

**February 1 – Wednesday of the Fourth Week before Lent (Publican and Pharisee)**

**Mark 12:28-37**

**The First of All Commandments:** *Mark 12:28-37, especially vss. 29-30: “Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.”* Jesus answers a scribe’s question about the greatest commandment (vs. 28) by reciting Deuteronomy 6:4. He follows this verse with Deuteronomy 6:5, adding that the commandment from Leviticus 19:18 is “like it” (Mk 12:31).

These words from Deuteronomy, called the Shema, are “the best-known words in Judaism’s liturgy, the *watchword* of Israel’s faith” (Plaut, *The Torah*, p. 1369). Devout Jews describe the principles in this command “as rays shining forth . . . from a diamond set into a crown of faith and proven true and enduring in human history” (p. 1370).

In today’s passage, we see that the scribe responds with appreciation. “Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He. And to love Him with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices” (vss. 32-33). Since Christ Himself calls the Shema “the first of all the commandments” (vs. 29), let us examine how we are to embrace this sacred truth.

This *first of all the commandments* enjoins us “to go forward to the perfection of love and to learn to know Him who is truly beloved,” according to Saint Basil the Great. “It is not the privilege of any chance person” to attain this goal; rather, it belongs only to “him who has already ‘put off the old man, which is being corrupted through its deceptive lusts, and has put on the new man’ (Eph 4:22, 24), which is being renewed that it may be recognized as an image of the Creator” (Homily 17, ACCS New Testament, vol. II, p. 172). In other words, the Shema is not a theory, but a way to live.

We commit ourselves to this work of *learning to know Him who is truly beloved* when we are “buried with [the Lord Jesus] through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4). Once we choose to be baptized into the Mystery of Christ, God is ready to transform us. According to the baptismal rite, He offers us the opportunity to “be partaker[s] of [His] Resurrection” so long as we preserve “the gift of Thy Holy Spirit” and use “the measure of grace committed unto” us. Indeed, this is not a privilege extended to *any chance person*, but only to those who deliberately take the Lord’s yoke upon themselves and proceed to labor (Mt 11:29).

The Lord insists that we “love [Him] with all [our] heart, with all [our] soul, with all [our] mind, and with all [our] strength” (Mk 12:30; Dt 6:5). However, Saint Basil cautions us that “as much love as you shall have squandered on lower objects, that much will necessarily be lacking to you from the whole.” Alas, “he who loves money and is aroused by the corruptible beauty of the body and esteems exceedingly this little glory here, since he has expended the power of loving on what is not proper, he is quite blind in regard to the contemplation of Him who is truly beloved” (Spidlik, *Drinking From the Hidden Fountain*, p. 174).

How, then, are we to avoid these pitfalls and fulfill Christ’s commandment? We cannot love when ordered to do so! Understanding this, Saint Basil encourages us: “We did not learn to love God as a result of outside instruction. In the very nature of every human being has been sown the seed of the ability to love. Welcome this seed, cultivate it carefully, nourish it attentively, and foster its growth by going to the school of God’s commandments with the help of His grace.”

*May my prayer draw near to Thee, O Lord. Grant me Thy holy seed, that I might bring Thee a harvest of sheaves abundant in good fruits and say, “Glory to Thee Who givest me life.”* – Saint Ephraim the Syrian

## February 2 – Thursday – Luke 2:22-40, Meeting of our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ

**Revelation To Simeon: *Saint Luke 2:22-40, especially vs. 26:*** “*It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.*” The holy man, Simeon, took the Child Jesus in his arms and blessed God Who revealed the Child to the eyes of Simeon’s heart as the Light of nations and glory for God’s People (Lk. 2:28-32). The blessing prayer the old man offered is the beautiful Hymn sung after the Aposticha at Vespers. It discloses both Simeon’s holiness of life, and the scope of the revelation that God gave him.

First, the hymn reveals Simeon as a holy man, one who kept communion with God and spoke with him personally: “Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel” (Lk. 2:29-32). How joyfully he lives to do only the Master’s bidding! He realizes his privilege from God: to live to a very great old age and ‘see’ the Lord’s Anointed. His prayer completes his life and service: “Now lettest Thou me depart, O Master, as Thou wentest before and promised me; for I have beheld Thee, O Light before eternity, the Lord and Savior of the Christian People.”

Submission to God is the essential mark of Saint Simeon’s holiness, clearly shown in his hymn. Consider: he lived in Jerusalem (vs. 25). Many, many times he was in the Temple. However, when the Virgin came with the Holy Infant to make the required sacrifice, Simeon “...came by the Spirit into the Temple” (vs. 27). Why? Because he listened with his heart to God. Therefore, he was led to the encounter at the critical moment and in the exact place.

The Holy Fathers call revelation like this ‘*the gift of discernment*’ or ‘*diorasis*,’ the ability to perceive invisible truths and happenings, an ability given to Saints who are deified from years of asceticism and prayer. Saint Simeon’s arrival in precise timing and in place allowed him to hold the Child in his arms. He blessed God, and uttered pure revelation - a deified man!

Examine the Saint’s revelation. The Child he held in his arms *is* God’s salvation, the universal Savior. Simeon looked beyond a woman with a child coming to make a sacrifice. He perceived God’s ultimate action in history: Incarnation. The Child was and is Divine Light, One capable of renewing every culture, people, and person to the fulfilling of God’s People.

The statement, “...before the face of all peoples...,” is a scriptural way of speaking when God acts openly in the stream of human events. Our Almighty Lord dwells beyond time and space. His works everywhere to disclose “...His eternal power and Godhead...” (Rom. 1:20), yet He came to us as a tangible, human infant. “Salvation, life, mercy, forgiveness,” are terms we mortals use to speak of God and His work, since He is removed forever from pure mental and abstract ideas. He became an embodied, living human Person, being both man and God.

The phrase, “...a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles...,” prompts us to see with Saint Simeon that God deliberately communicated His Word to every people within the human family in order to restore and fulfill all of us. The God-Man alone overcomes our suppression of truth, and our denial of relationship with God, a lie that renders human thinking futile and leaves the denying heart dark and insensate (Rom. 1:21). Truly Jesus is the Light of the World (Jn. 8:12).

To speak of the Lord Jesus as “...the glory of Your people Israel” (Lk 2:32) identifies Him as the keystone of centuries of Divine revelation given through Abraham, Moses, the Prophets, and Israel’s great Wisdom writers. The Eternal Head of God’s People came and *is* with us!

*The Lord hath made known His salvation; He hath revealed His justice in the sight of the Nations. Save us, O Son of God, Who wast borne in the arms of Simeon, as we sing to Thee.*

## February 3 – Friday of the Fourth Week before Lent (Publican and Pharisee)

### Mark 13:1-8

**Holding onto Christ: Mark 13:1-8, especially vs. 5-6:** “And Jesus, answering them, began to say: ‘Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My Name, saying, “I am He,” and will deceive many.’” Aware of this very danger, Saint John of Kronstadt urges us to hold onto Christ: “Never lose hearty faith in Him who is your invisible Life, your Peace, your Light, your Strength, your Breath; that is, in Jesus Christ. Do not believe your heart when it becomes gross, darkened, unbelieving, and cold from plenteousness of food and drink, from worldly distractions, or finally when you live by the intellect, and not by the heart” (*My Life in Christ*, p. 74).

Today, counterfeit christs abound. These charlatans approach us in many guises, appearing as friends, wise teachers, renowned authorities with impeccable credentials. Many carry a “Christian” conviction in their messages, “deceiving and being deceived” (2 Ti 3:13). So how may we *take heed* and not lose the true Christ? The answer is that we find strength, as the Holy Spirit provides, through the Church. In Her liturgy, Scriptures, sacred icons, and the prayers of Her saints, we find tested modes and methods of life.

For over two thousand years the Spirit has poured out His blessings upon the Church in abundance, making clear the way for those who entreat the Savior and Lord with their *whole heart* (Ps 118:58). Over the centuries the Holy Spirit has nurtured divine life within a vibrant grove of fruit-bearing trees. Such trees will line the streets of the New Jerusalem, “each tree yielding its fruit every month. . . . for the healing of the nations” (Rv 22:2). We are to make use of them all in order to avoid falling along with the *many* whom the Lord tells us will be deceived.

The Holy Fathers teach us always to read Scripture in light of the Church’s understanding. As Saint John Chrysostom says, “Reading the Holy Scriptures is like a treasure. With a treasure, you see, anyone able to find a tiny nugget gains for himself great wealth; likewise in the case of Sacred Scripture, one can get from a small phrase a great wealth of thought and immense riches. The Word of God is not only like a treasure, but also like a spring gushing with ever-flowing waters in a mighty flood” (*Homilies on Genesis 1-17*, p. 39).

Likewise, the rich and healing hymns we hear during the liturgy are satisfying fruits written by the Church Fathers for our nourishment. “The influence of the Divine Liturgy can be great and incalculable if a person makes it a rule to apply in life what he has heard there,” Nikolai Gogol reminds us. “Teaching all equally, acting equally on all conditions and all professions, from the emperor down to the poorest beggar, the liturgy teaches love which is the bond of all fellowship, the hidden spring of everything which keeps all life in rhythmic motion” (*Meditations on the Divine Liturgy*, p. 57-8).

The great scholar Leonid Ouspensky demonstrates that the icon, as liturgical craft, “does not define itself as an art belonging to one or another historical epoch, nor as the expression of the national peculiarities of one or another people.” Rather, “in its essence the icon . . . never served religion, but like the word, has always been and is an integral part of religion, one of the instruments for the knowledge of God, one of the means of communion with Him” (*Meaning of Icons*, p. 31).

If you would hold fast to Christ, search for Him through His holy icons and reverence Him in the liturgy. Finally, remember that the Spirit brings Christ to us through the lives of the saints and the writings of the Church Fathers, for these luminaries both teach and show us how to practice and guard the truth in Christ.

*O Eternal King, when Thou didst cleanse the substance of mankind and anointed it with the Spirit, Thou didst destroy the powers of darkness and translate mankind to life immortal.* – Feast of Theophany

## February 4 – Saturday of the Fourth Week before Lent (Publican and Pharisee)

### Luke 18:2-8

**Our Adversaries: Luke 18:2-8, especially vs. 3:** “Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, ‘Get justice for me from my adversary.’” Saint Cyril of Alexandria comments on this parable, challenging the faithful to “examine who it is that offends against them.” He identifies several adversaries who troubled the “holy ministers, teachers. . . . and servants” of the Lord in the fifth century. These included the heretics; those who “smite and scorn us, even . . . inflict violence upon us;” those who “make merchandise of the word of uprightness and prevail on many to abandon a sound faith, involving them in inventions of devilish error;” and those who fiercely resist “those who would live well” (*Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, p. 478).

It does not take much extrapolation to see that we face the same sort of adversaries today as did the fathers of fifth-century Alexandria. Our present enemies function under different banners and names unknown to Saint Cyril’s generation, but they are every bit as active in drawing the unwary from the Gospel of life and truth. In place of the heretics of Saint Cyril’s day we encounter sectarians, self-appointed theologians, and so-called experts in matters of faith. Holding impressive degrees and credentials, many such “leaders” hold forth in seminaries and universities, while the airwaves and Internet are flooded with those hawking false religion to the unwary.

Many of our adversaries today openly vow to *smite* and *inflict violence* on us, diligently seeking new ways to do so. And who can even begin to count the purveyors of moral corruption who seek to convince the innocent that evil is good and good evil? Pray for us, Holy Father Cyril, that Christ will preserve an abiding faith among His followers in our generation!

