) and in a *spiritual body* (1 Cor 15:44) – exactly what Christ’s Resurrection manifests to us.

The ancient people of God already look to God as the source of life. We hear this truth in Psalm 103, which is read at every evening at Vespers: “Thou wilt take their spirit, and they shall cease; and unto their dust they shall return. Thou wilt send forth Thy Spirit, and they shall be created; and Thou shalt renew the face of the earth” (Ps 103:31-32). The Lord ordains life and death for all flesh. He gives us life and takes away our breath as part of this great mystery.

However, the Lord Jesus announces the good news “concerning the dead, that they rise” (Mk 12:26). Furthermore, Christ puts His own life and death behind these words. He tells us what He said to Moses from the burning bush: “I am the God of your father – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Ex. 3:6).

Note that God speaks in present tense. He does not say, “Centuries ago, I was the God of the patriarchs of Israel,” but rather, “Now, in the present, I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” The Lord God renews the face of the earth and restores the dead to life, for He is the Life-giver – the One from whom all life derives and exists. Saint Cyril of Alexandria reminds us, “God created all things for incorruption, as it is written . . . ‘He hath swallowed up death, having waxed mighty, and God shall again take away all weeping from every countenance; He shall remove the reproach of the people from the whole earth’” (*Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, Homily 136, p. 542; see also Is 25:8).

One of the reasons the Sadducees deny the reality of resurrection, as do modern-day secularists, is because they experience only death. Such men do not accept the apostolic witness that Christ is risen “and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor 15:20).

The resurrection of mankind is the gift God offers to those who unite themselves to Christ, partaking of His Resurrection for the newness of life. “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming” (1 Cor 15:22-23).

In the resurrection our bodies will be like the body of the risen Lord, which “entered through the closed doors without difficulty and needed neither food, nor sleep, nor drink” (Saint John of Damascus, *ACCS New Testament*, vol. 2, p. 170). In that day we shall indeed be “like angels in heaven” (Mk 12:25).

Thy cross do we adore, O Christ, and Thy holy Resurrection we praise and glorify. – The Paschal Hours