At the conclusion of Jesus’ parable, we encounter this warning: “Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them?” (vss. 6-7). Christ reminds us that it is the persistence of the importunate widow that breaks down the judge’s resistance, so that he grants her a settlement against her adversary.

Are we to identify God with the judge? Not at all! If even a wicked, self-serving, and callous human judge responds to persistent pleas based on his own selfish motives, Christ assures us that our compassionate, loving God will most definitely “avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him” (vs. 7). The Lord’s story enjoins us to *cry out* in unremitting prayer.

Shall we be found standing before God, unwavering in our prayer that we receive justice before our adversaries (1 Th 5:17)? And what will keep us steady and persistent at prayer? Principally, it is our conviction. So the question remains: “When the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?” (vs. 8).

According to Father Matthew the Poor, “Faith and will are intimately related, distinct but indivisible. . . . It is only when we *will* something that we can be counted worthy of God’s response” (*Orthodox Prayer Life*, p. 166). When Christ asks the paralytic, “Do you want to be made well?” (Jn 5:6), He is stressing the primary role of will and desire in faith.

Finally, let us take the final part of the Lord’s warning into consideration. Yes, God sometimes *bears long* with us and seems to delay. And yet, according to Saint John Climacus, we must “not say, after spending a long time at prayer, that nothing has been gained; for you have already gained something. What higher good is there than to cling to the Lord and persevere in unceasing union with Him?” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 28.29, p. 216).

*Accept the prayer of us sinners and make us worthy to find grace in Thy sight, that our prayers may be acceptable unto Thee, and the good Spirit of Thy grace may dwell upon us.* – Prayer of the Proskomedia

**February 5 – Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee (First Sunday of Triodion), Tone 8**  
**Luke 18:10-14**

**Humbling Oneself: Luke 18:9-14, especially vs. 14:** “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” The Church Fathers affirm that the Jesus Prayer (“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner”) expresses the true way of repentance and humility. Our liturgical prayers likewise enjoin us to pursue humility, beseeching God to help us “complete the remaining time of our life in peace and repentance.” Is it truly possible to achieve unwavering humility of heart and mind? Clearly, we will fail if we adopt the attitude of the Pharisee, congratulating ourselves on our piety (vss. 11-12). We must follow the attitude of the Publican as the true way, for only “this man went down to his house justified” (vs. 14).

Let us consider first why the Publican stands *afar off* (vs. 13). From whom or what does he distance himself? He sees little good in himself compared with everyone else present in the Temple, including the pious Pharisee. He perceives that he is far from God, and therefore he “would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven” (vs. 13). Like King David, pierced to the heart by awareness of his sins of adultery and murder, the Publican can only bow low before the Lord. His downcast eyes express David’s words to God: “Against Thee only have I sinned” (Ps 50:4).

At a surface level, King David’s statement may seem misdirected. Uriah, the king’s loyal soldier, lies dead, while Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba, is pregnant with David’s child. Should not David be concerned primarily with the sins he committed against this couple? However, King David understands that his foremost transgression is against God. If we understand that the eye of our God “is too pure to see evil” (Hb 1:13), then we must also confess that sin has separated us from the King of all.

Secondly, of course, sin separates us from the Body of Christ – from other Christians. As Saint Paul looks into his own soul, he calls himself chief among sinners (1 Ti 1:15). Regardless of how others perceive him, the apostle’s encounter with Christ lays bare the very worst in his life, thoughts, and deeds.

Let us entreat the Holy Spirit to disclose our own sins to us, showing us clearly how we have violated the trust we enjoy in the Church. Sin damages communion and compromises our fellow Christians, abandoning them to their struggles. It weakens the entire witness of the faithful before the world. Indeed, let us stand *afar off* and mourn our sins.

Thirdly, the Publican “beat his breast” (vs. 13), for he knows that he has violated his own soul. Every sin wreaks havoc with the precious image of God within us, leaving us with a sense of shame and loss. However, we must take note of the words spoken by the man whom God deems truly forgiven: “God, be merciful to me a sinner” (vs. 13). These words, repeated almost verbatim in the Jesus Prayer, illumine for us the path to reconciliation. In them we find hope for our restoration and a balm to heal the image of God that we mar and denigrate in ourselves.

Let us determine, then, to rouse our conscience and galvanize the shreds of faith still in us. Let us, like the Publican, cry out to God, “Have mercy upon me a sinner!” Above all, let us not mouth these words mindlessly but rather cry out in pain from the heart, offering our prayer contritely before the throne of God. A healing repentance is possible only if we, like the Apostle Paul, allow God to open our eyes and show us what we truly are before Him. Then, by His grace, the words of the following prayer will bear fruit in us.

*O Lord God of my salvation, Savior and Benefactor of my soul, I am truly sorry for all my transgressions. I firmly resolve to amend my life. Implant in me the fear of Thy blessed commandments, that I may trample down all carnal desire and lead a godly life, ever pleasing Thee, walking uprightly in Thy statutes unto life eternal with all of Thy saints.* – Prayer after Confession

## February 6 – Monday of the Third Week before Lent (Prodigal Son)

### Mark 13:9-13

**Counting the Cost: Saint Mark 13:9-13, especially vs. 13:** “*But he who endures to the end shall be saved.*” In today’s Gospel the Lord Jesus warns of the consequences that may come upon us in this life – including in our family relationships – when we profess Christ. He bluntly cautions us to “watch out for yourselves” (vs. 9). Later, in this same chapter, He again admonishes us and urges us to remain alert and watchful for His return (vss. 33, 35, 37).

As we read through the present verses, we note that the specifics of the Lord Jesus’ warnings parallel, step by step, the events that will occur at His Passion, described in the chapters immediately following (Mk 14-15). The final teachings of our Lord in this Gospel transition directly into the plot against Him (vss. 14:1-2). The Lord, in His love, is warning us to count in advance the cost of our discipleship and the price of our salvation.

The sufferings endured by the Lord Jesus at His Passion, as well as those of countless martyrs and confessors, force us to confront a serious issue. Why do we choose to follow Christ if arrest, beatings, interrogations, betrayal, and execution may result? Among the many possible answers to such a question, the one true answer is salvation – our hope of eternal life (vs. 13).

If we call ourselves Christians, we would do well to heed Saint Makarios of Egypt’s chilling observation. “Many are moved to repentance and many become partakers of heavenly grace and are wounded by divine love,” he writes, “but unable to bear the ensuing tribulations and the wily and versatile assaults of the devil, they submit to the world and are submerged in its depths” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 308). Sadly, some who profess Christ will hear Him say, “I never knew you” (Mt 7:23).

Why does the Lord Jesus advise us to consider the cost of discipleship in advance? As we do so, we admit the tangible benefits of deciding *against* discipleship. Uninhibited pleasures in life are a principle reason for refusing to cultivate a robust faith. However, when we examine the ineffable benefits of the salvation to which we are called, we conclude that genuine humanity is found *only* in Christ. Deliverance from sin and eternal death is of incalculable worth, beyond all measure. Union with God becomes a radiant possibility.

The world offers only what can be touched, consumed, held, and tasted. Committing to Christ may imply forgoing momentary pleasures. However, when we consider the confusion, bitterness, and sterility that often accompany unbridled indulgence, then the promises of the Gospel – love, hope, faith, life, light, integrity, and purity – shine brightly with beauty.

Having looked at *why* we become Christ’s disciples, let us examine what we may need to endure in order to be saved. Our loyalty may require us to resist social consensus (vs. 9), advocate for the Gospel (vss. 10-11), and even deny some family demands (vs. 12). Taking such a stand may exact a price ranging from the surrender of some trifle to the loss of life itself. Make no mistake: our secular culture constantly advocates against loyalty to Christ and incessantly demands that we defend our beliefs, values, and practices. These subtle and not-so-subtle pressures are part of the price of enduring *to the end* in order to be saved (vs. 13).

Finally, how long might we have to endure if we stand for Christ? In one respect the answer is simple – until the end. And when does that end come? The Apostle Paul teaches that “it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment” (Heb 9:27). In other words, we have to endure until death, after which we are judged. Thus we pray in the Divine Liturgy for “a Christian ending to our life, painless, blameless, peaceful; and a good defense before the dread Judgment Seat of Christ.”

*Yea, let my humble heart be lighted by Thy fear lest it rise and fall from Thee, O all compassionate One. Purify me before Thou raisest me from this place.* – Orthros verse, tone 8

## February 7 – Tuesday of the Third Week before Lent (Prodigal Son)

### Mark 13:14-23

**Fleeing: Mark 13:14-23, especially vs. 14:** “Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.” In the face of a recognizable threat, our rapid departure may be advisable – flight, in a word, may be our best option. In the present passage from Saint Mark’s Gospel, the Lord Jesus states frankly that at times life offers us urgent reasons to take flight. He even identifies the circumstances that indicate when it is time to withdraw. Furthermore, He counsels that when quick retreat is needed we should not merely leave, but escape as quickly as possible. Let us note, however, that the Lord’s teaching first insists that we have a truly substantial reason for choosing to get away.

What, then, are the genuine and threatening circumstances that require to us flee? Let us first recall that Christ is providing His counsel about flight during the days immediately before His own arrest, while He is teaching in the Temple precincts (vss. 12:35, 41; vss. 13:1, 3). Second, we take note of His use of the term “abomination of desolation” (vs. 14). This phrase refers to a cataclysmic event, well-known to His first-century listeners, which befell the Jerusalem Temple.

Specifically, the Lord Jesus warns His disciples concerning “the ‘abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by Daniel the Prophet, standing where it ought not” (vs. 14). In the sixth century BC, the Prophet Daniel prophesies that a time will come when “the daily sacrifice is taken away, and the abomination of desolation is set up” (Dan 12:11). Centuries later, during the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-169 BC), the Seleucid king, a desecration of this sort occurs. This king “set up the abomination of desolation upon the altar” (1 Mc 1:54) in the Temple as part of his effort to eradicate every trace of Judaism.

Since those profane events are already past history, our Lord is clearly announcing a future act of sacrilege – one so appalling that the Temple will be abandoned by God. In AD 66, Jewish forces led by the Zealots revolted against the Romans. At first they were successful, but many knew that the Romans would return in force. In the flush of victory, however, the Zealots took over the Temple and permitted outlaws to carry out terrible sacrileges there, including murder and dressing up in mockery of the High Priest. Ananus, a former High Priest, said, “Certainly it had been good for me to die before I had seen the house of God full of so many abominations” (Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, IV.iii, p. 672).

Members of the Church perceived these events as the very signs of which the Lord had warned. They fled to Pella, across the Jordan River, as the Lord had advised them. In extreme circumstances withdrawal is indicated and the flight of God’s people fully warranted. We should not hesitate, but do as the Lord directs (Mk 13:15, 16).

By God’s mercy, may such flight never be necessary for nursing mothers, nor occur during harsh weather (vss. 17-18). The early Christians who heeded the Lord’s prophecy during the Jewish wars managed to flee Jerusalem without grave difficulties. “Those who believed in Christ migrated from Jerusalem,” Eusebios reports in his *Ecclesiastical History*. “Once the holy men had completely left the Jews and all Judea, the justice of God at last overtook them [the Jews], since they had committed such transgressions against Christ and His apostles.”

If and when we must flee, let us hold fast to Christ and reject all “false christs and false prophets” (vs. 22). Remember Lot and his family. God be with those who flee!

*O Thou Light of those lying in darkness, O Christ our Savior, enlighten us with Thy radiance that we may know and serve none other gods beside Thee.* – Canon to Our Lord Jesus Christ

## February 8 – Wednesday of the Third Week before Lent (Prodigal Son)

### Mark 13:24-31

**Christ's Return: Mark 13:24-31, especially vs. 31:** “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.” In this passage from Saint Mark, the Lord Jesus describes the epic ending of this age. Like a classical Japanese painter, He needs only a few suggestive strokes to portray the final scene. Some may receive this vision with exultation or joy, while others perceive terror and anguish (Rv 1:7). Let us examine in turn the four elements of what Christ describes.

First, the physical universe will actually shut down (Mk 13:24-25). Saint John the Theologian depicts this cosmic consummation using the image of a parchment scroll being rolled up and closed. Everything visible to the physical eye and the senses disappears (Rv 6:14).

Our minds struggle to comprehend how such a thing could happen, until we consider the time when there was neither earth nor an immense universe beyond it. As God asks Job, “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements? Surely you know. Or who stretched the line upon it? To what were its foundations fastened, or who laid its cornerstone, when the stars were made, and all My angels praised Me in a loud voice?” (Job 38:4-7).

Indeed, no man was present at creation. We can only imagine the beginning. Likewise, we cannot conceive of total, universal cataclysm. Survivors of great earthquakes and floods experience profound disorientation and disbelief. “What wonder is it that human beings should be troubled at this judgment [at the end of the world], the sight of which makes the very angelic powers tremble?” asks the Venerable Bede (*ACCS New Testament*, vol. II, p. 188).

We may rest assured, however, that none of us will avoid the closing of the scroll. All shall understand these events instantaneously when they transpire. No one will ask, “What is happening?” Every knee shall bow (Phil 2:10).

Second, the spiritual realm in which we are immersed at every moment will be *shaken* (Mk 14:25). We refer to this realm in the Nicene Creed when we assert that God created the “visible and the invisible.” Due to our spiritual dullness, we mainly respond to the stimuli of the visible world. Nevertheless, the spiritual realm impinges upon us constantly – demons, saints, and angels continually touch our lives.

When this unseen realm is shaken, our souls will become instantly visible to others. Everyone will see what is within us, just as we shall see the thoughts and desires of all (Rom 2:16). Who does not feel uneasy when faced with the prospect of such self-disclosure?

Third, Christ will come in His glory (Mk 11:26). The foreshadowing of the Lord’s glory on Mount Tabor causes His disciples to fall on their faces in awe (Mt 17:6). His Second Coming will not be limited to a select few: all shall witness the incomprehensible majesty of the Lord Jesus Christ our God.

If, at present, we only speak of His glory, at that time we shall *see* His unimaginable radiance, with no restraints to dim our vision. We shall see Him who died on the Cross for our salvation, who stood in the waters of Jordan to cleanse our sins. We shall see the print of the nails in hands flaming with uncreated light. Such words sound like madness, yet they reflect the full intent of Christ’s words.

Finally, He will *gather together* His own (vs. 27). When He does so, there will be an irreversible separation, as when “a shepherd divides His sheep from the goats” (Mt 25:32). There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth for some, while for others a hand will brush away all tears and remove every sigh (Is 25:8).

*O Lord, teach me Thy statutes and regard not the charges against me, that I may be established with Thee in Paradise where the choirs of the saints shine like the stars of heaven.* – Orthodox Funeral Service



## February 9 – Thursday of the Third Week before Lent (Prodigal Son)

Mark 13:31-14:2

**Watch: Mark 13:31-14:2, especially vs. 33:** “Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is.” In this Gospel passage, the Lord Jesus commands us repeatedly to “watch,” returning again and again to this preeminent requirement (vss. 33-37). However, His instructions are framed within a pair of urgent contexts. The greater of these is His declaration that His “words will by no means pass away,” which assures us that His warning is tied to the end of the age, when “heaven and earth will pass away” (vs. 31). We are to watch in anticipation of the “ending to our life” and “the fearful judgment seat of Christ,” as we pray in the Divine Liturgy.

The lesser context consists of the immediate circumstances under which the Lord’s order is given. At this time, “the chief priests and the scribes sought how they might take Him by trickery and put Him to death” (vs. 14:1). Sin, evil, and death, which He will defeat in His Passion, are already present.

If we look at the original Greek text of this Gospel, we discover that the Lord Jesus actually uses three different verbs in the course of his command to “watch.” *Blepo* is translated as “take heed” while *agrypneo* is translated as “watch” (vs. 13:33); *grigoreo* is also “watch.” The meaning of these verbs can range from *see, look,* and *watch* to *take heed* or *be awake*. In light of our Lord’s cautions and commands, the translators chose “watch” as the best fit for most of these verbs.

Note, however, the Anglo-Saxon roots of the phrase “take heed,” which connect it to the word “head” (as in, “guarding your head”). The two contexts in which the Lord issues his commands and warnings – and the contemporary advice to “get your head together” – fit together precisely. A guard in a front-line foxhole knows the value of watching!

There are also inward and outward aspects of watching. The image of a guard posted on the perimeter during combat speaks to each disciple of Christ about outward attentiveness. Each of us is posted at a different point along the Church’s perimeter. In the darkness beyond lies the enemy who is constantly testing our wakefulness. Opportunities to sin and to disregard the Lord’s commandments abound. We are surrounded by a multitude of opportunities to indulge in pride, greed, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth, all of which run counter to the gifts of the Spirit. These temptations assault us as we painstakingly seek to live the life in Christ.

The Church Fathers interpret the Lord’s admonition as first and foremost a command to watch inwardly, even when Jesus employs images from the external world. According to Archimandrite Ioannikios, “The essence of the Christian life has more to do with the inner life of the soul than with external conduct” (*Gentithes, Themes from the Philokalia Number 1*, p. 4). Our external conduct is merely leading edge of watching; the real work of being attentive takes place inside us.

Let us now turn our attention to the other word that Christ includes in these instructions: *pray* (vs. 33). Returning to the immediate context – the Lord’s betrayal, arrest, trial, and execution, all foreshadowed in this passage – we recall what He does in the Garden of Gethsemane: He prays (vs. 14:32). His disciples, although they are warned, fail to stay awake and pray as they are ordered.

This message also applies to our inner life, for as Archimandrite Ioannikios says, “In order for watchfulness to bear fruit, it must be coupled with prayer, particularly with the mental, unceasing prayer of the heart” (p. 11). Prayer is combat, demanding no small effort from the heart. Saint Mark the Ascetic advises us to “question other servants of God who are . . . engaged in the same ascetic struggle, so that [you do] not travel in the dark without a light, not knowing how or where to walk” (*Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 151).

*Lord Jesus, grant me the grace of true prayer offered in simplicity and peace, ever contrite before Thy Cross for my sinfulness and watchful for the sure stalking of evil.*

**February 10 – Feast of Hieromartyr Haralampos the Wonderworker**  
**Saint John 15:17-16:2**

**Chosen Out: Saint John 15:17-16:2, especially vs. 19:** *“If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”* Our Lord Jesus Christ reminds us: if you name yourself after Christ and follow Him, it is primarily because **‘He chose you out of the world.’** What does that mean? Recall our school days when it was time to play ball: two captains were appointed by the teacher or coach. These favored ones chose up the sides. At first, we stood in the midst of all the children. Which captain would pick us? Who would choose us to be on his or her team? We waited and waited until one of the selecting captains pointed to us and called our name. At that point, we left the group and we became a team member. We had been chosen out of the undifferentiated assembled classmates and became one of the team under our captain.

Apply our school experience to our membership in Christ. He chose us; though we are still in the world - at our same job, part of our same natural family, a citizen of our same native land, the same gender as the day we were born - something distinctive remains about us. Now, we are members of Christ. Recall Saint Paul’s words: *“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus”* (Gal. 3:27-28). Hereafter, may our actions and responses be determined by our being those chosen out from all other identities to belong to Christ **‘first and foremost.’**

Being chosen out by Christ entails definite consequences. Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ expects that when He joins us to Himself, we will 1) love our fellow Christians, 2) bear in mind, whenever we are hated *‘as Christians,’* that it is the Lord and our fellow members in Christ Who are the primary target, 3) seek the Holy Spirit as our Helper within the fellowship of the Church, and 4) speak and act as the Lord’s servants as occasions warrant, being those whom He placed where we find ourselves in this life.

1) See how our Lord begins! *“These things I command you, that you love one another”* (Jn. 15:17). It may be difficult to love some of us, yet we all are striving to live up to being chosen. Strive to let other Christians know that we love them.

2) We may very well experience hatred because Christ chose us; but be assured, that those who hate us, hate Him more than they hate us. The Lord always is the primary target (vss. 18-20). Similarly, when we find people who are keeping Jesus’ commandments (vs. 20), they also will be keeping the Church’s teaching; for, in truth, the *Church* in essence is those who have been chosen out by Christ to be His Body.

3) It is in the Church that we will find *“The Helper”* (vs. 26), the Spirit of Truth Who proceeds from our Father in Heaven. He helps those who belong to the Lord to make the right choices by humbly testifying to Christ our Savior and Lord.

4) As ones chosen, we may expect to find many opportunities to stand up for Christ our God, to *‘bear witness’* (vs. 27) to Him Who chose us to be His own. Remember, He called us because He does not want us to stumble, sin, or make painful mistakes. He is putting trust in us by explaining all of this in advance. *“Yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service”* (vs. 16:2), but no matter how roughly life may treat us remember, above all, we were chosen by Christ, the Life-giver, Himself! Glorify Him!

*Ye who have trod the narrow way most sad; all ye who in life have taken upon you the Cross as a yoke, and have followed Me: enjoy ye the honors which I have prepared for you.*

## February 11 – Saturday of the Third Week before Lent (Prodigal Son)

Luke 20:45-21:4

**Predatory Religion: Luke 20:45-21:4, especially vss. 46-47:** “Beware of the scribes. . . . who devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation.” We should find it rather ironic that the scribes are condemned by the Lord Jesus. After all, as the most devout scholars of their day, they were renowned for their teaching based on the Holy Scriptures. They swore never to receive payment based on their profession, but to live solely by their own labor and on subsidies provided by the wealthy. Because of their high ideals, they were greatly honored. Their lives shared much in common with our Lord’s own manner of living (vss. 10:4-8).

However, as these teachers of the Law gained a monopoly on the interpretation of Scripture, they turned its plain meaning into incomprehensible and esoteric teachings. In the first century these elite scholars may still have believed that they were highly favored by God, but they had distanced themselves from the populace and even disdained those who did “not know the Law” (Jn 7:49).

Even worse, they expected honors and perks for themselves (Lk 20:46). Many well-to-do families had the scribes manage their finances and estates. History records that as the scribes prospered, abuses followed. Among those exploited by the scribes, most likely, were the vulnerable widows (vs. 47).

Here is one of God’s most ancient commandments: “You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you afflict them in any way and they cry out to Me, I will surely hear their cry; and My wrath will become hot and I will kill you with the sword” (Ex. 22:21-23). God expects us to render service impartially. The fatherless child and the widow are to be protected against the greed of those who would deprive them of food or clothing (Dt 10:18). The defenseless are to be assisted in the marketplace, not reduced to convenient sources of profit (Lv 25:35-37). Every effort is to be made to include and welcome the disadvantaged as equals (Dt 16:11-12).

The Lord’s lifestyle (and that of His disciples) is a tacit reproach to the scribes (Lk 9:58). He is poor, lacks income, and truly depends upon assistance from the friends who maintain Him and the disciples in their ministry (Mk 15:40-41). In calling attention to the widow who offers “all the livelihood that she had” (Lk 21:3-4), Christ holds up one of the poor as an example, for she truly lives the ideals that the scribes profess.

Let us remember that the God who commands us to protect the defenseless does not alter His truth when He becomes incarnate. We must avoid falling under the denunciation directed by the Lord to the scribes and always heed His warnings concerning them. These words apply to His disciples also (v. 20:45); it is for our sake that Christ speaks and warns. Our Lord would save us from the judgment reserved for those who abuse the defenseless, saying that evil is good (Mal 2:17).

The Apostle James explains how predatory religion can overtake us: “You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures . . . . Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?” (Jas 4:2-4). Let us always remember Saint John Chrysostom’s claim that the Kingdom of God is not “bought with money . . . but by purpose of mind. There is no need for money, but of the [godly] disposition; if thou hast this thou wilt be able even by two mites to purchase heaven” (*Homily on Philippians 15*, NPNF First Series, vol. 13, p. 251).

*I, the wretched one, have destroyed Thy riches, O Lord, squandering them, and I have submitted myself to evil devils. Wherefore O most compassionate Savior, have compassion on me, purify me, the polluted one, and restore to me the first robe of Thy Kingdom.* – Orthros for the Sunday of the Prodigal Son

## February 12 – Sunday of the Prodigal Son, Tone 1

Luke 15:11-32

**True Repentance: Luke 15:11-32, especially vs. 20:** “*And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.*” In his homily on this well-known parable, Saint Cyril of Alexandria follows this Gospel passage to its beginning to “examine the occasion which led to it; for so we shall learn the truth” (*Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, p. 433). If we, like Saint Cyril, start at the beginning of chapter 15, we discover the occasion for the parable as well as the identity of those to whom it is addressed: “Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him” (vs. 1).

So far so good, for we expect that social pariahs who need to repent will make a fitting audience for a parable about forgiveness. However, in the next verse there is a surprise – the Lord does not address his parable to these lost souls. Rather, when “the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, ‘This Man receives sinners and eats with them,’” the Lord “spoke this parable to them” (vss. 2-3). He addresses the very people who object to His consorting with social outcasts.

A further surprise is that the Lord Jesus does not immediately start to tell the Parable of the Prodigal Son. First He introduces the Parable of the Shepherd who leaves His ninety-nine sheep to “go after the one which is lost until He finds it” (vs. 4). Another parable follows, this one concerning a woman who loses a valuable coin. She lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and seeks “carefully until she [found] it” (vs. 8).

Only after the Lord has twice made the point that there is “rejoicing” (vs. 5, 9) when the lost is found, does He proceed to tell the famed Parable of the (lost) Prodigal Son. In this way He prepares His listeners to appreciate the Father’s rejoicing when his son returns.

When the disgruntled scribes and Pharisees hear Jesus, that master storyteller, talk about sheep herding, they recognize subject matter based directly on the nation’s economy. Perhaps, when the shepherd leaves his flock, they imagine actual sheep herded together into a temporary fold. But as the shepherd journeys into the wilderness after His lost sheep, the Lord evokes an image of God very familiar to His listeners, who know Him as the “Shepherd of Israel” (Ps 79:1). Based on the Prophet David’s words, they are well aware that God shepherds, guards, and protects them (Ps 22:1).

The Lord Jesus’ message is startling and unmistakable: the God of Israel is coming in person, seeking the strays from His flock and gathering the lost ones to Himself. As God Incarnate stands in the wilderness in the midst of the lost souls gathered around Him, He announces to the self-righteous teachers that He seeks those who truly *know* they are lost. God enters into the wilderness of this life to infuse our desire for repentance with true hope.

Next, the Lord speaks of our need for God to illumine and cleanse us, drawing on the imagery of the lamp and the sweeping (Lk 15:8-10). Only the action the Holy Spirit can bring us to the point of repentance and change. *We* do not awaken and repent; rather, it is God who brings us to repentance. He illumines our souls and sweeps away the dust of life, and only then does the thought arise that we should return to our Father. True repentance happens because God awakens us while we are still in our spiritual pigsties.

At the end our Lord repeats His themes of gathering and rejoicing. There is no need, however, to belabor the latter point, for He has already prepared us to anticipate God’s joy. Only in verses 24-25 does He allude directly to rejoicing: “Bring the fatted calf. . . . And they began to be merry.” It is a celebration without end, for the extent of God’s love is unimaginable!

*Help us; save us; have mercy on us, O Savior, and grant us Thy gift of repentance.* – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

## February 13 – Monday of Meatfare Week (Last Judgment)

### Mark 11:1-11

**Responses to Christ’s Passion – Understanding: Mark 11:1-11, especially vs. 10:** “Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” The appointed Gospel readings for the next five days present Saint Mark’s account of the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. Mark’s narrative begins with the Lord’s regal entry into Jerusalem for what will be His last celebration of Passover. On many previous occasions the Lord Jesus had come to the Holy City, but His earlier visits had been largely private and unobtrusive. On this occasion, however, Christ’s notoriety effectively transforms His entry into a significant public event.

Why does Jesus decide to go public? “The Lord did this so that they might understand His glory if they wanted to understand,” says Blessed Theophylact, “and so that by seeing in Him the fulfillment of the prophecies, they might know that He truly is God. But if they did not wish to understand, it would be to their greater condemnation, that not even with such glorious miracles did they believe” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Mark*, p. 94).

We, too, must decide how we shall understand Jesus. Note that when he speaks of understanding, Theophylact does not refer to accumulating data and information. Rather, he focuses on Christ’s true nature and purpose, for this is what separates those whose understanding leads them to accept Jesus as Lord from those who refuse Him. Will we commit our hearts to God, or will we choose to avoid, resist, or ignore Him?

We hear echoes of this question in the writings of the prophets and apostles. For example, the Prophet Jeremiah grieves with the Lord that the people of his day “bent their tongues like a bow. Falsehood, not faith, prevails in the land. For they went from evil to evil, and have not known Me. . . . Each will mock at his friend and not speak the truth” (Jer 9:3-4).

Whenever we choose to sin and abuse our understanding, we fall into this very state ourselves. Saint Paul includes everyone under the wrath of God because they “suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. . . . Although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Rom 1:18-19, 21). Willful ignorance leads us into confusion and darkness.

Blame cannot be placed with God for our failure to understand. Even in our legal tradition, the principle of *ignorantia juris* (ignorance of the law) admits of no exception. Compassion and common sense may allow for mitigating circumstances when it comes to facts, but not in cases involving duty. According to Saint Paul, even those who never have read the Law of God “show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness” (Rom 2:15).

God reveals Himself in a manner that each person can understand. Indeed, He reveals His will through all cultures and in all periods of history. “He has shown you, O man, 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).

We may thus choose to *understand*, praying with the Prophet David, “Let my supplication draw nigh before Thee, O Lord; according to Thine oracle give me understanding” (Ps 118:169). Among those who come to welcome the Lord’s entry into Jerusalem in triumph are some who truly seek genuine knowledge of God. Let us join them in crying out, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord” (Mk 11:9)!

*O loving Christ, deliver us from the darkness of ignorance, and fill us with the stream of Thy knowledge, that we may become sons and daughters of Thine undying Light.* – Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov

## February 14 – Tuesday of Meatfare Week (Last Judgment)

Mark 14:10-42

**Responses to Christ's Passion, continued – Moments of Choice: *Saint Mark 14:10-42, especially vs. 38:*** “*Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation.*” As we approach Great Lent, these readings from Saint Mark's Gospel invite us to reflect on the Lord's Passion. We are to meditate on the sufferings and death whereby Christ our God gives us life and immortality. When Great and Holy Week comes, the Church will once again place our Savior's Passion before us, thus framing our Lenten journey.

Today's Gospel presents us with six real-life choices: to betray, obey, follow, protect ourselves, desert, or suffer with Christ. On any given day, these same choices always lie before us.

**Betrayal:** Judas, one of the most trusted disciples, sells the Lord for money (vs. 10). He approaches the chief priests in order to betray Jesus. His choice to seek out the authorities and cooperate with Christ's enemies comes at his own initiative, for these religious leaders did not come to him. Do we not face this same choice every day? We betray Christ when we compromise His truth (I have no sins to confess), commit acts of petty self-interest (I will tell a little lie to get ahead), or indulge in mindless carelessness (how fast will my new car really go?).

**Obedience:** We also choose whether or not we carry out our daily tasks thoroughly and diligently. At Jesus' bidding, two of His disciples “went out, and came into the city, and found it just as He had said to them; and they prepared the Passover” (vs. 16). Do we view our chores as God-given tasks, trying to please Him, following directions, and carrying out each detail with attention? Or do we make just enough effort to get by, looking for a quick fix without following through on the details? Do we always work and speak in order to please Him? The choice is always present.

**Following:** To follow the Lord is to remain close to Him. When the Last Supper ends and “they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives” (vs. 26). Wandering off to “do our own thing” is always an option. The apostles follow Him, even as the clouds of suffering and death are gathering. Yes, they fall asleep (vs. 37), but who among us has not discovered that “the spirit . . . is willing but the flesh is weak” (vs. 38)?

**Self-protection:** At supper the Lord tells the disciples: “All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night” (vs. 27). Sooner or later, every disciple of the Lord fails Him by pursuing his own self-interest. Were it not for the Cross and the Lord's forgiveness, His Resurrection and the gifts of the Spirit, our failings would leave us in utter despair. Save us, O Savior, from our instinct for self-protection!

**Desertion:** Like Saint Peter, we imagine ourselves to be among those who would never flee from Christ (vss. 29, 31). Yet how often do we forsake Him through the evasions of our ego (vs. 50), projecting a false self in order to avoid the crosses that inevitably come our way? Have we not “put on Christ” and chosen to stand with Him, never glossing over the truth? When others make coarse jokes about sacred matters, do we laugh? Do we go to movies or watch programs that insult the faith? Let us pray for the grace to be fiercely loyal to Christ!

**Suffering:** That night in the garden, Jesus says, “Rise, let us be going. See, My betrayer is at hand” (vs. 42). His disciples flee at that point – and yet these same followers will meet Him again, risen and alive. They will choose salvation and suffer for Him. Christ is forthright with us: “As I said to the Jews, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come’” (Jn 13:33). There is only one Savior, who tells us, “You follow Me” (vs. 21:22)!

*O Christ our Salvation, who didst suffer in pity for mankind, save us who cry unto Thee.* – Great and Holy Thursday Orthros

**February 15 – Wednesday of Meatfare Week (Last Judgment)**

**Mark 14:43-15:1**

**Responses to Christ's Passion, continued – I Denied Thee! *Mark 14:43-15:1.*** Lord Jesus, I behold a great crowd coming with swords and clubs. I see its raw and brutal power, but I cannot move; I can only watch. It is wrong and perverted. Why does Judas lead them to Thee? How dare he? This night must be a bad dream; it cannot be real. Listen to him say, "Rabbi, Rabbi," and even greet Thee with a kiss! *O Lord, God of our Fathers, save us!*

Men put their impure hands on God's pure One. Let there be no bloodshed – the Master does not want it so. Put back thy sword, for it is not His way. Please, Lord, stop them! Why do they appear at night, as if Thou wast a robber? Why do they not answer Thee? Take away all these swords and clubs! Did these men not hear Thee in the Temple? Do they not see the hand of our Almighty God upon Thee? Are they coming after all one of us? *Lord Jesus, save me!*

Thou saidst that they would beat us in their councils and synagogues. They have taken Thee, Master – let them not take me, too! *Save me, O God, by Thy Name.* Where can I hide? I am utterly naked. O God of my Master, let no harm come upon Him! *Lord, forgive me. I am a sinner.* I am afraid. I have deserted Thee. *Lord, have mercy!*

See, they have taken Him to the high priest's residence. All of the chief priests are inside with the elders and scribes. What are they going to do next? Peter has gone into the courtyard – maybe he can find out what is happening. He had better be careful, or perhaps they will take him, too. What a terrible night! Who could believe this could happen? You warned us, Lord. *O God, who didst deliver our fathers at the Red Sea, save and help us we humbly beseech Thee!*

Look, Peter is talking to one of the servant girls. Why is he shaking his head? She must suspect that he is one of us. May God who watcheth over all keep thee safe, my brother. What does the servant ask thee now, Peter? He has upset thee. Now Peter seems angry, and yet He comes out weeping. What does he know?

Peter, my beloved brother, our Master trusted thee above all. And yet I too ran away. We all are seized with fear. Yes, thou didst say that thou wouldst die with Him, but remember – we all denied Him. We ran like startled sheep once the Shepherd had been taken. Now they have stricken Him. Do you hear? Dawn is coming with the rooster's crow. I love thee, my brother. I weep with thee.

What word is there from the Council? What are they doing? Is He safe? No, say it is not true! They cannot be trying Him! The witnesses lie! He never said He would destroy the Temple, only that the Temple would be destroyed. They must not condemn Him for that! Let them be truthful, and then they cannot condemn Him. Not even their paid witnesses agree!

Did He tell them openly that He is the Christ? Then they should have believed Him. They think He has blasphemed God, but they are the ones who have gone too far. When will He come in power on the clouds of Heaven? When He does, it will be their turn to hide. How long will He permit them to blaspheme God, to spit on Him, beat Him, condemn Him? *Forgive us, O Holy One!*

Look, here comes the Master. *Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord.* They are bringing Him out, bound like a criminal. Why does He permit this to happen? Can He not stop them, just as He stopped the storm at sea? Where will they take Him now? They handle Him so roughly. Oh, no, they cannot be taking Him to Pilate's headquarters. Not for death, Lord Jesus, not for death!

*Refrain not Thyself, O God, but save us!*

## February 16 – Thursday of Meatfare Week (Last Judgment)

### Mark 15:1-15

**Responses to Christ's Passion, continued – A Good Confession: Mark 15:1-15, especially vs. 5:** “*But Jesus still answered nothing, so that Pilate marveled.*” As his labors for Christ are drawing to a close, the Apostle Paul encourages Timothy, his young protégé in the faith, by reminding him of the Lord's “good confession” (1 Tm 6:13) before Pilate. Saint Paul's words also apply to our own manner of life as Christians. Before the tribunal of the world, we are to follow our Lord's example so that we may be found “without spot, blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ's appearing” (vs. 14).

We do so, according to Saint Paul's advice, by fleeing *foolish and harmful lusts* (vss. 9, 11), by *pursuing righteousness* (vs. 11), and by fighting the *good fight of faith* and laying hold on eternal life (vs. 12). These are among the elements of the Lord's “good confession before Pilate” that cause the Roman procurator to marvel.

The most striking aspect of our Lord's demeanor, both in His all-night trial before the Sanhedrin and before Pilate the next morning, is His self-restraint. He displays a holy freedom from the passions. In answering nothing (Mk 14:61) to the flood of accusations, our Incarnate God offers us the eloquence of restrained silence. Through his passionless Passion, He speaks a word of calm laced with judgment against all human sin and passion.

Many questions are asked of the Lord during these two trials. He either remains silent or answers with concise brevity. When the high priest asks, “Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” (vs. 51), He answers, “I am” (vs. 62), describing also His future glory. When Pilate asks, “Are You the King of the Jews?” He answers, “It is as you say.” (vs. 15:2).

Other than these few words He remains silent, indicating His freedom from the passions and even of the need to defend His life. He has no lust for power, no concern about making His point nor proving His enemies wrong. As we are cleansed of the passions, God will bless us with peace and calm, even during the most agitating situations.

Is it possible to imagine anyone more righteous than Christ, or to picture a time when His righteousness is more evident than during His trials and Crucifixion? Our hearts join with Jeremiah in calling Christ Jesus “the Lord our Righteousness” (Jer 23:6; in Hebrew, *Josedec*). Most striking in the entire Passion account is the serenity of our Savior and God, even as intrigue, betrayal, mob rule, and injustice rage around Him.

As we read through the Passion narratives, we marvel at the Lord Jesus' all-pervading ability to stand above what happens. Indeed, Christ our God is moving events steadily forward for the salvation of mankind. We understand Him to be the “producer” of His ministry and the “director” of its scenes, including even His arrest, trials, and execution.

The Evangelist Luke records this turning point in his Gospel: “When the time had come for Him to be received up . . . He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem” (Lk 9:51). Unremittingly, Christ our God prosecutes the cause of righteousness for our salvation. The Lord's fellow human beings appear as the supporting cast, taking part in their scenes as assigned and then exiting the stage as others arrive to pursue their ends.

Lastly, we observe how the Lord fights the “good fight of faith” (1 Tm 6:12). The Sanhedrin's members believe they are ridding the world of blasphemy (Mk 14:64) and ensuring the triumph of the true faith. No, Christ Jesus wins the battle, for He lays hold of eternal life for every mortal who puts his faith in Him.

Perhaps Pontius Pilate took comfort in his achievement of maintaining the *Pax Romana* in the face of a frenzied mob. After all, how much did the life of one harmless Jewish teacher matter? And yet he lost his own great chance for eternal life. Christ offers this life to us through His good fight on the Cross and His great victory over death.

*Glory to Thee O Savior, who didst trample down death by death and bestow life upon all.* – From the Paschal Hymn



## February 17 – Friday of Meatfare Week (Last Judgment)

Mark 15:22-25, 33-41

**Responses to Christ's Passion, continued – Kindness: Mark 15: 22-25, 33-41, especially vs. 36:** “Then someone ran and filled a sponge full of sour wine, put it on a reed, and offered it to Him to drink, saying, ‘Let Him alone; let us see if Elijah will come to take Him down.’” The Lord Jesus embodies kindness and compassion to those in need. He restores a demon-possessed man to his right mind, stops a woman’s issue of blood, feeds hungry crowds, restores sight to the blind, heals lepers, enables the lame to walk, forgives sinners, embraces children, and returns the departed to their bereaved families. He reserves His scorn for the proud, the self-righteous, the power-hungry, the callous, and the indifferent among us.

In response, people show love to Him. His disciples attend to His welfare (Mt 26:35). Mary of Bethany anoints His head “for the day of [His] burial” (Jn 12:7). Even during His Passion, He elicits a heartening act of kindness from the good thief. Although he shares the same sentence of death on an adjoining cross, the good thief seeks to restrain the bitter tongue of his criminal accomplice on the third cross (Lk 23:40-41). He expresses his faith in the Lord Jesus, with no earthly motive compelling him, when he cries out, “Remember me when You come into Your kingdom” (vs. 42).

In the present reading from Saint Mark’s Gospel, we find four more examples of kindness shown to Him at His Passion. First, there is the compassion of a soldier in the execution squad and an unknown person in the crowd, then the steadfast witness of the centurion and the dedication of a small group of women who support His ministry.

When the Roman soldiers escort the Lord Jesus to Golgotha, the crucifixion site, one of the squad offers Him wine laced with myrrh to drink (Mk 15:23). Were the Lord to consume this narcotic concoction, it surely would have deadened His pain, creating a mood of euphoria and perhaps shortening His suffering. The soldier’s act reveals a profound degree of human kindness, and recalls Jesus’ promise that anyone who gives Him drink when He is thirsty – or “[does] it to one of the least of these My brethren” – will inherit the Kingdom (Mt 25:35, 40). Thank God, such kind gestures still happen daily across the globe.

For three long hours our Lord endures not only physical agony, but also the mockery of the passersby (Mk 15:29-33). At the ninth hour He cries out (vs. 34) and “someone ran and filled a sponge full of sour wine, put it on a reed and offered it to Him to drink” (vs. 36). This small act of kindness mirrors that of the soldier. Shortly afterwards, the Lord dies. God bless every act of kindness!

Tradition tells us that the centurion in charge of the squad of soldiers was named Longinos. The gift of faith enables him to say, “Truly this Man was the Son of God!” (vs. 39). The elders later try to bribe him, so that he will report that the body was stolen from the tomb. He refuses and seeks baptism, only to be hunted down and later martyred. Thank God for all who tell the truth steadfastly and kindly.

Finally, the loyal women who will become myrrh-bearers stand by while the Lord suffers (vss. 40-41). After His death, with the Sabbath ended, they come to the tomb in one last gesture of love, ready to anoint His body and bid Him farewell as best they can (vs. 14:1).

God bless those who clean up the pain and grief of the world without seeking recognition, for their sorrow, too, will turn to joy. May God grant us the grace to relieve suffering as we are able, offer gestures of comfort to those in need, tell the truth with love, and assuage the world’s pain whenever we meet it. And may the Lord say to us, “Come you blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom” (Mt 25:34).

*O Lord, constrain my heart to love friends and enemies, and shouldest Thou see in me the tiniest spark of kindness or love, fill it with grace sufficient for salvation – mine and others.* – Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov

## February 18 – Saturday of Meatfare Week (Last Judgment)

Luke 21:8-9, 25-27, 33-36

**Great Glory: Luke 21:8-9, 25-27, 33-36, especially vs. 27:** “Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” How often we hear this hymn of praise to the Holy Trinity: “Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: both now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen!” This hymn is called a doxology (in Greek, *doxa* means glory or praise, ascribed here to our Triune God). We sing and chant this hymn to bring “unto the Lord the glory due unto His Name” (Ps 28:2).

What is the nature of this glory that we constantly strive to bring to the Lord? We are in fact praising what is already God’s very nature. This *great glory* will be seen by all men when Christ returns.

Holy Scripture associates God’s glory with *theophany*, or an appearance of God. Theophany literally means “a giving or bringing of God’s light.” At the moment of theophany God does not disclose His essence, but rather the energies coming from His essence: light, love, power, and truth. We men do not see God directly, for He teaches us that “no man can see My face and live” (Ex 33:20). Man the creature and God the Creator are incomparable: “‘For My counsels are not as your counsels, neither are your ways My ways,’ says the Lord. ‘But as heaven is distant from earth, so is My way distant from your ways, and your thoughts from My mind’” (Is 55:8-9).

Theophanies are often associated with a cloud, fire, light, and/or a voice. These forms are spoken of as “the glory of the Lord” (Nm 16:19). However, even God’s energies overwhelm those who perceive their power and majesty during theophanies (Dt 5:23-27, Acts 22:9-11). God must modulate His appearances so that His creatures are able to receive them. In other words, He limits his glory to a level tolerable to our impure hearts, minds, and eyes.

Throughout the Book of Exodus, the people of Israel experience theophanies. We read: “The whole congregation of the children of Israel . . . looked toward the desert, and behold, the Lord’s glory appeared in the cloud. Then the Lord spoke to Moses” (Ex 16:10-11). Such spectacles were surely awe-inspiring, for “the sight of the Lord’s glory was like a burning fire on the top of the mountain before the children of Israel” (vs. 24:17).

Theophanies take ordinary men far beyond their spiritual depth. “Now therefore, let us not die, because this great fire will destroy us; and if we continue to hear the voice of the Lord our God any more, we shall die. For who of flesh heard the voice of the living God speaking from the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived?” (Dt 5:25-26).

Likewise, when the Lord reveals His glory on Mount Tabor, the disciples are rendered “heavy with sleep; and when they were fully awake, they saw His glory, and the two men who stood with Him” (Lk 9:32).

When God imparts a message, He reveals His glory. Often, what He communicates concerns both His judgment and salvation. When the Lord Jesus speaks of His return, He announces that the Son of Man will come “with power and great glory. . . . Heaven and earth will pass away” (Lk. 21:27, 33). These words hold a warning, but also offer hope: “Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things . . . and to stand before the Son of Man” (vs. 36). The Lord’s final, great theophany will fall like a snare “on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth” (vs. 35).

*As I remember the terrible Day of Judgment, and Thy dark, ineffable glory, I tremble altogether, O Dread Lord, crying to Thee in fear, O Christ God, deliver me from all punishments, and make me worthy to sit at Thy right hand, O Master.* – Verse from the Sunday of the Last Judgment

**February 19 – Meatfare Sunday – the Last Judgment, Tone 2**  
**Matthew 25:31-46**

**The Uncalculating Heart: Matthew 25:31-46, especially vss. 37-39:** “Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’” It is a blessed day when we, with dread recognition, finally look inside our souls and confess that we are starving, thirsty, naked, shame-ridden, sick at heart, and imprisoned by our passions.

The Lord teaches us in the Beatitudes to consider such destitution a blessed state (Mt 5:3-12). Like Saint Mary of Egypt, we experience alienation from Life because we are unable to reach Christ. When we become “poor in spirit,” there remains for us only to cry out, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner.”

Out of this emptiness, the blessed will discover the way to the Lover of mankind. As they inch toward Him, He directs them along the narrow trail of repentance. He steadies us with His gracious hand, gives us the Bread of Life, and slakes our parching thirst. He becomes clothing, healing, and freedom – the true Friend who saves.

What will the man who is poor in spirit do when he meets a fellow sufferer along the way? Naturally, he shares what he has. He gives to others simply because there is a need. He does not calculate, but simply responds, always remembering to feed and to forgive. Yes, he will share whatever he has.

Saint Martin of Tours was a Roman soldier who served in the army solely to please his father. After he discovered Christian faith, Saint Martin became a catechumen. One winter day, on his way to the city, a beggar stopped him to ask for alms. Saint Martin had no money, but he could see that the beggar was shivering and blue with cold. He took off the cloak of his uniform, cut it in half with his saber, and gave one half to the beggar before he went into the city.

Of such saints, Blessed Theophylact says that “they deny, with befitting modesty, that they have cared for Him” (*Explanation of the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, p. 219). Very simply, the saints do not calculate what they give. They are too preoccupied with their gratitude and love for the Lord.

Yesterday’s Gospel focused on the majesty of the Lord at His Second Coming. An inescapable aspect of that future glory will be the judgment of all men. What will the Lord look for when He judges us? He will not review how many alms we distributed to charity, nor our work in prison ministry. It is dangerous to seek assurance from our investment in such activities. “And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love,” warns Saint Paul, “it profits me nothing” (1 Cor 13:3).

In the present passage from Saint Matthew, the Lord Jesus sets forth His criteria for judgment: He will look for our love, delight, and gratitude. Will he find His light flowering in our hearts? Do we love, or do we merely calculate?

“The purer the heart becomes, the larger it becomes,” says Saint John of Kronstadt, “[and] consequently it is able to find room for more and more loved ones” (*Spiritual Counsels*, p. 183). It is all too easy to forget the plight of the poor, the neglected, the homeless, the destitute, the old, the sick, and the brokenhearted. Were not the Lord to heal our hearts, there would be no capacity in us at all to love. God help us!

*I have no life, no light, no joy or wisdom; no strength except in Thee, O God. Enable me at all times to speak and act to Thy glory, with a pure spirit, with humility, patience, love, gentleness, peace, courage, and wisdom.* – Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov

## February 20 – Monday of Cheesefare Week (Expulsion from Paradise)

Luke 19:29-40; 22:7-39

**Fasting – Finding Gratitude: Luke 19:29-40, 22:7-39, especially vss. 22:28-30:** “*But you are those who have continued with Me in My trials. And I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as My Father bestowed one upon Me, that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*” Today we begin fasting from all flesh meats, taking one small step toward the asceticism of Great Lent. During this week, we meditate on seven readings which strengthen us for the Lenten Fast. Each passage considers a spiritual aspect of fasting: gratitude, strength, repentance, dying with Christ, the age to come, piety, and the essentials of ascetic labor.

Orthodox fasting derives its distinctive nature from the Church’s knowledge of God. For the faithful, fasting is connected to the Incarnation of Christ our God, His saving Death and Resurrection, and the illuminating presence of the Holy Spirit. Gratitude – for what God has accomplished, is accomplishing, and will accomplish – always comes before our ascetical efforts.

The role of joy, praise, and gratitude to the Lord is evident during Forgiveness Vespers, which marks our full transition, a week from now, to Lenten asceticism and our efforts to defeat vice and develop virtue within ourselves. During that service we softly sing the Paschal Canon. The time for penitential sorrow has come, yet we offer the beautiful hymn of praise from the Paschal Liturgy with its joyous announcement: “Christ is risen from the dead.”

The singing of the Paschal Canon actually takes place while the faithful are asking forgiveness of one another. The last verse of the Canon inspires us with its command to “embrace one another”: “Let us speak, brothers, even unto those who hate us, and forgive all for the sake of the Resurrection.”

The Resurrection alters our perception of life and of every activity that takes place in the created order. We Orthodox Christians never enter the fast in a purely penitential mode; we are always aware of the joyful reality of Christ’s Resurrection.

This irrepressible joy can be found in the Passion narratives. Our hearts gratefully anticipate the Lord’s coming victory when we hear the crowds praising Jesus of Nazareth as He rides into Jerusalem (Lk 19:38). We cannot read the account of the Lord’s Last Supper in isolation from the eucharistic gratitude we find in the Divine Liturgy (vs. 22:16). We fast gratefully, knowing that our personal betrayal and denial of Christ are overcome (vss. 21-23, 33-34). We are strengthened by knowing that “the things concerning Me have an end” (vs. 37), for the end is revealed in His Resurrection.

Because we died with Christ and are buried with Him, we also live with Him (Rom 6:8). His Resurrection frees us from sin, enabling us to have “fruit to holiness and the end, everlasting life” (vs. 22), for which we are deeply grateful. The risen Lord empowers us to rule over our passions and to fast from sin, just as we practice material abstinence.

Withdrawing from earthly things whets our spiritual appetite for Christ’s heavenly gifts. We gratefully experience the same nourishment He describes to His disciples at Sychar in Samaria: “I have food to eat of which you do not know” (Jn 4:32). Orthodox fasting never devalues earthly things, but in a spirit of gratitude restores them to their true function within God’s good creation.

*O Christ our God, who alone art sinless and hast risen from the dead, Glory to Thee who hast given us fasting to quench the uprisings of passions and to reconcile us to Thee!* – Orthros for Forgiveness Sunday

**February 21 – Tuesday of Cheesefare Week (Expulsion from Paradise)**

**Luke 22:39-42, 45-23:1**

**Fasting – Finding Strength: Luke 22:39-42, 45-23:1, especially vs. 69:** “Hereafter the Son of Man will sit on the right hand of the power of God.” Whipped, lashed, blindfolded, blasphemed, and mocked, the Lord Jesus stands in the midst of those who would bring Him to trial. He declares that He will soon assume the full “power of God” – that is, God the Father. He manifests amazing restraint and exhibits strength of will, heart, and soul. Such is the strength He offers us even now, along with the *power of God* hereafter (vs. 69).

Fasting helps attain this strength. We must learn to look beyond the incidental weakening of the body which occurs when we fast. Ascetic practices are designed to help us defeat vice and develop virtue. Their primary purpose is to foster in us the strength of “the kingdom of God and His righteousness” (Mt 6:33).

According to Bishop Kallistos Ware, fasting “is directed, not against the body, but against the flesh. Its aim is not destructively to weaken the body, but creatively to render the body more spiritual” (*The Orthodox Way*, p. 156). By fasting, we seek to restore the natural powers that God intends for our spirits, souls, and bodies. We gain strength when we exercise restraint over uncontrolled lusts, appetites, and provocations.

The present passage from Saint Mark starts in the Garden of Gethsemane and concludes with the Sanhedrin setting out to obtain an order from Pilate for Jesus’ execution. As we observe our Lord in the early stages of His Passion, we discern the kind of power that God intends for us to gain. The means to this strength include fasting and prayer, which help us overcome temptation, and a stance of meekness before the powers of darkness. Only by these means do we achieve health of spirit, which enables us to stand before the opponents of God just as our Lord did. When God’s life flows through ours, we, too, may witness to the human potential that God gives.

When he first comes to the Garden, the Lord Jesus urges his disciples – including us – to “pray that you may not enter into temptation” (Lk 22:40). However, the eleven were unable to sustain their prayers at this critical time, even when the Lord kindly repeats His admonition (vs. 46). The reason, the evangelist reports, is because they are “sleeping from sorrow” (vs. 45). After the Lord Jesus’ warnings, the disciples are overcome with sorrow at the prospect of His blood being shed, His betrayal (vss. 20-22), and their own imminent failure to stand with Him (vss. 31-34) when He is “numbered with the transgressors” (vs. 37).

As we prepare to empower our lives by fasting, the disciples’ failure to pray reminds us that true strength comes only from God. We restrain our desires in the confidence that God is in charge of events, past, present, and future, including those that involve His Son. Temptation and its accompanying sorrow will gradually subside as the strength of God grows within us.

Indeed, fasting strengthens our spirits to meet the power of darkness with the same God-given meekness and inner strength that the Lord Jesus displays when the authorities arrest Him (vss. 47-54). He permits Judas’ kiss (vss. 47-48). He halts all resistance by the disciples with a command (vs. 51). He immediately heals the servant of the High Priest (vs. 51) and allows the officials to arrest Him and lead Him away (vs. 54).

Those whose hearts are empowered by Christ and God’s infinite love are able to stand pure and strong amidst terrible circumstances. That is true strength! Fasting may reveal our human weaknesses, but more importantly, it shows us Christ’s almighty strength. Fasting helps make us indomitable before the opponents of the faith. After Jesus’ arrest, even Peter’s strength fails. Yet by the Lord’s power we can find the strength to face such assaults, as Peter does later.

*O Compassionate One, help us to hasten to the subjugation of the flesh by abstinence as we approach the divine battlefield of blameless fasting, and shower us with forgiveness.* – Forgiveness Vespers

## February 22 – Wednesday of Cheesefare Week (Expulsion from Paradise)

Joel 2:12-26

**Fasting – Repentance and Changes: Joel 2:12-26, especially vs.** “*Rend your hearts, and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for He is merciful and compassionate. He is long-suffering, and plenteous in mercy, and repents of evils.*” At a minimal level, we understand fasting as limiting the types of food we eat and the quantities of sleep and other pleasures we enjoy. However, as Father Georges Florovsky notes, “Asceticism does not consist of prohibitions. Asceticism is activity, a *working out*, a perfection of oneself . . . inspired by the task of inspiration” (Akakios, *Fasting in the Orthodox Church*, p. 49).

Fasting directs our attention to sinful deeds, but we benefit most when it also prompts us to repudiate the thoughts that precede sinful acts. The significance of evil thoughts is twofold. First, wicked thoughts work inward corruption in the heart; secondly, they result in sinful actions and consequences. Among the consequences that follow from our evil thoughts and actions are the divine judgments meted out to us.

Because sinful thoughts and actions are equally repugnant to God, the Prophet Joel teaches us to *rend our hearts* when we turn to God the Lord. In this reading, the Lord kindly invites us to heartfelt repentance and promises to “restore to you the years the grasshopper and the locust have eaten, and for the blight, and the caterpillar” (vs. 25).

We pay a heavy price for unrestrained evil thoughts and passions. Like locusts, they eat up our hearts and souls. Here is how Saint Gregory of Nyssa summarizes the process: “Man was a thing divine before his humanity got within reach of the assault of evil . . . then, however, with the inroad of evil . . . afflictions broke in upon him” (“On the Soul and Resurrection,” NPNF Second Series, vol. 5, p. 564).

Our passions turn into a destructive swarm of marauding insects: wrath, fear, cowardice, impudence, depression, indulgence, hatred, strife, cruelty, envy, flattery, brutality, and brooding over injuries. The Prophet Joel likens these swarming passions to conquering nations who desolate our *inheritance* in Christ (vs. 17). The image of God in us becomes despoiled, but the Lord promises to drive away the adversary (vs. 26) and restore the things necessary for life (vs. 24).

Our loving Lord specifically connects fasting to repentance: “Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting and wailing and with mourning; rend your heart and not your garments” (vss. 12-13). He holds up repentance, as one would an icon of promise, to encourage us. Let the priests sound the trumpet and gather God’s people (vs. 15), and let even newlyweds set aside their nuptial joy (vs. 16). Let God’s people weep for their inward and outward sins, crying, “O Lord, spare Your people, do not give Your inheritance to reproach” (vs. 17).

God declares that He will turn His “face away from [our] sins, and blot out all [our] iniquities” (Ps 50:9). He desires “not the death of the sinner,” but that we should repent and live. He is “merciful and compassionate. . . long-suffering and plenteous in mercy and repents of evils” (Joel 2:13). The Lord is inviting us to embrace the coming Great Fast; we are to “be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God, for He gives food that is right for you” (vs. 23).

Joel declares God’s promises: “He will shower you as before with the early and the late rain” (vs. 23). If we sow well in our hearts, He will “restore to [us] the years” eaten away by our sins (vs. 25). According to Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, “Repentance . . . in deep mourning and joined with confession is what unveils the eyes of the soul to see the great things of God” (*Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 142).

Repentance holds the promise of Great Lent. Let us pursue it diligently so we are able to “praise the name of the Lord [our] God for what He has so wondrously done unto [us]” (vs. 26).

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

**February 23 – Thursday of Cheesefare Week (Expulsion from Paradise)**  
**Luke 23:2-34, 44-56 – First Reading at Vespers**

**Fasting – Dying with Christ: Luke 23:2-34, 44-56, especially vs. 49:** “*But all His acquaintances, and the women who followed Him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.*” Despite their fears at the time of Jesus’ arrest, His disciples do not die with Him. They watch His execution from a distance, dying within themselves. We too may *die* with Christ if we, despite our distance from him, revere His Passion and die with Him through fasting.

Take note, as Saint Athanasios urges us, of “how much a fast can do, and in what manner the law commands us to fast. It is required that not only with the body should we fast, but with the soul. The soul is humbled when it does not follow wicked opinions, but feeds on becoming [i.e., pleasing] virtues. For virtues and vices are the food of the soul, and it can eat either . . . of the two, according to its own will. . . . Such was the case with our Lord, who said, ‘My meat is to do the will of My Father which is in heaven’ (Jn 4:34)” (*Paschal Letter* 1.5, *NPNF* Second Series, vol. 4, p. 508).

As we humble ourselves through fasting, let our chief food be God’s will. Indeed, fasting can be a “little death” of our own choice, for we find life by dying to our passions of body and soul. We choose to die because we long to join the Lord at His heavenly table, partaking of the will of our Father in heaven. Let us briefly explore how we undertake this dying with the Lord Jesus in order to receive His life.

Caiaphas, the high priest, brings the Lord Jesus to Pilate to have Him condemned to death. Caiaphas understands it is “expedient . . . one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish” (Jn 11:50). The leadership of the Jews fears Jesus, believing that His ministry will create unrest and bring down reprisals by the Romans. Flush with power over the Lord, who is now blindfolded and bound, the Sanhedrin “mocked . . . and beat Him” (Lk 22:63).

If we are to truly follow the Lord, we are often required, like our Lord, to “turn the other [cheek]” (Mt 5:39), forgiving those who wrong us. This humility comes about through fasting if we approach it as an opportunity to incline *downwards* in favor of the will of our Father who is *above* in heaven.

Although Pilate is under pressure (Lk 23:2-5, 11-22), he is inclined to release Jesus. However, the voice of the Sanhedrin is insistent and finally prevails (vs. 23). Pilate finds in Jesus a good man with no faults, and yet to keep order he acquiesces to these leaders rather than risk a tumult (Mt 27:24). If we, in our fasting, would die with Him, we must find more in Christ Jesus than a *good man*; we must find the Savior.

When the Lord Jesus “answered him nothing” (Lk 23:9), Herod is contemptuous; he is looking for entertaining miracles. To die with Jesus Christ, it is necessary for us to find in Him more than someone who interests or diverts us for a time. Truly, when we perceive that He is Life and our full restoration to God, we are willing to risk the fasting that allows us to die with Him.

The centurion commanding the execution squad spends three hours at the Cross, watching the death of Christ. Seeing all that takes place, he is transformed. Although he initially mocked Jesus (vs. 37), he now perceives “a righteous Man” (vs. 47). He is later baptized and martyred, understanding that it is “better to be an outcast with Christ . . . and to labor in solitude for God” (*Lives of the Saints*, vol. II, p. 249) than to remain with those who disdain the Lord.

Likewise, Saint Joseph of Arimathea “had not consented” with the Sanhedrin (vs. 51), for he was a *good and just man* (vs. 50). Through fasting, may we too become good and just, never standing in opposition to the Lord.

*I beseech Thee to purify me with Thy showers of forgiveness and lighten me with fasting.* – Forgiveness Vespers

**February 24 – First & Second Discoveries: Head of the Forerunner  
Saint Matthew 11:2-15**

**Preparing the Way: Saint Matthew 11:2-15, especially vss. 2, 3:** “*And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, ‘Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?’*” Saint John the Forerunner dedicated his life and ministry to prepare men for belief in Christ, the ‘*Coming One*,’ the universal Savior of the world as foretold by the Prophets of old. While a babe in the womb of his mother, Elizabeth, John “...leaped...for joy” (Lk. 1:44) at the presence of the infant Jesus within the womb of *His* mother, the Maiden Mary. As Saint Theophylact of Bulgaria notes: “John was more than a Prophet because the early Prophets foretold Christ, but he was an eyewitness.” It was as adults that the earlier Prophets foretold the wonder of Christ, while John, yet unborn, recognized the Lamb of God and leapt. Later, as a grown man preaching and baptizing, John remained urgent to prepare everyone who would listen, knowing that the unrecognized Messiah would soon appear to “...baptize...with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Mt. 3:11).

When Jesus actually “...came...to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him...John tried to prevent Him” (Mt. 3:14), acknowledging instead his personal need to be baptized by Christ. Notice carefully the words of the Lord Jesus that moved the Forerunner to take the actual step of baptizing the Lord: “...it is fitting for *us* to fulfill all righteousness” (Mt. 3:15). Observe that Christ invited John to participate in the Divine ministry of man’s salvation, saying “...it is fitting for *us*,” for you [John] and Me together, to carry out this baptism. The whole synergy of human salvation was displayed even as Jesus was baptized, because John’s participation was sought and engaged - as the Evangelist shows: “Then he allowed Him” (Mt. 3:15). Saint John consistently maintained his God-given ministry of preparing men to receive and believe in Christ, for the day after the Lord’s baptism, “...looking at Jesus as He walked, he said, ‘Behold the Lamb of God’” (Jn. 1:36). Two of his own disciples heard him “...and they followed Jesus” (Jn. 1:37).

In the present passage from Saint Matthew, the same cooperative commitment is evident in John. In prison, anticipating his likely execution, the Forerunner sends yet two more disciples to Jesus with a question for them to ask, *undoubtedly for their benefit*: “Are You the ‘Coming One,’ or do we look for another?” (Mt. 11:3). As Saint Jerome points out: “John asks this not because he is ignorant but to guide others who are ignorant and to say to them, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, Who takes away the sin of the world.’” At the threshold of his own death, the Forerunner sustains his effort to labor in the synergy of salvation. Concerning this final mission by the Forerunner’s two disciples, Saint Jerome says explicitly: “...when John was about to be killed by Herod, he sent his disciples to Christ, intending that when they met Him, the disciples would observe His appearance and powers and believe in Him.”

Let us confess the truth in the Forerunner’s ministry of preparation. This day we should prepare the way of the Lord like Saint John. Use iconography, Scripture and the Church’s prayers, and “...let us commend ourselves and each other, and all our life unto Christ our God.” May our words and actions show that we seek and know Christ Jesus as the ‘*Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world*’ (Jn. 1:29). May the action of Christ’s grace in our Baptism break down whatever sin remains in us to the glory of the Lord and the salvation of many. Like Saint John, we can live in the spirit of Elijah to reveal that all things are new!

*O Forerunner of Christ, may we, with thee, glorify Christ Who bowed His head to thee sanctifying the nature of man. And do thou implore Him to grant our souls the Great Mercy.*



## February 25 – Saturday of Cheesefare Week (Expulsion from Paradise)

### Matthew 6:1-13

**Fasting – The Pitfalls of Piety: Saint Matthew 6:1-13, especially vs. 1:** “Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven.” The earliest manuscripts use the Greek word *dikaiosune* (piety) in verse one rather than *elemosune* or “charitable deeds,” which does not appear until the second verse. The more generic term *piety* actually provides a better introduction to chapter six because it encompasses the Lord’s teaching about three devout practices: charity (vss. 2-4), prayer (vss. 5-15), and fasting (vss. 16-18). As we pursue these pious actions, we must be vigilant against vainglory to ensure that our efforts are directed toward obtaining heavenly treasure (vss. 19-21).

Blessed Theophylact underscores the seriousness of the Lord’s warning against vainglory: “See what He says: ‘Take heed,’ as if speaking of some terrible, wild beast. Take heed that it not tear you limb from limb” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, p. 56).

Let us be wary of the crouching beast of vainglory, always ready to spring and devour us! If we fall into the habit of measuring ourselves against others, such comparisons serve to prepare our souls to accept vainglory as something natural. The world, of course, urges us to take pride in our accomplishments without a moment’s thought for God. We never stop to consider who gave us every ability, strength, and capacity that we possess!

The serious Christian faces another danger. Out of devotion to the Lord, we seek to do well, give generously, pray fervently, and fast strictly. But as we practice righteousness, what happens to our humility? According to Saint John Chrysostom, “the most tyrannical passion of all, the rage and madness with respect to vainglory . . . springs up in them that do right” (*NPNF First Series*, p. 130). Vainglory is like a raging virus that mutates into the worst kind of self-congratulation. As soon as we are tempted to believe we have become humble, we are indeed worse than the Pharisee.

Our compassionate Lord knows it is difficult for us to practice piety while keeping our focus solely on Him. “Our heart often sleeps,” Saint John of Kronstadt explains. “The outer man prays, but not the inner one . . . we only flatter with our tongue” (*Spiritual Counsels*, p. 40).

How do we sustain an awareness of God’s presence? The Lord Jesus offers us specific guidance in these verses. First, let our charitable giving be discreet and private (vss. 3-4). We must also pray in secret (vs. 6) and occupy our hearts with prayer constantly (vss. 7-8). Finally, the Lord gives us His own prayer (“Our Father”) as a sure guide and weapon against vainglory. This prayer sustains us as we lift our hearts to Him.

Whom do we seek to please, other than our Father in Heaven, with our offerings, prayers, and fasting? *Our Father*, Thou hast provided the perfect Offering for the sins of the whole world. Christ, the infallible intercessor, prays for us; He is the champion of fasting who defeated Satan through His own hunger. Accept our imperfect piety and make it perfect in Him.

Let us hallow Thy name in every thought and word, and in every one of our deeds. *Hallowed be Thy name* above every name that is named. Do we pursue acts of piety to further Thy Kingdom, or simply to increase our reputation? O Compassionate One, forgive our impiety and may *Thy Kingdom come* in us!

Thou hast asked us to give, to pray, to fast. May we do so only for Thee! We need *our daily bread*, but above all we need the Bread of Life. Receive our thanks, for all things come from Thee! *Forgive us our debts*, although we do not deserve it, for we are hopelessly in debt to Thee for all things. *Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory* unto the ages of ages!

*By the power of Thy love, grant us to hold fast to that which is good in Thy sight.* – Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov

**February 26 – Cheesefare Sunday (Expulsion from Paradise; Forgiveness Sunday), Tone 3**  
**Matthew 6:14-21**

**Three Essentials of Fasting: *Matthew 6: 14-21, especially vss. 17-18:*** “*But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place. . . .*” In this passage the Lord outlines three conditions of true fasting: forgiveness (vss. 14-15), accountability (vss. 16-18), and readiness for combat with the enemy (vss. 19-21).

Two matters concerning *forgiveness* must be settled prior to commencing the Lenten Fast: our need to be forgiven and our need to forgive. The aim of the fast is to assist us in embracing the Lord’s “propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world” (1 Jn 2:2) which does cleanse “from all unrighteousness” (vs. 1:9). God calls us to repent and confess (Acts 3:19), for He forgives when we forgive. And “if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Mt 6:15).

This very evening, at Forgiveness Vespers, we have an opportunity to begin the Fast by cleaning the slate – seeking and offering forgiveness. If we do so, we shall profit from the days of the Great Fast with their self-examination, repentance, and confession.

As for *accountability*, we must remember that we are called to fast by our Master. He defines the Great Fast and how we carry it out. We must not to blur His goals and procedures. The Lenten fast is a secret between us and God. For this reason the Lord commands us to “anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting” (vss. 17-18).

If we exhibit penitence and contrition – if we “appear to men to be fasting” (vs. 16) – we fall into temptation from Satan. Displaying our asceticism realigns our motives in the direction of seeking the approval of our peers. Let us purify ourselves and labor where God *alone* sees, in the hidden areas of our heart.

“Do the Christian hypocrites . . . think that they . . . live hypocritically?” asks Saint John of Kronstadt. “They do not think so.” His words on prayer also apply to fasting: “They [fast] daily, perhaps at length; but . . . out of habit . . . not with their hearts, without heartfelt contrition, without a firm desire for amendment, and only in order to fulfill the established rule, and [they] ‘think’ they ‘do God service,’ whilst in fact they only incur the wrath of God” (*Spiritual Counsels*, p. 39).

In this world, the Lord warns, “moth and rust destroy and . . . thieves break in and steal” (vs. 19). Moths lay eggs in woolen fabrics unless we guard against them. As the larvae hatch, they eat into the cloth and destroy the covering that protects us against the elements.

What does this mean for us spiritually? We must prepare to combat Satan and sin! When we allow sin’s larvae into our hearts and minds, they eat away the truth that shields us from lies and delusion. Only by confession and contrition do we attract the grace of God, which alone has the power to kill these deadly and voracious hatchlings of sin within ourselves.

Similarly, what functions like *rust* in our daily lives? Surely it is the corrosive power of secular life. The world carries our passions with self-serving lies, fads, and distortions. Secularism, unless sealed out with the chrism of the Holy Spirit, will corrode our devotion and our worship. When we fast, let us heed the Lord’s sure and gentle voice, for He alone assists us in countering the corrosive rust of the world.

Finally, the demons are the *thieves* who seek to break into our hearts by any means to steal our souls for Satan’s perverse kingdom. Beware when these enemies encourage us to “adjust” the terms of the fast or to shrug at Christ’s Mysteries! If we listen to them, we serve ourselves (and many devils) instead of God.

*Come and abide in us and cleanse us from every stain and save our souls, O good One.* – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

**February 27 – Clean Monday**  
**Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 1:1-20**

**Two Attitudes Toward Wisdom: Proverbs 1:1-20, especially vss. 5, 8-9:** “For a wise man who hears these things will be wiser. . . . But the ungodly despise wisdom and instruction. Hear, my son, the instruction of your father, and do not reject the laws of your mother.” We Orthodox Christians will immediately recognize that the “wisdom” set forth in the Book of Proverbs shares much in common with the *Philokalia* and other famous writings of the Church Fathers. Meditating on Proverbs during Great Lent encourages us to cultivate “the fear of God” (vs. 7) as a first step in gaining wisdom in Christ. The wisdom that we receive from the Book of Proverbs is not merely helpful advice. It highlights God-pleasing morals and ethics that form a major dimension of Christian life, understanding, and perception.

The opening line of Proverbs states the title of this collection of writings, followed by a prologue to its contents. Immediately we are presented with two contrasting orientations toward wisdom, aptly illustrated by the verses quoted above. When he is oriented to wisdom, the *wise man* gains discernment, astuteness, perception, understanding, and direction (vss. 2-8). However, the orientation of the *ungodly* leads one astray, for the secular mind neither knows nor considers God. If we do not “turn away our foot from their paths” (vs. 15) but instead choose “evil” (vs. 17), then we will suffer, for “they take away their own soul in ungodliness” (vs. 19).

The wisdom in Proverbs shows us how to conduct our life “before the Lord,” to whom each of us shall give account. We must bear in mind, of course, that these verses were compiled before the Lord’s incarnation. The writer of Proverbs does not yet “know” Christ as Wisdom incarnate. However, the Preincarnate Christ does speak to us through Proverbs, if we listen closely!

Whenever the word “God” appears in Proverbs, as in verse 7, we may read it as “the God-Man, Jesus Christ” – the Alpha and Omega, Holy Wisdom Himself. It is Christ who teaches us how to live rightly with others through the wise words of Proverbs. Christ is the very “Wisdom [who] sings in the streets . . . [and] moves boldly in the squares” (vs. 20). Let us be numbered among the “simple” so that we may receive “perception and understanding” (vs. 4). When we hear Proverbs as coming from Christ Himself, “a wise man who hears these things will be wiser, and the man of understanding will gain direction” (vs. 5).

When Proverbs prompts us to “hear . . . the instruction of your father, and . . . not reject the laws of your mother” (vs. 9), let us receive this admonition with all our mind, heart, and will. These words may recall the godly voices of grandparents and parents, to the extent that they raised us in the faith. They also remind us to heed the preaching, teaching, and counsel of our priests. Finally, let us read the words of the Church Fathers, who give us a two-thousand-year-old, life-giving stream of Holy Tradition that constantly renews the riches of Orthodoxy. Among these fathers we are blessed to count elders – gerondas, startzy, and abbas – who are speaking, writing, and praying for us even today.

May God grant us during the coming season of Lent the grace of attentive listening for our salvation! Our mother, the Church, serves us a lavish feast of words and worship. She does not confine, constrict, or inhibit us, but rather urges us to restrain ourselves from the evil passions and the insidious, worldly invitations of the *ungodly* (vss. 10-14).

*O Lord our God, nail our flesh to the fear of Thee, and mortify my earthly members that we may be illumined by the contemplation of Thee, O Holy, life-giving Wisdom.* – Great Compline prayer of Saint Basil the Great

**February 28 – Clean Tuesday**  
**Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 1:20-35**

**Lord, Have Mercy: Proverbs 1:20-35, especially vs. 35:** “*But he who obeys me shall dwell in hope, and shall be at rest without fear from every evil.*” During virtually every Orthodox church service the priest offers the Litany of Peace, which bids us to pray for an all-encompassing list of needs, situations, and groups of people. Our response to each of these requests is “Lord, have mercy,” a refrain that reminds us of our urgent need to cry out to God. The litany ends with the plea, “Help us; save us; have mercy on us; and keep us, O God, by Thy grace.”

In this light, let us observe the message conveyed by today’s passage from the Book of Proverbs. It warns against *arrogance* and the *ungodly* (vs. 23) – those “evil men [who] . . . hate wisdom and choose not the fear of the Lord” (vs. 31). These people do not “wish to follow [God’s] counsels, but despise [His] reproofs” (vs. 32). What befalls those who “hate wisdom,” rejecting the Lord’s counsel and despising divine correction (vss. 31-32)? Effectively, the wicked slay and bring ruin on themselves (vs. 33-34)!

Our reading reinforces the fact that the Wisdom of God is heard in the hymns the Church *sings*, as well in the passages of Holy Scripture we read (vs. 20). It is up to us to heed this wisdom, but there is nothing secret about Orthodox Christianity. We openly proclaim Christ, the Truth, as announced by His apostles, those “lords at the gates” of the City of God (vs. 21). Within the life of the Church, Christ our Truth is the same forever (Heb 13:8).

When we read that “Wisdom sings in the streets” (Prv 1:20), let us picture life’s winding avenues, those daily thoroughfares traveled by the people of every city in the world. The mention of “squares . . . high city walls and . . . the gates of a city” (vss. 20, 21) emphasizes the fact that our holy faith applies to every aspect of human activity. The Church openly asserts the message of the Gospel so that people everywhere may cry out to God, in the spirit of the Litany of Peace, “Lord, have mercy.”

In the Septuagint version we read, “So long a time as the simple hold fast to righteousness, they shall not be ashamed.” (vs. 22). By way of contrast the text holds up those without *discernment*, who desire “arrogance” and “become ungodly” (vs. 23). As one commentator notes, “Folly and carelessness of heart can laugh at the entreaties of Wisdom; [but] a day comes . . . when Wisdom shall laugh at . . . calamity and mock . . . bitter anguish” (Ironsides, *Notes on the Book of Proverbs*, p. 24).

First and foremost, the ungodly are defined as those who lack *discernment* (vs. 23). Saint Peter of Damascus defines this virtue as knowing “when the time is ripe, what means to employ, the inner state of the questioner, what level he has reached, his strength, his degree of spiritual knowledge and his intention, as well as God’s purpose and the meaning of each verse of Holy Scripture” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 242-3). If we wish to avoid God’s rebuke and remain guileless before Him, we must cleave to righteousness, attain mindfulness, and practice discernment. We need to pray unceasingly, “Lord, have mercy!”

Wisdom declares, “I shall bring forth upon you the utterance of my breath, and I shall teach you my word” (vs. 24). Christ our God warns that if we are tempted to scorn His counsel, we risk becoming ungodly and “subject to reproofs” (vs. 23). How willingly He calls us! He speaks to us “at length” (vs. 25), for “close examination shall destroy the ungodly. But he who obeys me shall dwell in hope, and shall be at rest without fear from every evil” (vss. 34-35).

*Thy coming will be great and fearful, O Lord, when Thou wilt come in righteous judgment. Do not condemn me, though I stand condemned, but spare me as the compassionate God, through the acceptable prayers of Thy holy apostles and all the saints.* – Divine Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts