

May 1 – Monday of the Third Week of Pascha (Myrrh-bearing Women)

John 4:46-54

Who Was Healed? John 4:46-54, especially vs. 53: “So the father knew that it was at the same hour in which Jesus said to him, ‘Your son lives.’ And he himself believed, and his whole household.” Saint John Chrysostom offers us an arresting insight into Christ’s healing of the nobleman’s son. “For here He healeth the father, sick in mind, no less than the son, in order to persuade us to give heed to Him, not by reason of His miracles, but of His teaching. For miracles are not for the faithful, but for the unbelieving and the grosser sort” (*Homily 35 on the Gospel of Saint John, NPNF First Series*, vol. 14, p. 124). As we explore the steps by which Christ enlarges the father’s faith, we learn at the same time how to deepen our own faith in Christ and make our relationship with Him more robust.

When the nobleman first approaches the Lord Jesus, his son is “at the point of death” (vs. 47). Because rural communities have established networks for passing along news, the boy’s father already knows of the Lord’s reputation. When he learns that the famous rabbi is in Galilee, there is no hesitation on the man’s part. His need mobilizes him – as soon as he hears that Jesus is nearby, he “went to Him and *implored* Him to come down and heal his son” (vs. 47).

Consider the father’s situation when he leaves for Cana. Other standard remedies have proven useless and his child is dying (vs. 47). The loving parent is open to any solution – he is looking for an answer. He knows that Jesus spent time in Cana with His disciples and performed the first of His signs at a local wedding (vs. 2:1-11). Other reports concerning the Lord Jesus circulated while He was in Jerusalem (vs. 2:23). Many Galileans believe that the Lord is a prophet (vss. 4:44-45). The word is out on the street.

As a court official, the nobleman stays in close touch with events in the capital. When the nobleman hears of Jesus’ powers, the desperate father sees hope. He exhibits a “try anything” form of faith. His spiritual state is based on objective action as well as a trust in Christ’s physical presence. He cannot imagine long-distance healing, so he begs Jesus to come to Capernaum – to the place where the boy lies near death (vs. 47).

Now let us observe how the Lord heals the father. First He chastens him, although in a rather mild manner. Christ’s first response to the father – a comment about signs and wonders (vs. 48) – is directed toward all who depend on physical evidence as a basis for belief.

However, the urgency of the situation leads the official to speak to Jesus with high respect: he calls Him *Sir* (*Kyrie*, Lord) (vs. 49). The father bypasses his limited faith in order to press his need, taking another step toward deeper trust. We see him grow, for when the Lord says, “Go your way; your son lives” (vs. 50), the father trusts and obeys. Specifically, according to Saint John Chrysostom, “the man believed the word that Jesus spoke.”

The nobleman risks placing his trust in the unseen power of the Lord Jesus when he goes home. The third and final phase of the nobleman’s healing thus comes when he discovers that his son recovered “at the same hour in which Jesus” declared the boy well (vs. 53).

First, the father has to place his trust in the Lord’s reputation. Second, he must accept the challenge of trusting the Lord’s word by obeying Him. Finally, the nobleman becomes one of the faithful – he believes in Christ with his whole person! He becomes a man of such contagious faith that he draws his entire household to the Lord Jesus (vs. 53). May God heal each of us as we risk taking these same steps in our own lives!

O Master, who lovest mankind, grant me healing of soul and body, a faith unashamed, a love unfeigned, increase of wisdom, and growth in Thy divine grace. – Post-communion Prayer

May 2 – Tuesday of the Third Week of Pascha (Myrrh-bearing Women)

John 6:27-33

Earthly Bread, Heavenly Bread: John 6:27-33, especially vs. 33: *“For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”* Every Christian undergoes a lifelong series of surrenders which wean us away from the material-centered life into which we were born and reshape us into persons wholly submitted to Christ our God. Surrender to Him is a commitment that supersedes all other loyalties. This way of life forms an unshakable bond between ourselves and Christ as Master.

Our separation from the material does not come easily, however, since we are earth-bound. The process of weaning involves change and the reshaping of habits. We need only observe a young child who, deprived of the breast or the bottle, now strives to gain a minimal facility with cup, plate, and table service. From this trying experience we can discern in microcosm the spiritual struggle required by the life in Christ. Ours is no easy task!

The Evangelist John describes the kind of realignment that Christ our God requires of everyone who approaches Him with respectful purpose. To understand this present set of verses, we must first come face to face with how revolutionary it is to follow Christ. The inherent conflicts become apparent in the interaction between the Lord Jesus and the multitude – the crowd of people which has pursued Him since the day He fed the five thousand (vss. 6:1-14).

When the crowd determines to “take Him by force to make Him king,” He escapes by departing “to the mountain by Himself alone” (vs. 15). When they see Him next, He points out that they do not understand the reason behind His miraculous sign. Instead, they seek Him merely because they “ate of the loaves and were filled” (vs. 26).

The Lord advises us, along with the multitude, to refocus our lives: “Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life” (vs. 27). As fallen creatures, we are dominated by our cravings for material goods and rewards. Yet if we are to follow Christ Jesus as disciples, we must exchange our pursuit of the mundane and the worldly in favor of laboring for the spiritual bread that “endures to everlasting life.” This bread can only be given to us by the Son of Man, “because God the Father has set His seal on Him” (vs. 27).

Which commitments should guide and organize our lives, according to the Lord? What goal determines our loyalties and priorities? Christ our God states it very simply: “This is the work of God, that you *believe in Him* whom He sent” (vs. 29). The commitment to believe in Christ must be foremost, guiding all that we do and say.

However, such a demand is difficult for most of us to grasp. We see how the mob misses Jesus’ point, asking Him, “What sign will You perform then, that we may see it and believe You?” (vs. 30). Because the people are still thinking in material terms, they remind Jesus of the ancient miracle of the manna in the wilderness: “Our fathers ate . . . in the desert” (vs. 31). Of course, this challenge ignores the fact that Christ has recently fed a crowd five thousand strong with five loaves and two fish (vs. 9).

The Lord Jesus is very blunt concerning the bread that God’s people received under Moses. The manna was *not* “the bread from heaven,” but merely material food intended to feed physical bodies. However, God the “Father gives you the true bread from heaven” (vs. 32).

We know this bread to be “He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (vs. 33). Jesus yearns to give us Himself. Let us joyfully receive Him, the true bread of God!

O taste and see that the Lord is good, who for our sake was made like unto us of old and once for all offered up Himself. . . sanctifying those who partake of Him. – Pre-communion Hymn

May 3 – Wednesday of the Third Week of Pascha (Myrrh-bearing Women)

John 6:35-39

Partaking of the Holy Gifts: John 6:35-39, especially vs. 35: *“He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.”* Viewed from the outside, our reception of Holy Communion appears simple and straightforward. We approach the chalice, the napkin is placed under our chin, and we receive the Holy Gifts from the spoon. The spiritual process of Holy Communion, however, is far more complex. We encounter such divine realities as unworthiness, fear, love, condemnation, mystery, conscience, forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, the Kingdom of Heaven, divine mercy, the holy fire of purification, enlightenment of the soul, the indwelling of Christ, and the Last Judgment.

The poor human mind, heart, and soul cannot encompass these realities, and yet they impinge upon us as we receive Christ’s Body and Blood. Let us consider three aspects of Holy Communion that the Lord sets forth in today’s reading: receiving the Holy Gifts takes away hunger forever (vs. 35); it satisfies a thirst which is otherwise unquenchable (vs. 35); and it conveys eternal life upon the one who communicates (vss. 38-40).

First and foremost, according to the Lord, we must *come to Him* when we receive (vs. 35). A wealth of meaning is imbedded within this tiny phrase. Yes, we approach on our feet, we draw near the chalice with our bodies. Often, however, our souls and hearts are scattered. We fail to gather the disparate elements of our being into a concerted focus. However, Christ our God will help us if we exert ourselves to meet Him. We must cry out to the Lord Jesus to open the eyes of our heart so that we may perceive Him and approach without wandering.

When we come to Him, the Lord reminds us that He is “the bread of life” – and as a result we “shall never hunger” (vs. 35). Notice that He separates spiritual hunger from spiritual thirst. What is the meaning of this distinction? We know that earthly food satisfies different physical needs than do liquids, even though the two are closely related. While solid food nourishes, drink quenches.

Christ’s immaculate Body nurtures our whole being. If we set our hearts and minds on the “simplicity that is in Christ” (2 Cor 11:3), driving off every other intrusion, then by God’s grace we shall be fed with and by Him who is eternal Truth and Life.

Seek Him alone and “incline your heart to understanding” (Prv 2:2); do not incur the reproach of evil men, neither seek their ways” (3:34). The Lord will nourish our flagging spirits and give us strength to do His will. When we say, “O Lord, have mercy on me, heal my soul, for I have sinned against Thee” (Ps 40:4), then “our mouth [will be] filled with joy, and our tongue with rejoicing” (Ps 125:2).

As we open our hearts to the One who knocks, He comes in to dine and dwell with us (Rv 3:20). “My soul thirsted for God, the mighty, the living” (Ps 41:2), and “my throat is become hoarse; from my hoping in my God” (Ps 68:4). And yet He promises to all whose “tongues are parched with thirst, I the Lord God . . . will not forsake them. But I will open rivers in the mountain and fountains in the midst of plains” (Is 41:17-18).

Lastly, when we receive Him in the Holy Gifts and truly perceive His presence, we are infused with the Risen Lord. He imparts everlasting life to us (Jn 6:40), assuring us that He will raise us up on the last day.

Even unto my last breath, may I worthily partake of Thy holy things, unto forgiveness of my sins and unto life eternal, O Thou who art the Bread of Life and the Fountain of holiness. – Post-communion Prayer of Saint Basil the Great

May 4 – Thursday of the Third Week of Pascha (Myrrh-bearing Women)

John 6:40-44

Unless the Father Draw Him: John 6:40-44, especially vs. 44: “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him. . . .” Many of us have friends or family members who resemble the Jews of Capernaum (vss. 41-42). They stand at a distance from the faith and resist the claims of Christ on their lives. We may yearn for them to know our life-giving joy, but they neither see nor believe in the Lord. What makes them different from the others of whom the Lord speaks, those who do *see* the Son and *believe in Him* (vs. 40)?

In the present passage from Saint John’s Gospel, the Lord addresses several aspects of this question. He discusses the failure to see and to believe in Him (vs. 40), and the resistance to the Father who would draw all men to Himself (vs. 44).

We have undeniable proof that God is fully able to draw men to Christ. The case of Saul of Tarsus meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus is a famous example of God drawing someone against his will (Acts 9:3-8). Historically, there have been times of widespread willingness to see and believe in Christ. During such seasons, multitudes of men and women have flocked to the Good Shepherd.

Why then, at present, are so few coming? Why do many show no signs of being drawn to God? We must first recall God’s gift of freedom – a freedom that includes the ability to resist God. Drawing is not the same as forcing. Judas Iscariot was drawn to Christ, but he was not forced to honor Him. Ananias and Sapphira were drawn to God, yet they turned aside (Acts 5:1-10).

The Lord describes the faithful as those who see the Son (Jn 6:40). Those who embrace Jesus as the Son of God are commonly described as believers. In the Orthodox tradition, the perception of Christ as God is called *illumination*. Seeing is therefore essential. Thus, we pray that those who enter the Church may “know that Thou art the only true God with Thine only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.” Of those who do not see, Saint Paul observes that “the god of this world has blinded [those] who do not believe” (2 Cor 4:4).

The Lord continues to describe the faithful as those who, having seen the Son, believe in Him (Jn 6:40). A further step must be taken if one agrees that Christ is God, for merely saying “Jesus is God” can be nothing more than an interesting idea or even a ridiculous annoyance. The true issue is our commitment. At baptism we ask the candidate: “Dost thou unite thyself unto Christ?” The one who agrees is again challenged: “Dost thou believe in Him?”

Wherever the Gospel of Christ is preached, there have been those who have “begged that these words might be preached to them” (Acts 13:42). At the same time, there have been others who “were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming . . . opposed [to] the things spoken” (vs. 13:45). Ultimately, we either choose to submit to Christ as Lord and God or we do not. God does not force Himself on us.

A spiritual constant applies to all who hear the Gospel: the love of God the Father draws everyone to Him through Christ. “For God [the Father] so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (Jn 3:16). We Christians understand that it is “the spirit of error, the spirit of guile, the spirit of idolatry and of every concupiscence” which operates at Satan’s bidding and blinds men to God’s Son.

While God does not force us, His active love, “as strong as death” (Sg 8:6), reaches out to the deluded to free them from fantasies of self-realization. People may freely turn aside, refrain, or hold back. Nevertheless, miracles occur – God draws men and women to Himself, and some come home!

O Master, Lord our God, call to Thy holy illumination Thy children who see Thee not and who believe Thee not, and grant them great grace to be renewed unto life everlasting. – Baptismal prayer

May 5 – Friday of the Third Week of Pascha (Myrrh-bearing Women)

John 6:48-54

The Body and Blood of Christ: John 6:48-54, especially vs. 54: “Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” When we speak of holy communion as the Mystical Supper or holy mysteries, we must take care not to spiritualize the Eucharistic elements. We Orthodox Christians mean the words we confess: “I believe that this is truly Thine own immaculate Body, and that this is truly Thine own precious Blood.”

Father Anthony Coniaris rejects any tendency to reduce the bread and wine to mere allegories, emblems, representative symbols, or purely immaterial, spiritual substances. “The bread and the wine that are received at Communion are literally His Body and Blood. They are not merely symbols. For Jesus Himself said, ‘For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed’ (Jn 6:55)” (*Introducing the Orthodox Church*, p. 135). The Lord’s words stand as the touchstone of the faithful when we receive holy communion.

We correctly refer to the Holy Gifts as “mysteries.” The Church steadfastly resists using feeble human constructs to define how the elements (bread and wine) are the Body and Blood of Christ. Uzzah’s destruction (2 Kgs 6:6-7) serves as ample warning against any attempt to explain holy things and to rely on human ideas to clarify what faith knows. That sad man, thinking he could save the ark of God from falling when the oxen stumbles, placed his hand on the ark to steady it. Uzzah was struck dead because of his act of presumption.

When we reflect upon what the Lord says in these verses, we begin with the statement, “I am the bread of life” (Jn 6:48). As God, the Lord Jesus is the source of all life, from the tree that buds to the tiniest baby in the womb, from the vibrant presence of gifted artist to the faint heartbeat in the breast of one near death. When we partake of holy communion, we join ourselves to the Bread of Life. We are strengthened and renewed, both for this life and for the life which is to come.

The Lord distinguishes sharply between Himself – “the Bread which comes down from Heaven” (vs. 50) – and the food the fathers “ate . . . in the wilderness” (vs. 49). Both types of food can surely be categorized as miraculous. Likewise, what earthly food can equal in quality the wine made from water at the wedding feast at Cana (vs. 2:11) or the bread multiplied by the Lord on the mountain (vs. 6:1-14)?

However, even these miraculous gifts differ entirely from the Body and Blood of Christ which we receive during the Divine Liturgy. The manna, the wedding wine, and the multiplied bread exist for a limited time only. Those present at the miracle ate or drank and were nourished for but a moment. Such miraculous foods are merely types and shadows of the life-giving Bread of Eternity, come down to us. When we partake of the Lord’s Body and Blood, it is for more than a passing moment; we partake of eternity, so that we “may eat of it and not die” (vs. 6:50).

We trust in the Lord’s promise: “Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life” (vs. 54). Saint John Chrysostom exhorts us to “be blended into that flesh. . . . He hath mixed up Himself with us; He hath kneaded up His Body with ours, that we might be a certain One Thing, like a body joined to a head” (“Homily 46 on Saint John’s Gospel,” *NPNF First Series*, vol. 14, p. 166.) When Christ Himself is received, we are united to His glory and become a terror to the demons.

As I am become Thy tabernacle through the reception of the holy communion, may all evil and all passion flee away from me as from fire, O my Creator. – Post-communion Prayer of Saint Simeon the Translator

May 6 – Saturday of the Third Week of Pascha (Myrrh-bearing Women)

John 15:17-16:2

The Spirit of Truth: John 15:17-16:2, especially vs. 26: “*But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me.*” Many of us who regularly share in the Church’s worship would be hard pressed to reply if we were asked to say something about the Holy Spirit. Our ability to address the subject of the Spirit need not be so limited, especially given the Lord’s statement that “you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you” (vs. 14:17). Let us learn from Christ how to speak of the Holy Spirit.

In verse 26 of today’s reading, the Lord Jesus identifies three qualities of the Holy Spirit: He proceeds from God the Father, is sent by God the Son, and testifies to us concerning Christ. The Holy Spirit’s presence is vital for every Christian who struggles to keep the Lord’s commandments and cope with the realities of loving others (vs. 15:17), who contends with the hatred of the world (vss. 18-19), endures persecution for Christ’s sake (vss. 20-21), and avoids the pitfalls of spiritual life (vs. 16:1). In every one of these instances, our help comes from the Spirit (vs. 26).

God reveals Himself as three distinct Persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – within one Godhead. Let us begin with the Father, for this divine name points to the source or essence of God in Trinity. To say that the Spirit *proceeds* from the Father testifies to the unity of the Spirit and the Father. In a similar manner, we express the Son’s unity with the Father using filial terms such as “only begotten.”

However, we must bear in mind that expressions like “begetting” and “proceeding” do not refer to events; they express eternally existing relationships among the Persons of the Godhead. According to Saint John of Damascus, “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are One in all things except the being unbegotten, the being begotten, and the procession” (*Writings*, p. 186).

The procession of the Holy Spirit is significant because His presence makes our prayer to the Father instant and immediate. Because He dwells in us, the Spirit enables us to say “Jesus is Lord” (1 Cor 12:3), thus assuring us that no “created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:39). Furthermore, the Father justifies us “in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit” (1 Cor 6:11).

Even as the Lord Jesus declares that the Holy Spirit *proceeds* from the Father, He says that the Spirit is *sent* by God the Son (Jn 15:26). Here we encounter two distinct truths concerning the Holy Spirit. Procession refers to the Holy Spirit’s eternal existence in the Godhead. “Sending” refers to the movement of the Spirit upon and within the Church – and on each of the faithful. These matters occur within the particular historic circumstances of human activity.

When the Lord withdraws from the disciples and ascends into heaven, He says that He will “send the Promise of My Father upon you” (Lk 24:49). That *promise* is the Holy Spirit. On Pentecost, fifty days after Christ’s Resurrection, the Holy Spirit comes to reside within the Church in all her activities (Acts 2:1-4). According to the Father’s promise, the Spirit continues to dwell in the Church. Christ, who sent the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, continues to send Him to the Church – and each of us – to this very day.

Finally, the Spirit *testifies* that God is with us and among us. He convicts us of sin, leads us from error into truth, illumines our pastors to teach the Orthodox faith, and enables us to follow the path of salvation. He enlivens our hearts, reveals God as ever present in our lives, and renews us through the holy mysteries of Christ our Savior.

By the Holy Spirit do we speak divinely, saying, Verily, Thou art God, Life, Love, Light, and Mind. Thou art Goodness. Thou dost reign for ages. – Orthros Prayer

May 7 – Sunday of the Paralytic (Fourth Sunday of Pascha), Tone 3

John 5:1-15

The Healer of All: John 5:1-15, especially vs. 14: “See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you.” As we continue to read Saint John’s Gospel after Pascha, we marvel at how the Holy Spirit led the Church to place this particular account on a Lord’s Day, thus drawing our attention to the relationship between healing and the Resurrection. The healing of the paralytic prompts us to glorify our risen Savior, the Life-giver who makes us whole. Even as this account celebrates the Lord Jesus’ healing, it reveals His boundless mercy – the gift that He bestows on all who are raised with Him to new life.

“Jesus saw him [the paralytic] lying there” (vs. 6). Why does the Lord visit the pool by the Sheep Gate? He goes deliberately to where there “lay a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed” (vs. 3). From eternity, our compassionate Lord enters a world filled with sickness, sin, and death (Titus 3:4-5). On this particular occasion the Healer of all comes to the Pool of Bethesda, an ancient gathering place for the desperately ill. Bethesda serves as a type of the ongoing, healing work of God.

The maladies named in this reading encompass many of the physical diseases common to mankind. But later, when the Lord seeks out the man healed of physical paralysis, He cautions him concerning spiritual illness (Jn 5:14). The scope of God’s concern covers every dimension of our fallen existence. His will is for us to find health in body, soul, and spirit: “But seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (Mt 6:33).

We notice the Lord’s tender care for the paralyzed man, for He “knew that he had been in that condition a long time” (Jn 5:6). God permits us to remain debilitated, if we wish, for He greatly respects our freedom. Sometimes we prefer our present condition to the alternative of full health.

The paralytic runs the risk of losing his one reliable source of income – begging – if he is healed. So the Lord Jesus asks this man, “Do you want to be made well?” (vs. 6). Even with infinite power available, the Lord of the Universe never forces us to abandon our temporal securities and give up the special sins that feed our passions. We are free to choose.

What irony we find in the man’s answers! At first he vacillates, offering logical reasons for why he cannot escape his condition (vs. 7). He sees no path to health other than entering the pool at a critical moment – and yet the Author of health stands before him.

Nevertheless, the Lord detects his desire to be well and heals him immediately (vs. 8). When God enters the arena of the sick, He seeks faith among the porticos. Although He finds little faith, the Merciful One restores the paralytic.

The Lord, however, has only begun to heal this man. He seeks him out once again in the Temple. This time, He directs the man forward to full health, bidding him to abandon his far more serious moral and spiritual illness: “Sin no more” (vs. 14).

The foremost aspect of new life in Christ is the healing of our hearts, wills, and minds. As these are healed, we draw fresh vigor from the firm and certain health given by the Holy Spirit. “If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God,” Saint Paul advises us. “Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth” (Col 3:1-2).

Lastly, we note that those who are most debilitated in this account – paralyzed, indeed, by their own rules – are the religious authorities. Sadly, when they see the former paralytic carrying his pallet and thus “working” on the Sabbath, they proclaim that his deliverance violates God’s law (Jn 5:10).

O Lord, have mercy upon me; for my bed hath become my grave. Of what use is my life? I have no need of the sheep’s pool. I come to Thee, O Fountain of all healing. Glory to Thee! –Vespers for the Sunday of the Paralytic

May 8 – Monday of the Fourth Week of Pascha (Paralytic)

John 6:56-69

Receiving Life: John 6:56-69, especially vs. 56: “*He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.*” The pre-communion prayer of Saint Basil the Great asks that we “receive a portion of Thy holy things, and be united to Thy holy Body and Blood, and . . . have Thee, with the Father and Holy Spirit, dwelling and abiding in me.” The saint’s prayer parallels our reading in today’s Gospel: each time we receive the Holy Gifts, we consume not ordinary matter but the glorified Body and Blood of our Lord. No wonder many people, including the disciples, find that “this is a hard saying” (vs. 60). To strengthen us when we approach holy communion, the Lord illumines His immaculate Mysteries in this reading.

“As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me” (vs. 57). When we receive the Holy Gifts we receive life; we are joined to Life and true life enters us. God the “living Father” sends the living Son into this world to bestow life on all who embrace Him. The life He gives is uncreated Life, eternal life, in Jesus Christ. According to Saint John of Kronstadt, “In each smallest particle of the Body and the Blood rests the entire Christ-God, filling every part” (*My Life in Christ*, p. 195).

“This is the bread which came down from heaven. . . . He who eats this bread will live forever” (vs. 58). The life we receive in the Holy Gifts is mystical: the Lord imparts eternal life so that we “will live forever.” We do not simply meet eternal Life – we are *united* to the Lord’s precious Body and Blood. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit come to dwell and abide in us, joining us to the eternal, undying life of God.

“Not as your fathers ate the manna and are dead” (vs. 58): In the course of history, God has given food to His people supernaturally. In paradise He provided all that was needed. The tree of Life was there, along with “the tree of learning the knowledge of good and evil” (Gn 2:9) – although of this tree, with its inherent death, the Lord commanded “you may not eat” (vs. 17).

The children of Israel received quail and manna in the desert (Ex 16). God caused ravens to feed Elijah with bread and flesh (3 Kgs 17:4-6), and sustained the prophet and the widow at Zarephath through the days of famine (vss. 13-16). None of these foods, however, gave eternal life.

“When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples complained about this, He said to them, ‘Does this offend you?’” (Jn 6:61). When we seek to explain the life-giving mysteries, we err in two ways. By attempting to explain Christ’s presence in the bread and wine by using objective, rational categories of thought, we reduce the mystery of the Lord’s Body and Blood to reasonable symbolism. Such explanations attempt to manage God and thus avoid the need to acknowledge and submit to a power beyond human control – One who may even be dangerous, if we approach Him impiously and improperly (1 Cor 11:29-30).

“It is the Spirit who gives life” (Jn 6:63). God the Holy Spirit unites us to eternal life. During the Divine Liturgy, the Church beseeches God to “send down Thy Holy Spirit upon us and upon these gifts here spread forth,” in order that Life may unite Himself to us in holy communion.

“No one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father” (vs. 65). We are joined to Life by God’s grace, but “that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:8-10).

May Thy holy Body O Lord Jesus Christ our God, be unto me for life eternal. – Post-communion Prayer

May 9 – Tuesday of the Fourth Week of Pascha (Paralytic)

John 7:1-13

Opposition to Christ – Truth or Fraud: *John 7:1-13, especially vs. 12:* “*And there was much complaining among the people concerning Him.*” In chapter 6 of Saint John’s Gospel, hints of growing resistance to the Lord Jesus appear. Many people who formerly were drawn to Him “went back and walked with Him no more” (vs. 6:66). Chapter 7 opens on this chilling note: “the Jews sought to kill Him” (vs. 1).

The introduction of this theme provides a window for us to examine what leads people to oppose our Lord, the Church, and the true faith. In the present passage we find three common reasons for such opposition: the refusal to accept Jesus as God; hostility to His moral teachings; and the belief that He is a fraud.

We learn that the Lord’s own relatives do not believe that He is a prophet, much less God Incarnate: “For even His brothers did not believe in Him” (vs. 5). Similar doubts circulate in Nazareth, as reported by Saint Matthew when the Lord Jesus preaches in His home synagogue. In response to this ambivalence, our Lord makes His famous statement, “A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and in his own house” (Mt 13:57). Familiarity breeds contempt, and may influence people to dismiss the truth when it is right before their eyes.

Saint John depicts the Lord’s brothers – relatives from Jesus’ extended family – as taunting Him and belittling His works (Jn 7:3-4). Their argument rests upon a simple logic: If you want to influence the world, why do you remain in the backwaters of Galilee? Go up to the capital and see how you are received there.

Clearly, these relatives cannot accept their cousin Jesus as a prophet, much less one sent from God. Of course, their expressions of doubt precede the Crucifixion and Resurrection. After Jesus rises from the dead, His stepbrothers James and Jude actually become leaders of the Church (Acts 15:13ff., Gal 1:18-19, 1 Cor 15:7; Jude 1).

Resistance to Jesus as God Incarnate, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, continued in the early years of the Church. Gnostic heretics claimed that Simon of Cyrene was crucified at Golgotha while Christ, the immaterial God, returned to heaven. Over the centuries, many other factions have denied Christ’s divinity including Arius, Mohammed, nineteenth-century Unitarians, modern secular humanists, and others.

The Lord identifies a second type of opposition when He says, “The world . . . hates Me because I testify of it that its works are evil” (Jn 7:7). This form of resistance focuses on Christ’s ethical demands for purity. With His teachings and sinless life, Christ serves as a thorn in the flesh of those unwilling to comply with His life-giving ethical demands.

Our moral opposition to these demands may be spoken or unspoken. We may know we are doing wrong and yet, because we enjoy the way we live, resist change. Or, we may reject the reality of sin from an intellectual standpoint, embracing a moral relativity more compatible with our own desires. Such an approach assumes that it is all right to do as we wish as long as others are not hurt, the laws of the land are not broken, and no social gaffe is committed.

Finally, verse 12 discloses a third form of opposition to Christ: “He deceives the people.” Even when the Christian faith is not considered an outright fraud, the modern tendency is to consider it merely a useful myth for social control. From this perspective the Church is reduced to an ethical educator, social club, or “opiate of the people.” Claims to the divinity of Jesus help manage an unthinking, uncritical populace. We, on the contrary, boldly affirm that since “grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (vs. 1:17), we are all called to repent of our opposition to Christ – moral, intellectual, and spiritual – so as to worship Him in purity.

Remove from us all delusion and fill us with that faith, hope, and love which are in Thee. – Prayer for the Reception of Catechumens

May 10 – Wednesday of the Fourth Week of Pascha (Mid-Pentecost)

John 7:14-30

Opposition to Christ, continued – Submit or Resist: John 7:14-30, especially vss. 25-26: “Now some of them from Jerusalem said, ‘Is this not He whom they seek to kill? But look! He speaks boldly, and they say nothing to Him.’” Continuing with the themes of yesterday’s reading, the evangelist identifies additional factors that may prevent us from submitting to Christ. We may hold assumptions that militate against a belief in Jesus as God and Savior. Or, we may conclude that the Lord, while kind and insightful, was deluded or insane. Worst of all, we may become self-satisfied in our beliefs to the point that our heart closes against the truth in Christ.

Today we often hear education extolled as the cultural engine for creating openness and tolerance to new ideas. In fact, much of what poses as “education” merely serves to train us to accept contemporary biases and prejudices. For example, the modern emphasis on the theory of evolution as unquestionable scientific fact has led society toward an agnostic view of the origins of life. Likewise, the notion of Jesus of Nazareth possessing a divine nature is often dismissed as misinformed religious idealism.

The Lord Jesus faced a society with similar kinds of “educated” assumptions. Religious authorities in the first century naturally accepted the standards they had been taught in the rabbinical schools of their day. Jesus’ teachings came as a shock to this faction, as did the message of the apostles after Him (Acts 4:13). Astonishment at the Lord’s wisdom reverberates throughout the Gospels (Mt 13:54; Lk 20:26), for Jesus regularly silences His highly educated opponents with astute answers (Mt 22:32-33).

Marveling at Jesus’ air of authority, the Jewish teachers wonder, “How does this Man know letters, having never studied?” (Jn 7:15). They find it unthinkable that someone who never trained under the rabbis could gain true knowledge of Holy Scripture. The “educated” do not know what to do when confronted with the Man of Wisdom. As His followers, we should never quail before the secular experts, for Jesus’ answer is our own: “My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me” (vs. 16).

In verse 19, the Lord poses a question that at first appears out of context: “Did not Moses give you the law, yet none of you keeps the law? Why do you seek to kill Me?” Christ mentions the plan to kill Him as if it is already common knowledge. Yet nothing has been said in public, despite the deadly clues that appear in John 5:16, 3:14, 7:1 and 7:11.

The Lord Jesus understands the sinister and hidden forces at work beneath the rabbis’ polite veneer of tolerance, “for He knew what was in man” (vs. 2:25). Note the response they offer when He dares to strip away this veneer. Accusing Him of being demon-possessed, they flare up and ask, in a wounded tone, “Who is seeking to kill You?” (vs. 7:20). Later, of course, the high priest will advise them “that it was expedient that one man should die for the people” (vs. 18:14).

The underlying assumption on the part of the authorities is that Christ must be crazy, dangerously deluded, or both. Dostoevsky places this assumption in the mouth of the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*. During the twentieth century, Marxists and Nazis vigorously pursued a similar position when opposing the Church and Christianity.

Do we allow our own hearts to harden against the faith? If we read Romans 1:20-21 in conjunction with John 7:28, we understand that something inside us resists the Lord – even as we know that He is true and comes from above. In the darkness, however, the authorities do not know this – and hence “they sought to take Him” (vs. 30).

I have no life, no light, no joy, or wisdom; no strength except in Thee, O God. Because of my unrighteousness I dare not raise my eyes to Thee. – Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov

May 11 – Thursday of the Fourth Week of Pascha (Mid-Pentecost)

John 8:12-20

The Light of the World: *John 8:12-20, especially vs. 12:* “*I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.*” When Holy Scripture declares that God is light, it affirms a reality we know in our hearts. We embrace the faith of the apostle who proclaims, “God is light and in Him is no darkness at all” (1 Jn 1:5). Indeed, men have known this truth for ages, for the Prophet David says, “The Lord is my light” (Ps 26:1).

And yet we must take care, as earth-born mortals, when we speak of God as light, for He is not that created light we take as a given in our everyday lives. The light we know casts a certain illumination – but God is the One who creates all lights. Every created light comes into existence out of nothing, for “God said, ‘Let there be light: and there was light’” (Gn 1:3).

The light of God, however, is uncreated. This light is not made of photons visible to our physical eyes. God is separate from and entirely other than His creation, including every form and type of created light. In Himself, from His divinity, and apart from all created lights, God is Light uncreated.

While we know God to be light, we cannot fully state the truth without adding that God directly reveals Himself *as* Light, although no physical eye has ever seen Him. No man may see, nor has seen God, at any time (Jn 1:18). Only when the Son of God – the eternal Word, true God of true God, Light of Light – became man do men gain ability to see the divine Light.

When He came, He openly declared, “I am the light of the world” (Jn. 8:12). Those who saw Him affirmed, “The Dayspring from on high has visited us” (Lk 1:78) and “the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world . . . was in the world” (Jn 1:9-10).

In what manner did these witnesses perceive the divine Light? According to the apostle He met on the road to Damascus, “God who commanded light to shine out of darkness . . . shone in our hearts” in order to give us “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6).

While He is incarnate, God gloriously reveals Himself on Mount Tabor within the hearts of Peter, James, and John. When the body of the Lord is transfigured, the mortal eyes of these disciples see a radiance from the uncreated Light (Mt 17:1-9): “His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light” (Mt 17:2). When the Lord is transfigured, He does not lay aside His humanity. Rather, He illumines His humanity with His divinity, and this they see.

That transfiguration of human nature has important consequences, for now all men have the capacity to be illumined by the divine light. The Lord Jesus demonstrates the possibility that every person who acquires the grace of the Holy Spirit may become a participant in the divine radiance. According to Saint Symeon the New Theologian, “The Father is light, the Son is light, the Holy Spirit is light. . . . And by contemplating it, we can receive it” (Spidlik, *Drinking From the Hidden Fountain*, p. 108).

Although iron is not fire, fire transmits its effects to the iron. The divine energies, as Light, may illumine men with the light seen on Mount Tabor. Such illumination of humanity is called “theosis,” or deification. God yearns for us to become “the light of the world” (Mt 5:14) and “in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation [to] . . . shine as lights in the world” (Phil 2:15). Let us arise, turn to Him, “and Christ will give you light” (Eph 5:14).

Illumine our hearts, O Master who lovest mankind with the pure light of Thy divine knowledge, that we may enter upon a spiritual manner of living, both thinking and doing such things as are well-pleasing unto Thee, for Thou art the illumination of our souls and bodies. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

May 12 – Friday of the Fourth Week of Pascha (Mid-Pentecost)

John 8:21-30

The Issue: John 8:21-30, especially vs. 24: “If you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins. . . .”

The Church is prepared to help us grapple with the implications of Christ’s challenge to us in this verse. Indeed, she alone can help us understand the momentous issue posed here by the Lord, for it requires an answer from everyone, at all times and under all circumstances, regardless of whether we heed these words or not.

When we analyze the Lord’s statement, we discover that it consists of seven interwoven proposals which He asserts as life-giving truth. One by one, let us consider the Master’s words and the issue He presents.

1) We will die. Death is an incontestable, universal fact of human existence. By mentioning death, the Lord reminds us of His claim upon our lives, We can address this claim only during the time that we remain in this present existence – a time to which He assigns great significance.

2) We commit sins and have done so all our lives. As used here, the word *sins* refers to every thought, attitude, and action contrary to the will of God. We Orthodox Christians accept the conclusion of the Lord and His apostles that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). All people therefore exist “in their sins.”

3) To “die in your sins” is a prospect to be dreaded, for after death comes God’s judgment. We shall give account to Him for all our thoughts, words, and deeds. To live in our sins is to oppose God deliberately, as a result of our chosen preferences, but we can also repent and affirm our desire to remain in our sins no longer. After death, however, we enter a “state of unchangeable things; no alterations whatever happen then, only developments in the state chosen by free personalities” (Kalomiros, *River of Fire*, p. 117).

4) Our sins may be covered or forgiven in this life (Ps 31:1), so that we do not enter life after death still “in our sins.” The Lord’s statement is not absolute but rather conditional, for He says, “You will surely die in your sins” *unless you believe in Me* (Jn 8:24).

5) Jesus is God. This truth is obscured by many translations of this verse, including the Orthodox Study Bible rendition (“if you do not believe that I am He”). The pronoun “He” does not appear in the original Greek, and thus the NAB translation – “unless you come to believe that *I am (ego eimi)*” – more accurately captures the significance of the Lord’s words. Since the burden of this passage in John 8 points to Exodus 3:14, it clearly parallels the “I AM” of the Old Testament. Verses 23, 28, and 29 (and later on, verse 58) all stress the Lord’s divinity – His unity in essence and will with God the Father.

6) We enjoy complete freedom to believe in Jesus as God, or not. To *believe* means more than simply assenting to the idea that the Lord Jesus is God – it also implies belief *in* Him. Such belief involves the commitment and submission to Him that we proclaim at baptism. A “belief in” Christ includes obeying, following, and looking to Him for direction in life, and it certainly implies worship.

7) The Lord’s point is that if we believe *in* Him, we will *not* die in our sins, for “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Tm 1:15). To believe in Him involves taking on the lifelong struggle to control our passions and rebuff the appeals constantly coming from Satan and our fallen flesh. We are to confess our sins, repent, and strive to end our sinful habits. Let us live rightly, as He gives us strength to do (Jas 2:14ff).

Hast thou renounced Satan? Dost Thou unite thyself unto Christ? Hast thou united thyself unto Christ? Dost thou believe in Him as King and God? – Service of Baptism

May 13 – Saturday of the Fourth Week of Pascha (Mid-Pentecost)

John 8:31-42

Abiding in His Word: *John 8:31-42, especially vs. 31: “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed.”* Today’s passage from Saint John’s Gospel details the steps we undertake when we unite ourselves to the Lord Jesus. The first step in the process is the decision outlined for us in John 8:21-30: we commit to Christ as King and God. This decision, however, is only the beginning of our lifelong effort to grow in relationship with the Lord. The Church Fathers call this effort a struggle, and a what battle it is! Many forces oppose us whenever we seek to draw closer to Christ.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of this battle takes place within ourselves as we endeavor to submit our every choice and action to the Lord. Sustaining this interior struggle to attain union with God is what Christ, in this passage, calls “abiding” in His word. He explains what abiding means as He confronts a group of “Jews who believed Him” (vs. 31).

A short time later, we find these same believers among those seeking to kill Him (vss. 37, 40). Do we find this turn of events seem surprising? By portraying believers as seeking the Lord’s death, the evangelist warns sternly against a mere superficial commitment to Christ. Let us consider prayerfully how we are to *abide* truly in the word of the Lord.

“If you abide in My word,” the Lord Jesus tells them, “you shall know the Truth” (vss. 31-32). The verb “to know,” when used in the context of Scripture, expresses a relationship, as in knowing a person rather than simply acquiring information about him. Because the Lord calls Himself “the Truth” (vs. 14:6), to *know the Truth* means to know Christ Jesus through our relationship with Him.

The more we know Christ, the more we are changed into His likeness. Ultimately, to know Christ our God is to think, feel, desire, reason, and will as He does. By submitting to His will, we become like Him and thus enjoy true freedom (vs. 32). This freedom is neither political, economic, nor social in its essence, but an inner freedom of the heart, soul, and mind.

The Lord refines our appreciation of the inner freedom He imparts by promising to release us from our bondage to the passions. If we abide in Christ, we are no longer the “slaves of sin” (vs. 34). We are set free from servitude to the passions and to our desire to live for the pleasures of the flesh. The impulses of the flesh are stilled, and at the same time we are freed from pressure from others who are still controlled by sin. The Lord frees, for “if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed” (vs. 36).

Abiding in the word of the Lord also means to give *place* in ourselves to His teachings and doctrines (vs. 37). As we grow in the Lord, our vision gradually conforms to the Lord’s mind, until we find ourselves thinking with Him. We develop what Father George Florovsky calls a “scriptural mind” – one which is wholly attuned to God.

Finally, abiding in the word of Christ means to “do the works of Abraham” (vs. 39). This ancient patriarch consistently trusted God and always walked before Him blamelessly. In all that he did, he worshiped and honored the Lord with reverence and complete humility.

The soul that *abides in the Lord* strives to obey His word and to cultivate a relationship with Him. We throw off bondage to sin through repentance and develop godly virtues within ourselves. If we persevere, we gain moral and spiritual freedom and learn to trust in God unquestioningly. We ultimately become those for whom God is truly Father through His love for the Son (vs. 42) in the Holy Spirit.

O Lord, Thou has permitted us to partake of Thy holy, divine, and life-giving Mysteries. Also establish us in Thy sanctification, that we may meditate upon Thy righteousness. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

May 14 – Sunday of the Samaritan Woman (Fifth Sunday of Pascha), Tone 4
John 4:5-42

Missionary Counsel: John 4:5-42, especially vs. 38: “I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored, and you have entered into their labors.” The Risen Lord commissioned the Church, as His Body, to “make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19) – that is, of every people on earth. The present passage overflows with counsel for accomplishing this task. We observe the Lord teaching about this commission through His discourse with the Samaritan woman (Saint Photini), and then we see the results He achieves among her Samaritan neighbors concerning the mystery of their salvation.

Saint Nikolai of Zicha describes the Samaritan woman as a missionary with “rare skill and . . . modesty” by which she caught “the attention of all the citizens of Sychar” (*Homilies*, vol. 1, p. 260). In the decades following the Lord’s Resurrection, she testified zealously to the faith. Her words even reached into the imperial household of that infamous enemy of Christians, Nero (AD 65-66). According to tradition, Photini convinced Nero’s own daughter, Domnina, to confess Christ as Lord.

Saint John Chrysostom observes that Saint Photini’s evangelism is offered “with the same condescension by which Christ had netted her” (“Homily 34 on the Gospel of John,” *NPNF* First Series, vol. 14, p. 118). She draws the men of Sychar out to hear Him by declaring the good news of Christ and encouraging them to “come and see!” By offering others the possibility of encountering truth, she leads them to hear the Lord for themselves. Further, she uses her own life story as the vehicle for attracting others to Him (Jn 4:29).

The Lord’s actions reveal what a natural and simple thing it is to reach out to others. He approaches the vast topic of mankind’s salvation using simple proverb and familiar example. Addressing His disciples, He turns a mundane question about food into a statement of the purpose of His Incarnation and Resurrection: “To do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work” (vs. 34). Notes Saint John Chrysostom, “He here calleth the salvation of men ‘meat,’ showing what an earnest desire He hath of providing for us; for as we long for food, so He that we may be saved” (p. 119).

The Lord then lifts up our eyes to see the fields of men’s souls “already white for harvest” (vs. 35). He urges us not to delay, but rather to enter into God’s plan alongside the prophets and saints, so that we “may rejoice together” with them (vs. 36).

Who is it that sows in order that another may reap (vs. 37)? Is it not God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? God has appointed many to sow the message of His blessings! Let us enter into the work and make disciples of the nations. It need not be an overwhelming task, for wherever we are we will find simple ways to enter “into their labors” (vs. 38).

Let us never doubt how significant the work is, nor question whether we are suited to take part in this great world enterprise. The Lord demonstrates how every honest effort may become part of His process of gathering “fruit for eternal life” (vs. 36). On the basis of the word of Saint Photini, “many of the Samaritans of that city believed in Him” (vs. 39).

Her honest, straightforward testimony concerning matters about which her neighbors are already well informed (vs. 18) leads the villagers to urge Christ “to stay with them; and He stayed there two days” (vs. 40). Thus the harvest was extended to more souls.

God is always able to compensate for our sins, imperfections, and omissions by means of “His own word” (vs. 41). Note how the reading reaches its climax with the Samaritan villagers saying, “Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world” (vs. 42).

Lord, in Thy mercy grant us the peace from above, the salvation of our souls, the peace of the whole world, the good estate of the holy churches of God, and the union of all men. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

May 15 – Monday of the Fifth Week of Pascha (Samaritan Woman)

John 8:42-51

What We Are Up Against: *John 8:42-51, especially vs. 44:* “*You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do.*” Three events occurred recently in separate parts of the world. They may appear at first to be unrelated, although all share the superficial connection of involving Eastern Christians. In Egypt, Islamic militants burst into a village church and machine-gunned a gathering of young people, leaving a dozen dead. In Romania, Orthodox missionaries from America met scores of people who were amazed to that some Americans share their Orthodox faith, care about them, and do not consider them pagans in need of conversion. In America, a picture of a high-level U.S. official greeting the Patriarch of Moscow accompanied a report in a major American news magazine reporting on the widespread activities of the Russian mafia.

Those eager to indulge in conspiracy theories will find in these three events evidence of a worldwide, anti-Orthodox plot. However, if we look at the incidents through the lens of today’s Gospel, a deeper and more troubling connection emerges. Christ makes clear that indeed there is a conspiracy which can be traced to the devil, who opposes God Himself.

There are four ways that we, as Orthodox Christians, experience the effects of this demonic plotting. First, we encounter hatred. The Lord said to His opponents, “If God were your Father, you would love Me. . . . You are of your father the devil” (vss. 42, 44). People hated the Savior, and we Christians should expect the same treatment (Mt 10:22-24).

Even in the West, we should never be deceived by a façade of polite tolerance. Although the Church currently enjoys freedom to preach the great truths of the faith, the cultural tides are running against Christianity throughout much of the world. Orthodoxy, as the staunch guardian of the fullness of apostolic faith, serves as a ready target for hatred.

Second, many people today *do not hear* His words because they “are not of God” (Jn 8: 47). How often does the mention of Jesus’ name provoke offense, or at best a blank stare? A generation has now come of age ignorant of Christianity, “foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another” (Ti 3:3). In the world of secular journalism, a story about crime in Russia needs to be illustrated with a “Russian” image, so why not juxtapose the Patriarch of Moscow with criminal corruption?

Third, as the Lord says, “the desires of your father you want to do. . . . There is no truth in him. . . . But because I tell the truth, you do not believe Me” (vss. 44-45). It is very tempting for us to listen to pleasant lies, enjoy innocent sins, and accept a watered-down Christianity as the whole truth! Many Christians today actually believe that such an approach will save the world, including we poor, deluded Orthodox Christians. However, the devil “is a liar and the father of it” (vs. 44).

The final form of opposition to the Lord is to dishonor Him: “I honor My Father, and you dishonor Me” (vs. 49). The devil openly dishonored the Lord by insinuating, contrary to fact, “*If You are the Son of God*” (Mt 4:6). Although many people today know that Christ is worshiped as divine, they disdain those who reverence Him as King and God.

O God who dost guide the meek, grant us, Thy people, grace in all our uncertainties to ask what Thou wouldest have us to do, and save us from all false choices by Thy pure Light. – Episcopal Book of Common Prayer

May 16 – Tuesday of the Fifth Week of Pascha (Samaritan Woman)

John 8:51-59

Vainglory: John 8:51-59, especially vs. 54: “*If I honor Myself, My honor is nothing. It is My Father who honors Me, of whom you say that He is your God.*” It seems incredible that the Lord Jesus’ opponents would dare to accuse Him of craving honors and adulation from others (vss. 52-53). Of course, this vice appears wherever men gather – it haunts everyone! According to Saint John Climacus, vainglory “abounds till the very grave in clothes, oils, servants, perfumes and . . . beams on all activities” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 22.4, p. 132).

In our modern age this sin and its corresponding virtue have become strangely inverted, for humility and meekness are despised while self-esteem and pride are exalted as salve for the psyche. Let us reflect prayerfully on the dialogue recorded in this gospel passage and allow our Savior’s self-denying grace to teach us how to overcome the soul-destroying sin of vainglory.

Note that the Lord begins to address his opponents using a form of speech unique to Him. This preface often appears in Saint John’s Gospel and is usually translated into English as “truly, truly,” “very truly,” “most assuredly” (vs. 51), etc. However, in the original Greek it reads, “Amen, amen.” The purpose of Christ’s “double amen” is to arrest our attention at the very start of His teaching.

Christ cautions us to struggle against vainglory, for it is deadly to our souls. As His disciples, we are to forsake the effort to look good in the eyes of others. “Vainglory . . . though full of pride . . . feigns humility,” observes Saint John Climacus. “It checks manner and voice, and keeps an eye on the hands of visitors in order to receive something” (p. 132). Let our intent always be entirely truthful, for only a pure heart lives openly in the light of God’s truth. We are to consider who we and what we are in the eyes of God, not the eyes of men.

Following His initial “amens,” the Lord declares a second aspect of the battle against vainglory: keeping His word (vs. 51). Our obedience to the Lord is twofold: first, we believe in Him and then, as a result of that commitment, we do whatever He commands. For the true disciple, obedience stems from genuine trust in the Lord. Our life in Christ will flower as long as we allow ourselves to rely on Him.

Our surrender to the Lord must include our whole heart, soul, and mind (Mt 22:37), if we are to unite our spirits to Christ our God. When we are truly joined to Him, He gives us the grace to obey Him. We are to strive to be at one with the Lord Jesus in every respect, following the pattern of His union with the Father, in which He knows His Father and keeps His word (vs. 55)

Furthermore, the Lord teaches us to shun worldly glory and seek honor from God alone. “If I honor Myself, My honor is nothing. It is My Father who honors Me” (vs. 54). Only recognition from God is truly worth attaining – honor from men sets us up to become the prey of vainglory.

“There is a glory that comes from the Lord,” Saint John Climacus declares, “for He says: Those who glorify Me, I will glorify (1 Kgs 2:30). And there is a glory that hunts us down through diabolic intrigue, for it is said: Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you (Lk 6:26)” (*Ladder* 22.29, p. 135). If we do anything, no matter how trifling, with the goal of being observed by men, then vainglory will conquer us and separate us from the Lord.

The Lord Jesus concludes by referring to Abraham, who “rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad” (vs. 56). Abraham not only saw the promise of Christ beforehand, but also confessed to be a stranger and a pilgrim on earth (Heb 11:13). If we ardently seek our well being from on high, we receive the genuine glory of God. “He who has tasted that will despise all earthly glory,” according to Climacus.

Preserve me from every word or deed that corrupts the soul and save me, O Savior. – Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov

May 17 – Wednesday of the Fifth Week of Pascha (Samaritan Woman)

John 6:5-14

On the Feeding of the Five Thousand: *John 6:5-14*. The Church Fathers provide us with a rich feast of wisdom concerning the Lord's multiplication of the loaves. Saint Augustine observes that "the government of the whole world is a greater miracle than the satisfying of five thousand men with five loaves; and yet no man wonders at the former; but the latter men wonder at. . . . For who even now feeds the whole world, but He who creates the cornfield from a few grains?"

"The power, indeed, was in the hands of Christ; but those five loaves were as seeds, not indeed committed to the earth, but multiplied by Him who made the earth. In this miracle, then, there is that brought near to the senses, whereby the mind should be roused to attention . . . that we might admire the invisible God through His visible works; and being raised to faith, and purged by faith, we might desire to behold Him even invisibly. . . . Yet it is not enough to observe these things in the miracles of Christ. Let us interrogate the miracles themselves, what they tell us about Christ" (Tractate 24.1, *NPNF* Second Series, vol. 7, p. 158).

Several fathers focus their reflections on the Lord's questioning of Philip in verses 5-6. Saint Athanasios the Great asks, "Why [do] they consider Him ignorant? For the One who asks, does not for certain ask from ignorance. . . . Thus John was aware that Christ, when asking, 'How many loaves have ye?' was not ignorant, for he says, 'And this He said to prove him, for He Himself knew what He would do'. . . ."

"From this instance we may understand similar ones; that, when the Lord asks, He does not ask in ignorance . . . but knowing the thing which He was asking, aware what He was about to do. . . . Therefore this is plain to everyone, that the flesh indeed is ignorant, but the Word Himself, considered as the Word, knows all things even before they come to be.

"For He did not when He became man, cease to be God; nor whereas He is God does He shrink from what is man's . . . but rather, being God, He has taken to Him the flesh, and being in the flesh deifies the flesh. For as He asked questions in it, so also in it did He raise the dead. . . ." ("Third Discourse Against the Arians," *NPNF* Second Series, vol. 4, p. 414).

Saint John Chrysostom leads us to a fuller understand of the Lord's purpose in questioning the disciples. "He knew which of His disciples needed most instruction; for this is he who afterwards said, 'Show us the Father, and it sufficeth us' (Jn 14:8), and on this account Jesus was beforehand bringing him into a proper state. For had the miracle simply been done, the marvel would not have seemed so great, but now He beforehand constraineth him to confess the existing want, that knowing the state of matters he might be the more exactly acquainted with the magnitude of the miracle about to take place" ("Homily 42 on the Gospel of Matthew," *NPNF* First Series, vol. 14, p. 151).

Finally, Saint Ephraim the Syrian draws our attention to the multiplication of the bread and its collection afterwards (vss. 11-13). "When our Lord took a little bread, He multiplied it in the twinkling of an eye. That which people effect and transform in ten months with toil, His ten fingers effected in an instant. For He placed His hands beneath the bread as though it were earth, and spoke over it as though thunder. The murmur of His lips sprinkled over it like rain, and the breath of His mouth was there in place of the sun. . . ."

"The loaves of bread, like barren women . . . became fruitful at His blessing, and many were the morsels born from them. The Lord also showed the incisiveness of His word to those who were submissive . . . in accordance with the hunger of those who were hungry. . . . His miracle therefore was measured by the hunger of the thousands, and it was victorious over the number of the twelve baskets" (*Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*).

Let us receive, remember, and record the Lord's questions and miracles in our hearts!

O Christ our God, Thou dost bless and sanctify all things. Unto Thee we ascribe glory! – Festal blessing of the Wheat, Wine, and Oil

May 18 – Thursday of the Fifth Week of Pascha (Samaritan Woman)

John 9:39-10:9

Salvation: John 9:39-10:9, especially vs. 9: “*I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.*” At this point in Saint John’s Gospel, the Lord Jesus Christ delves into the nature of salvation using three vivid images: being illumined (vss. 9:39-10:1), answering the call of God (vss. 2-6), and being fulfilled (vss. 7-9).

Although Saint John’s Gospel also records the Lord Jesus’ warning that “in the last day” all shall be judged by God (vs. 12:48), His purpose is to save: “I did not come to judge the world but to save the world” (vs. 12:47). Why, then, does He begin today’s passage with the words, “For judgment I have come into this world” (vs. 9:39)?

For those who repudiate the Lord, His coming will be judgment; for those who turn to Him, He works their salvation. In John 9:39-41, He describes a sorting action by which some of us see with spiritual understanding while others effectively remain blind. He presents Himself, in fact, as the causative agent of this sorting action.

Using an analogy from chemistry, we can liken the impact of His words and deeds on men’s lives to a spiritual “reagent.” A reagent evokes a specific response when it is introduced into the presence of other elements. The very presence of Christ precipitates a spiritual reaction in us. The eyes of our hearts may be opened, or they may turn dark in resistance to Him. Our spiritual state determines what our reaction to Christ will be.

The judgment of which the Lord speaks in verses 39-41 applies this reactive character to Him. Notice, however, that our *first* response to the Lord may not tell the story of how we will be judged by God on the last day (Mt 21:28-32). Even after we are illumined by Christ, we can still lapse or apostatize. Likewise, the one who rejects Him initially may later repent and be saved.

The bottom line is that Christ comes to save – to give sight, to illumine us. If we persistently prefer our own insights, we will remain blind (vs. 41). Then, at the great and final judgment, we will remain in darkness as a function of our personal choice.

The second image of salvation reveals Christ as the Good Shepherd who preserves His sheepfold as a shelter for His flock (Jn 10:2-6). The sheepfold is His Church, and Christ is the shepherd who comes into the Church. On Pascha the priest knocks three times at the outer doors of the temple, asking for admittance. Only when he says, “Be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors, that the King of glory may enter therein,” are the doors opened.

The sheep know His voice. Since “Church” literally means “those called out,” the sheep in the fold are those who, having responded to the voice of the Master, come out of the world into His sheepfold. To be saved is to respond to Him. We come into the Church through the mysteries of baptism, chrismation, and communion. We continue heeding, following, and responding to Him within the Church while we are yet living in the fallen world.

The third image of salvation has two facets. Christ first portrays Himself as the door to the sheepfold (vs. 7) and then as the pasture for His flock (vs. 9), leading it to a “green pasture” (Ps 22:2). The interrelated images of God as shepherd and as pasture of rest recur frequently in Scripture (see Ps 79:1; 94:7; 99:3; Ezk 34:14). The pasture is where the people of God are filled, nurtured, and protected by Him. It corresponds ultimately to the Kingdom of God – the paradise which appears at the end of history (Rv 22:1-5).

O Christ our God, Good Shepherd of Thy people, grant that when we hear Thy voice we may know Thee who calleth each by name and follow Thee wherever Thou dost lead. – Book of Common Prayer

May 19 – Friday of the Fifth Week of Pascha (Samaritan Woman)

John 10:17-28

Theo-Logic: John 10:17-28, especially vs. 17-18: *“I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father.”* When modern scholars reflect on the sayings of the Lord Jesus, they soon become as divided among themselves as were the Jews who heard those words in the first century. This divergence underscores how far the reasoning of Christ deviates from the norm of our conventional thinking.

Even if we are familiar with the Church’s liturgical life and worship on a regular basis, we may find ourselves listening to Christ’s words without reflection. If we merely accept His statements as standard “biblical” language, we overlook the yawning gulf between the world in which we live and what the Lord truly proposes. His words are meant to jar us out of our complacency.

Saint John thus does us a great favor by reporting that many who heard the Lord had trouble understanding His remarks. Many even said bluntly: “He has a demon and is mad” (vs. 20). If we lack an inner grasp of the logic behind the Lord’s declarations, we may become like the first-century Jews who ask their countrymen, “Why do you listen to Him?” (vs. 20). They refuse to waste time on such confusing talk.

In this reading we encounter three unspoken assumptions that pose great hurdles for many of His disciples, including us. These assumptions take us to the very heart of our faith. We are called to humbly internalize them if we wish to fathom true Orthodoxy and the nature of the life Christ offers to us.

First, note that the Lord Jesus speaks from a perspective that assumes eternity as a state of being belonging strictly to God. Eternity is a gift the Lord graciously bestows upon His servants. As we know, eternity is not an assumption that gains much traction in this world. Few people talk of dying voluntarily, of “laying down one’s life” by choice (vs. 18). Such talk is reserved only for times of war or disaster. Even more rarely do we speak of taking up life again (vss. 17, 18). The notion of resurrection contradicts the mindset that views death as terminal.

Our Savior speaks as He does because He is God. He stresses that His dying is a choice shared by Him and His Father. Here He expresses another spiritual truth: the unity of will among the Persons of the Holy Trinity. As the eternal Word, the Lord informs those who will hear that He and the Father are one in purpose concerning His Death and Resurrection. Only God can speak as Jesus does in this passage. Only God has the power to lay down His life and then take it *again*.

Second, the Lord’s remarks will appear meaningless if we lack an awareness of sin and its “theo-logical” relationship to death. God understands far better than we the disruptive, alienating, and deadly consequences of sin. He reveals this basic truth through His prophets and apostles: sin and death have always been the central bane of human existence. Sadly, such concepts find no place in our modern secular ideologies.

Third, Christ’s words become intelligible only in light of the Incarnation. He joins Himself eternally to our humanity in order to suffer and overcome death. Only from the divine perspective can we understand His laying down His life that He may take it again. Only God can say, “No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have the power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it again” (vs. 18).

Come, let us worship Him who rose from the dead and enlightened all; for He hath liberated us from the oppression of hades by His third-day Resurrection, granting us life. – Verse for the Resurrection

May 20 – Saturday of the Fifth Week of Pascha (Samaritan Woman)

John 10:27-38

Reach Out: John 10:27-38, especially vs. 28: “*And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.*” What a privilege it is that we have “been found worthy to flee unto His holy name, and to take refuge under the shelter of the wings” of the God gives eternal life! Christ our God is never capricious in His giving, and yet we waver between trusting Him and relying on things that do not endure. As Christ’s own sheep, our names are inscribed in the Book of Life. We are united “to the flock of His inheritance,” for at baptism the Church asks the merciful God for all these things on our behalf.

As we consider today’s verses from Saint John’s Gospel, let us learn from the experience of a woman who dares to reach out. “Now a woman, having a flow of blood for twelve years, who had spent all her livelihood on physicians and could not be healed by any, came from behind and touched the border of His garment. And immediately her flow of blood stopped” (Lk 8:43-44).

She reaches out her hand in the belief that Christ can heal her. Many of the nicest people we know might consider accepting God’s help with spiritual or physical problems – if only they could believe in Him. But among our sophisticated contemporaries, truth is considered relative. As Father Seraphim Rose notes, “No one . . . wishes or professes to . . . believe in absolute truth, or more particularly in Christian truth” (*Nihilism*, p. 24).

The truth of God always costs us, for it requires humility, dependence, and surrender on our part. We prefer to rely on our intelligence instead, believing that we know too much to behave with simple, childlike trust. The “wise” among us turn to doctors who cannot actually heal, but only assist us in healing. We fail to see how this sterile wisdom drains us of our blood and vitality, leaving us seriously weakened in the major crises of our lives. We forget that God is everywhere present – His garment is near. The woman with the issue of blood teaches us to reach out to the Lord.

Let us next consider the case of the Apostle Peter. “When he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying ‘Lord, save me!’ And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, ‘O you of little faith, why did you doubt?’” (Mt 14:30-31).

We constantly struggle to keep from sinking into the waves of emptiness surging through the world around us. When sickness, pain, financial loss, betrayal of friendship, isolation, or death come – or when the benign and dull routine of everyday existence empties life of its meaning – we need only reach out and touch the hem of Christ’s garment. He absolutely will not permit His sheep to perish. His hand catches us even when we “walk in the midst of the shadow of death” (Ps 22:4).

Finally, let us consider the experience of the Apostle Thomas. Satan reaches out to entice the Lord Jesus’ own apostle, just as he continually seeks to distract us with the turmoil of life. The compassionate Lord, however, turns aside the doubts planted in Saint Thomas by the enemy. Note the firmness of the Lord’s words: “Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing” (Jn 20:27).

The enemy finds many opportunities to steal us out of the Lord’s hand. Schools and universities often deny God His rightful place in the curriculum, filling our impressionable hearts and minds with godless visions of self-actualization. The media, in living color, sells us fleeting moments of self-satisfaction. And yet, at this very moment, Jesus is passing by, telling us, “Reach your hand here!”

Thou didst not reject the harlot and sinner who approached and touched Thee, so also have pity on me, a sinner, as I approach and touch Thee, trusting in Thine infinite goodness. – Pre-communion Prayer of Saint John Chrysostom

May 21 – Sunday of the Blind Man (Sixth Sunday of Pascha), Tone 5

John 9:1-38

Open and Closed Minds: John 9:1-38, especially vs. 24: “Give God the glory! We know that this Man is a sinner.” A heart-to-heart conversation with someone who has solved all of life’s mysteries and considers every question settled, who brushes away new insights with pre-determined conclusions, is both disappointing and enervating. By contrast, when we converse with someone who examines life’s questions freely, who shares from the heart and looks forward to learning through an honest exchange of ideas, we find our souls energized and lifted up.

In the present passage, the Pharisees react to the healing of the man born blind with a stubborn resistance. Rather than welcome the man’s healing as a sign of God’s presence, they grow ever more desperate in their opposition and angry at any mention of the Christ (vs. 22). The man who is healed, however, exemplifies a heart and mind fully open to and appreciative of God’s mysterious workings in the world. He embraces truth in the person of Truth Himself.

We can identify six ways in which the Pharisees defend themselves against the truth, refusing to engage in open dialogue. First, by accusing the Lord of violating the Sabbath (vs. 16), some of the Pharisees shut themselves off from the joy of this wonderful healing, although a few do not buy into their reasoning. Meanwhile, the man who has been healed says, “He is a prophet” (vs. 17); based on his experience, he testifies to the work of God. “O taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps 33:8).

Second, the Pharisees seek to explain away what happened by impugning the honesty of the witnesses, then questioning results that all can plainly see. “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” (vs. 19). Here three different attacks on credibility are made, but simple replies force them to abandon this approach.

“The Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed . . . he would be put out of the synagogue” (vs. 22). This third defense exposes the hidden motives behind the persistent interrogation associated with the healing – there is a threat of social banishment. The man’s parents rightly refer all inquiries to the blind man himself, while he in turn speaks for himself – and of God – quite capably.

Labeling is a tried and true method of intimidation, and the Pharisees readily embrace it as their fourth weapon. They call Jesus a “sinner,” although no substantiating evidence is offered. They also assume the role of impeccable authorities. In verse 24, the “we” is given grammatical emphasis in the original Greek. The Pharisees retreat into claims of specialized knowledge to support their truth. We are familiar with this ploy, which introduces its claims with statements such as “science has shown,” “all the evidence proves,” or “those who have looked into the matter know...” The blind man brushes these tactics aside and plainly states the facts: “Though I was blind, now I see” (vs. 25).

When it becomes obvious that the Pharisees’ tactics are failing, these opponents of the Lord resort to discrediting the witness: “You are His disciple, but we are Moses’ disciples” (vs. 28). They appeal to a higher authority in their attempt to undermine the case as worthless. They even attribute prejudice to the man who has been healed!

His reply is a classic example of growing strength in response to an attack on one’s faith. He easily reaches the very conclusion the Pharisees reject: “If this man were not from God, He could do nothing” (vs. 33). Finally, the opponents resort to thrusting the man away from them rather than face his truth (vs. 34). After the man is rejected, the Lord comes to him and reveals Himself as God – and the man worships Him (vs. 38).

Illumine our hearts, O Master who loveth mankind, with the pure light of divine knowledge, and open the eyes of our minds to the understanding of Thy gospel teachings. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

May 22 – Monday of the Sixth Week of Pascha (Blind Man)

John 11:47-57

Malice: John 11:47-57, especially vs. 53: “Then, from that day on, they plotted to put Him to death.” Saint Peter, chief of the twelve apostles, admonishes us to lay aside “all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking” (1 Pt 2:1). He himself is a firsthand witness to the malice borne against the Lord – a growing spite that would “hatch the eggs of asps, and weave a spider’s web” (Is 59:5). He watches malice grow from mere questioning into a full-fledged plot, from outrage at the Lord Jesus’ words to execution – the murder of our God and Savior.

The Apostle Paul understands what it is like to carry the venom of threats and murder within his own heart (Acts 9:1). He urges us: “Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice” (Eph 4:31). Likewise, the Gospel account of the plot to kill Jesus is a clarion call to eradicate the cancer of malice from our hearts and souls. We see how malice begins in fear, which in turn makes us willing to sacrifice others and ultimately renders our soul godless.

We see the chief priests who profit from the Jerusalem Temple gathering for a planning session focused on the Lord Jesus. First comes fear: “If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation” (Jn 11:48). Ironically, what they call “our” nation and “our” place (the Temple) in fact belong to the Lord Jesus. The nation is His (Jn 1:11), as is the Temple (Mt 21:13).

History reveals how fear and protectionism warp the soul. We form coalitions to assure that *our* precious goods and goals prevail. We struggle, with malice in our hearts, against any and all who might threaten our paychecks, our benefits – whatever we consider our due.

Candidates campaigning for office understand well the usefulness of fear and malice. They promise more than they can deliver, knowing that economic and social fears drive many voters. Fear makes opponents into partners, and money flows to convince voters, clients, or customers. Woe to him who opposes what is dear to men, for he shall bear their malice.

Though malice often starts in fear, it soon breeds a willingness to sacrifice others. When individuals or groups are designated as problems, malice is prepared to sacrifice them. For example, fifteen million Ukrainians were starved to death in 1934 for obstructing Soviet collectivization.

In the case of the malice that falls on the Lord Jesus, we find a poignant irony. His death does nothing to protect either the nation or the Temple. The revolt that the chief priests feared bursts out thirty years later, the result of festering Jewish nationalism. Nevertheless, as Saint John notes, the Lord Jesus dies as a sacrifice for the nation – and not just that one nation, but the “children of God who were scattered abroad” in many nations (Jn 11:52). The beauty of Christ’s sacrifice is that God uses the malice of men to achieve our salvation.

God was not in the hearts of those who bore malice toward Jesus. On their lips they spoke of God, but they knew Him not in their hearts (1 Cor 2:8). Malice informed their choices through power relationships involving this world’s goods. In the end, their references to God become nothing but taunts (Mt 27:42-43).

According to Saint John Climacus, “If the Holy Spirit is peace of soul, as He is said to be and as He is in reality, and if anger is disturbance of the heart, as it actually is, and as it is said to be, then nothing so prevents His presence in us as anger” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 8.14, p. 82). We are thus called to “put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy” (Col 3:8) that God may dwell in our hearts.

O Compassionate One, grant us tears of cleansing from all fear, malice, and godlessness in our hearts, but rather fill us with Thy pure spirit of love and of trust in Thee for our lives.

May 23 – Tuesday of the Sixth Week of Pascha (Blind Man)

John 12:19-36

Children of Light: John 12:19-36, especially vs. 36: “While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.” We have shouted, chanted, and sung the words “Christ is risen!” for nearly forty days now, witnessing to our faith which is “much more precious than gold that perishes” (1 Pt 1:7). The darkness of the tomb which for a few short days enveloped the body of the crucified Lord has now become forever radiant, a source of true light for the world.

“Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst. . . . [Him] God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it” (Acts 2:22-24). With eyes illumined by faith, we behold the world around us and find it changed – it has acquired a glorious luminescence. “We have seen the true light, we have received the heavenly Spirit; we have found the true faith, worshiping the undivided Trinity: for He hath saved us” (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom).

We know the reason why “the world has gone after Him!” (Jn 12:19). Indeed, who would not prefer to seek life instead of passive resignation to the common lot of death? Even before we lay down these frail, mortal, corruptible bodies, we are raised to life in Christ. We are graced to “seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God” (Col 3:1), when we join the ranks of the disciples who “go after Him.”

Not only do we “wish to see Jesus” (Jn 12:21), but we may also behold “the things which God has prepared for those who love Him [and which] God has revealed . . . to us through His Spirit” (1 Cor 2:9-10). We have seen the Son of Man glorified (vs. 23). Like “a grain of wheat [that] falls into the ground and dies . . . [He] produces much grain” (vs. 24). Indeed, we are the very grain produced from Him, ground into one loaf, one Body. “Just as this loaf previously was scattered on the mountains and when it was gathered together it became a unity” (*Apostolic Fathers*, p. 314), so we have been gathered together from the ends of the earth into one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

Light and life have been implanted in our undeserving, sinful selves. Now we have a choice between wasting our life on this world – and losing the true light – or hating our life in this world and receiving the fullness of eternal Life (vs. 25). The Light calls us to follow Him; where He is we must be also, that we may be honored by the Father (vs. 26).

Every passing day prepares us for that dread and final Day. Christ our God casts out the ruler of this world when He is “lifted up from the earth” (vs. 31). The Cross is His triumphant sign, filled with the power to draw us close to our Savior (vs. 32). In the end, the choice is ours – do we wish to be counted among the sons of the Light?

This Light walked among the men of first-century Roman Palestine. He taught by the shores of its lakes, entered homes, and touched the suffering people He found there. And yet the leaders of His day refused to acknowledge Him. Listen to His admonition, for He addresses it to us as much as to those who lived in the first century: “Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you; he who walks in darkness does not know where he is going” (vs. 35).

What a pity that in our own day so many still remain in darkness! Let us not push Him away, perpetuating the crime of those who first rejected Him, but rather seize the blessed opportunity to become children of the light. Christ is among us, speaking to us from the Gospels, shining from every icon with the uncreated Light. “Come ye, take light from the Light!”

O Lord, help me to prove myself a child of the light and an heir of Thy good things. – Baptismal prayer

May 24 – Wednesday – Leave-taking of Pascha
John 12:36-47

Who Has Believed? *John 12:36-47, especially vs. 38:* “*Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?*” Let us consider God’s commitment to our poor human race and to His creation, bound in futility. Most especially, let us consider His desire “not to judge the world, but to save the world” (vs. 47). Salvation from sin and death is the center of God’s plan for mankind – the essence of God’s great design from eternity. He uses the course of history to transform men and women who confess Him and labor with Him to fulfill His purpose for all mankind and the whole of creation.

God brings about our salvation in Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:19), but not everyone will be saved. We find that sad truth declared very plainly in the present passage from Saint John’s Gospel (Jn 12:37, 40, 48). God requires us to respond to His initiative in Christ. Specifically, He seeks our belief in Jesus as King and God as demonstrated by our efforts to obey Christ’s words (vs. 46).

We see many people around us who neither accept the Lord Jesus nor make an effort to live by His teaching (vs. 47). Why is this so? Since the dawn of time, resistance to God has been the hallmark of the human race – the great problem plaguing every man and woman.

Reflecting on this problem, the Evangelist John reiterates the Prophet Isaiah’s question: “Lord, who has believed our report?” (vs. 38). Saint John provides the first part of his answer with another quote from Isaiah (vs. 40). God will heal us if we will embrace the truth. He will even soften our hearts so that we may turn to Him and obey.

Bear in mind that a hasty reading of this verse can lead us to the opposite conclusion – that God actually hardens our hearts so as to prevent us from seeing the truth. The Lord explicitly rejects this terrible, false notion: “I did not come to judge . . . but to save” (vs. 47). There is a distinction here between God’s active will and His permissive will. God does not blind us with the active intent of preventing our right perception, as verse 40 might be (incorrectly) interpreted. However, He does permit us to resist Him – to say no to His will. In such a case, we blind ourselves. Here we find the true meaning of verse 40, which reminds us that there are predictable consequences with God (Rom 1:21).

The second part of Saint John’s answer emerges when we consider this positive truth: many individuals see clearly, understand with their hearts, and turn to God. These believers He heals. Deuteronomy 4:9 provides an excellent commentary on verse 40: “Only take heed to yourself and diligently guard your soul, and lest you forget all the things your eyes saw, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life.” This passage expresses the Lord’s point concerning the keeping of His words (Jn 12:47). When we truly see, we make a deliberate and God-pleasing effort to obey.

Even though we are weak-willed because of our sins, we can still genuinely strive to make the godly effort required for our salvation! The Lord Jesus teaches us a simple practice for strengthening our resolve to obey: confession (vs. 42). He speaks here not only of confessing our sins, but living for Christ deliberately and publicly, without hiding our commitment to Him (Mk 8:38). Of course, the Lord never suggests that we push our faith on other people, but neither are we to hide it. “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Mt 5:16).

True belief in Christ is an open secret – first we see, and then we choose to act. Only then, in our interaction with others, does the great mercy of salvation become manifest.

O Lord, may we preserve our baptismal garment and the earnest of the Spirit pure and undefiled unto the dread Day of Christ our God and prove ourselves children of the light. – Baptismal prayer

May 25 – Thursday of the Sixth Week of Pascha
Feast of the Ascension

The Lord Blesses: Luke 24:36-53, especially vs. 51: “Now it came to pass, while He blessed them, that He was parted from them and carried up into heaven.” What image comes to mind when we read the account of Christ’s final blessing: “He lifted up His hands and blessed them” (vs. 50)? Icons of Christ often depict His hand raised in the same manner used by our priests when they bless us. Although we will never see and touch Lord as the first disciples did during the forty days before His Ascension, the Lord constantly blesses us through the gift of the Holy Spirit. In every season the blessing which the Lord bestows on His Church is essentially the same as that blessing He bestowed upon His apostles until “He was parted from them” (vs. 51).

Today’s Gospel begins by depicting this scene: “Jesus Himself stood in the midst of them, and said to them, ‘Peace to you’” (vs. 36). We are still blessed, for Christ continues to come among us according to the pattern of the eleven Resurrection appearances described in the Gospels.

In the earliest of these appearances, He comes to His disciples on “the first day of the week” (Lk 24:1). The Church continues to celebrate this first day, Sunday, as the Lord’s Day, the foremost day of the week. The Lord’s Day takes precedence over the hallowed seventh day, the Sabbath given to the people of God in the fourth commandment as a day of rest (Ex 20:8-11). The Sabbath is honored by the Church as the day Christ’s body rested in the tomb, but the Lord’s Day offers a greater blessing, for on a Sunday Christ rose from the dead. According to tradition, the Lord’s Day also is known as the eighth day, or day of the New Creation, called by Saint Augustine “an eighth and eternal day, consecrated by the Resurrection of Christ” (*City of God* 22.30, p. 554).

Christ continues to come among us in the mystery of our Church assembly. In Greek, this gathering is called a *synaxis*. By gathering together in the temple, we become the Body of Christ, for as He says, “Where two or three are gathered in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (Mt. 18:20).

Most importantly of all, the Lord is known among us “in the breaking of bread” (Lk 24:35). Several of Christ’s Resurrection appearances include a meal at which He blesses the disciples (Jn 21:12, Lk 24:30-31). His presence is of a supernatural character, for His numinous body is transformed by the Resurrection; His two natures remain distinct in one Person.

Christ suddenly appears among His own inside a locked room. He converses with two of them in the guise of a stranger on the road to Emmaus. Just as suddenly, He is gone. When we say, “Christ is in our midst. He is and He shall be,” we express the ongoing blessing of His presence among us.

The Risen Lord blesses the faithful with tangible evidence of His bodily Resurrection (Lk 24:39-43). He tells Saint Mary Magdalene not to cling to Him (Jn 20:17). He reveals the wounds in His hands and side, commanding Thomas to touch the physical evidence of the Crucifixion (Jn 20:27). When we receive holy communion, we tangibly encounter His immaculate Body and precious Blood.

The Lord also blesses His disciples during the forty days by enlightening them to comprehend the Scriptures (Lk 24:44-49). Our own Church worship always includes the witness of the written word. In fact, each prayer and verse read during the service is permeated by the language of the sacred record and enlivened by Christ’s presence. Our pastors, like the apostles (Acts 2:42; 6:2), pay special heed to God’s word when preaching so that we might fully “comprehend the Scriptures” (Lk 24:45).

O Lord, sweep death from our flesh as we partake of Thine incorruptible Life. – Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov

May 26 – Sixth Friday after Pascha
John 14:1-11

Quieting the Heart: *John 14:1-11, especially vs. 1:* “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Have faith in God and faith in Me” (NAB translation). Whittaker Chambers, after a lifelong commitment to the Communist Party, rejected that ideology. He tells of a German man, like himself, who became “an implacable anti-communist” in a single unexpected moment during the heyday of the Soviet Union. Chambers describes the man’s conversion: “One night in Moscow, he heard screams. That’s all. Simply, one night he heard screams.” Chambers asks, “Why does the communist ever hear them? Because,” he asserts, “in the end there persists in every man, however he may deny it, a scrap of soul.”

Our own “scrap of soul” can likewise be troubled. Events have the power to awaken, unsettle, and distress our heart and soul, forcing us to change. What sort of circumstances have this power? Guilt, loss of meaning, and death come readily to mind. When such realities stir within, three statements from the Lord also press in to give us peace: “Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me” (Jn. 14:1 NKJ translation).

Guilt is disturbing, for it touches the depth of the conscience. Blame of others, confession, denial, and self-punishment are various tactics we use to rid ourselves of guilt. We rationalize the sins we enjoy – and if we persist, we may sear the conscience and deaden that holy fire that burns and troubles the heart (see Prv 6:28; 1 Ti 4:2). Yet so long as a scrap of soul remains, there is hope for our repentance. True life abides, like a green root of a dead tree, and with a little nurture life sends up new living shoots.

We observe how the Lord Jesus undercuts the Apostle Peter’s pride and self-confidence: “Will you lay down your life for My sake? Most assuredly, I say to you, the rooster shall not crow till you have denied Me three times” (Jn 13:38 NKJ). Jesus says this to a disciple who has left everything to follow Him, a man who loves Him deeply, a man whose physical life He saved from drowning by an outstretched hand.

The Lord troubles Saint Peter and the other disciples, and yet He reassures them. Despite guilt, there is a way to God, for “I am the way.” Further, He says, “No one comes to the Father except through Me” (vs. 14:6). The Lord’s message is simple: “Stop the raging in your heart; believe in Me, for I am the way back to the Father.”

Loss of meaning also erodes our inner world. Whittaker Chambers explains how so many were caught up by the false promises of communism. “The world outside communism, the world in crisis, lacks a vision and a faith.” He indeed describes the present world!

The world’s mad rush to pleasure, self-realization, and addiction are frenetic efforts to stave off the loss of meaning that seeps in upon us from every side. Against such emptiness stands the holy faith. Saint John of Kronstadt says, “The Holy Trinity sees and hears me; this is the most life-giving assurance for my heart, penetrating it with peace and joy.” Jesus Christ is “the Truth” (vs. 6). When we have faith in Him who is the truth, He stops the raging in the heart.

The specter of death disquiets us. Life’s gifts – our cherished relationships, achievements, and goals to be completed – will be shaken in one moment by death. The Lord Jesus warns the disciples of His Passion: “One of you will betray Me” (vs. 13:21). “I shall be with you a little while longer” (vs. 33) and “where I am going you cannot follow Me now” (vs. 36). These are disturbing words. Saint John Chrysostom notes that the disciples “would expect to have to undergo some great reverse, sufficient to bend even souls of adamant.” But although the Lord Jesus died and His flock was scattered, Christ is among us!

“I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only-begotten. . . .”

May 27 – Saturday of the Sixth Week of Pascha (After-feast of the Ascension)

John 14:10-21

To Ask in Christ's Name: John 14:10-21, especially vss. 13-14: *“And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.”* Among the interpretations of this promise from Christ our God, we find some that are plainly wrong, even highly presumptuous. Due to the “deceitfulness of sin” (Heb 3:13), we are tempted to impose our own ideas on these words of the Lord rather than grappling with what He has to say on His terms. Let us resolve not to depart from the Lord Jesus' intent, but rather to study His meaning and follow it faithfully within the greater context of His teachings.

First, how shall we understand the words “in My name” (Jn 14:13)? In common speech, a “name” is simply a designation – this is the first meaning found in the dictionary. However, when Christians speak God's name, mere identity is not the foremost issue.

When we encounter this word in Psalm 19:1 (“the name of the God of Jacob defend thee”), we understand the *name* of God to be equivalent to His living, protective activity. That usage proves consistent with the way the name of God is frequently used in Holy Scripture. For example, we read: “Help us, O God our Savior, for the sake of the glory of Thy name; O Lord, deliver us and be gracious unto our sins for Thy name's sake” (Ps 78:9).

To speak the name of God reveals His present energies. Saint John writes, “As many as received Him, to them gave He the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name” (Jn 1:12). Our Christian life is predicated on the assumption that when we trust in the Lord's active energies – in His name – we may become what we were originally created to be: sons of God. Thus His name also defines us.

Let us seek illumination by applying this understanding of the phrase “the name of the Lord” to today's reading. The one who loves Christ as Savior and God, is also one who trusts the Crucified and Risen Lord to be present and active in all circumstances. Such a love seeks to embrace even the more difficult commandments of the faith (vs. 14:15), such as taking up the cross.

Disobedience, indifference, willfulness, and disdain epitomize the spirit of the world in its rejection of what Christ desires. These qualities in us will impede His promises; to ask with such attitudes is not to ask in His name.

Of course, there will always be those of us who do as we please, and then have the temerity to pray for whatever we desire. In such a case we are deceived, believing God will answer us like a supernatural bellhop. Such prayer is abomination in God's eyes. “My name shall be great among the Gentiles,” says the Lord Almighty. ‘But you profane it . . . Cursed be the man who . . . takes a vow but sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished . . . My name is glorious among the nations’” (Mal. 1:11-12, 14).

If we are to ask rightly in the name of the Lord, we must strive to be pure with the help of the Holy Spirit. Christ promises to pray the Father to send the Holy Spirit to the faithful. The Lord tells us that the Spirit will “abide with you forever – the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him, but you know Him, for He dwells with you, and will be in you” (Jn 14:16-17).

Saint Seraphim of Sarov identifies the error of the foolish virgins as the supposition “that the Christian life consisted merely in doing good works . . . but they little cared whether they acquired thereby the grace of God's Spirit” (Moore, *Saint Seraphim of Sarov*, p. 172). When the Spirit guides us from within, then our prayer will gain a response from the Lord!

Holy art Thou, of a truth, and all-holy, and there are no bounds to the majesty of Thy holiness, and just art Thou in all Thy works, for in righteousness . . . Thou hast ordered all things. – Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great

**May 28 – Sunday of the Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council (Seventh Sunday of Pascha), Tone 6
John 17:1-13**

The Glory of God: *John 17:1-13, especially vs. 13:* “*But now I come to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves.*” As we read the High Priestly Prayer of the Lord Jesus as recorded in these verses, we enjoy the privilege of listening in, so to speak, as God the Word addresses God the Father concerning the inner life of the Godhead. The Lord Jesus deliberately utters the words of this prayer in the presence of His apostles and thus completes the revelation by which He discloses Himself to mankind.

What do we learn concerning the Godhead from Christ’s prayer? First, we understand that God’s glory becomes most evident in the Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ (vss. 1-5). The Lord Jesus reveals His glory through these events to His apostles (vss. 6-7) in order that they might gain true knowledge of God – a knowledge they receive because they believe in the Son and trust Him (vss. 7-10).

Second, we understand that while He is on earth the Lord Jesus keeps the apostles in God’s presence. And ever since the Lord’s Ascension, the Holy Spirit keeps the apostolic community – the Church – united to the Father and the Son (vss. 11-13).

The word *doxa* (glory) appears no fewer than four times in the first five verses of this prayer. The Lord Jesus reveals to us that His glory is eternal, for He shares this glory with God the Father from “before the world was” (vs. 5). This glory is accomplished at a specific *hour* (vs. 1) in the history of the world through the great and saving work of His Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension (vs. 4). By God’s own design (Acts 2:23), the glory of God is revealed on earth to men for our salvation (Ti 2:11) so that we may truly *know* God (Jn 17:3) as Holy Trinity.

The Lord Jesus asserts that He has manifested God’s name to the “men whom You have given me out of the world” (vs. 6) – in other words, to the apostles in whose presence the prayer is uttered. We learn from John 14:10-21 that the *name* of Christ connotes the active presence of God. The glory of God is now revealed to the apostles because Jesus, the God-man, is present and active among them. Everything God the Father gives to the Son comes from the ineffable glory of the Godhead (vs. 7).

The apostles’ belief in the Son of God as “the only true God” gives them eternal life (vs. 3). Christ gives His apostles the words of God the Father (vs. 8). When they receive those words, they come to know God as the saving Truth – not in form of a mere concept, but in the person of the God-man, Jesus. The apostles’ capacity to receive these words from the Word of God is in itself a mystical, saving work of God the Father (Mt 16:17), which is actively accomplished within their hearts and minds through the work of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:2).

God protects the tiny apostolic group – the nascent Church – as the Lord Jesus walks the roads of Palestine with the disciples: “While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name” (Jn 17:12). Now, on the threshold of His Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension – *the decisive moment of all time* – the Son asks the Father to continue to guard the apostles (vs. 11). God the Father accomplishes this request through God the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). And since “none of them is lost except the son of perdition” (Jn 17:12) – i.e., Judas – the apostles thus have the joy of God the Son “fulfilled in themselves” (vs. 13).

O Christ, have mercy upon us guilty men who transgress against Thee often and in every hour. Give us before the end, the means of a repentance acceptable to Thee. Verily, sovereignty over creation, its sanctification, and its motion are of Thy Holy Spirit; for He is God consubstantial with the Father and with Thee, the living Word. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

May 29 – Monday of the Seventh Week of Pascha
John 14:27-15:7

Table Talk – Do Not Be Troubled: John 14:27-15:7, especially vs. 27: “*Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.*” At the Last Supper (see Jn 13:30-31), the Lord Jesus speaks at length to His closest disciples to prepare them for His departure (vs. 16:5). He likens His leaving to a birthing (vs. 21). It will be painful, but at the same time it will mark the joyous advent of a new age for all men.

We, of course, have the advantage of knowing that Christ’s Passion is followed by His Resurrection, Ascension, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit – events that His apostles could not possibly anticipate on that fateful evening. The Lord clearly desires to equip His disciples to meet the coming interval of grief and pain, but He also readies us, His future disciples, for the dark times that inevitably come to us in life. The Lord offers this “table talk” as both a farewell teaching and a “how-to” session: how to be victorious, how to cope with pain, how to pray, how to avoid stumbling, how not to be troubled – essential qualities for every disciple.

Early in His discourse, the Lord Jesus directs the disciples to maintain His peace within themselves. They desperately need His peace if they are to survive the time between His *going away* and His *coming back* (vss. 14:27-31). We likewise need His peace if we are to survive this present dark age.

The Lord concludes His message by offering us the image of a vine and its branches (vss. 15:1-7). Pruning is required if the branches are to bear fruit, yet each branch must remain united to the vine in order to bring forth life.

When we combine the two points emphasized in today’s reading, we discover the key to facing every trial that comes to us during this life. We gain and hold onto the Lord Jesus’ peace only by *abiding in Him*. In this message lies the secret of how *not* to be troubled.

We begin by recognizing the peace of the Lord as a unique type of peace, not to be confused with the term used by the world to describe a non-warring condition between nations and groups during which violence and civil commotion remain at a minimum. Christ’s peace is a condition of the heart that exists when the love of God is known and returned to Him (vs. 14:28). Within our Christian communities, peace is the natural, God-given concomitant of holy communion and fellowship.

Furthermore, Christ’s peace removes our deepest human fears of guilt, death, and perdition (vs. 27). Such fears cannot coexist with the Lord’s peace. The Lord Jesus’ remark that Satan “has nothing in Me” (vs. 30) not only indicates the sinless state of His human nature but also applies to His peace inside us. The gates of hell cannot prevail against the people of God, for nothing can overcome Christ’s peace within us. We rejoice because He says, “I am going to the Father, for My Father is greater than I” (vs. 28).

Why, then, do we so often find the peace of Christ disrupted within our hearts? Saint John of Kronstadt explains that “the devil takes an enormous part in the sins of men. Therefore, let none consider himself cast away, even if he be a great sinner: his sins are greatly the fault of the devil. Turn at once to Jesus Christ for forgiveness – He is ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29)’” (*Spiritual Counsels*, p. 105).

We abide in Christ and secure our bond with Him by making an honest effort to bear fruit. As we abide in Him, we receive His fruit of peace (vs. 15:4). The Orthodox concept of salvation assumes our cooperation with the saving work of Christ. However, the Lord’s work is prior and requisite, for “without Me you can do nothing” (vs. 5). Apart from His gift – and if we do not labor – we shall be cast out, thrown into the fire and burned (vs. 6). But if we work with Him we will find His true peace abiding in us (vss. 7; 14:27).

Lord, grant us the mercy of Thy peace from above and the salvation of our souls. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

May 30 – Tuesday of the Seventh Week of Pascha
John 16:1-13

Table Talk, continued – How Not to Stumble: *John 16:1-13, especially vs. 1:* “*These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble.*” We continue with another portion of Christ’s farewell discourse, in which the Lord offered His final teachings at the Last Supper. He aims to prepare His disciples for the difficult times ahead, including His Passion and the time after His Ascension. He knows that spiritual disorientation and pain await His flock, and He does not want His beloved followers to stumble, either when He is attacked or their own faith assaulted.

Certainly, consternation wells up in our hearts when we hear the Lord Jesus attacked, defamed, or rejected. Likewise, we may stumble on the royal way when we ourselves suffer physical and spiritual assaults. The Lord reveals three ways by which we may defeat such attacks. First, we must prepare for assaults by knowing they are coming. Second, we reframe our vision by holding onto His Cross, claiming as our own “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24). Finally, we rely upon the gift of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us.

To guard a nation against attack requires constant surveillance and early detection. The armed forces of our nation remain ready for deployment at any time, but without the gathering of intelligence such preparedness is of little value. The same is true of our life in Christ. Prayer, worship, and the sacraments help us but little unless we are trained in the use of these spiritual weapons, employ them regularly, and stay aware of developments around us.

So that we might maintain such an awareness, the Lord Jesus places His Church on “ready alert.” “They will put you out of the synagogues,” He warns. “Yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. . . . I have told you, that when the time comes, you may remember that I told you of them” (Jn 16:2, 4).

If we expect assaults on our person and on our faith, then keeping the heart awake is mandatory. The Apostle Paul tells Timothy to “be watchful in all things” (2 Tim 4:5). Remaining alert to the condition of our heart and inner life – especially during times of loss, rejection, or defamation – shows watchfulness.

According to Saint Hesychios, the heart is a “watchtower commanding a view over our whole spiritual life” (*Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 175). When our passions become inflamed, they separate us from the Lord – and then we abandon our watchtower and stumble. Our Lord and Savior promises, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20). If we keep watch, expecting spiritual shocks, we will not trip and be torn from Him.

Next, the Lord helps us prepare for spiritual trauma by reframing our perception of His Cross: “It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you” (Jn 16:7). The Lord’s departure (by means of His Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension) sets in place the necessary, eternal foundation of our salvation. We receive an ineffable blessing from God, for Christ has trampled down death by death once and for all. He bestows life upon all of us who take His hand, allowing the Savior to raise us up from spiritual death.

Above all, Christ’s departure brings into the world the Holy Spirit who “is everywhere present and fillest all things.” He is within us and around us, beyond us and yet very near. Through the Spirit we learn “many things” that the Lord wishes to say to us (vs. 12). He sounds the alert whenever we fail to notice an impending attack, or slip off our sure foundation in Christ. The Spirit will “guide [us] into all truth . . . and . . . tell [us] of things to come” (vs. 13).

O Lord, by Thy sovereign Spirit strengthen our unstable minds, that we may be worthy each day to do Thy commandments, being guided by Thy Spirit into that which is profitable. – Vespers for Pentecost

May 31 – Wednesday of the Seventh Week of Pascha

John 16:15-23

Table Talk, continued – Coping with Pain: *John 16:15-23, especially vs. 20:* “*Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy.*” Our Lord Jesus is compassionate. He knows that a painful time lies ahead for the disciples who have committed themselves to Him, their Teacher and Lord. Knowing that He will be cruelly wrenched away, our Lord talks to His beloved about how to cope with the pain and sorrow already seeping into their consciousness. He lovingly prepares the first disciples – even as He prepares us – to meet the pains that are certain to come to us in this existence.

Above all, the Lord Jesus places the issue of pain in the context of the Spirit-led life, promising that the Holy Spirit “will take of Mine and declare it to you” (vs. 15). To all who commit their lives to Him, Christ our God promises the gift of the Holy Spirit, also called the Paraclete, Helper, and Comforter. The Spirit will abide with the disciples of Christ and dispense light, life, power, healing, mercy, and the presence of Christ Himself, exactly as needed.

This work of the Holy Spirit, called *declaring* in this passage, has particular bearing on the issue of pain, for the Spirit brings us the strength to overcome pain’s terrible and dehumanizing effects. He enables the faithful to endure and even transforms their lamenting into joy (vss. 20-22), for “declaration” by the Spirit is not limited to mere concepts. The Holy Spirit effects results: for example, He came upon the Theotokos and, when the power of the Highest overshadowed her (Lk 1:35), she conceived Christ.

The Lord takes two assumptions for granted when He speaks of the Holy Spirit. First, the indwelling of the Spirit is the normal state for His disciples; the Spirit is to be with us and to indwell us (Jn 14:17). Second, the Spirit’s help comes to the faithful in times of darkness as well as times of joy.

The next portion of the Lord Jesus’ counsel anticipates times of painful uncertainty. There are dark spiritual voids in our lives when we neither feel nor discern the presence of God. What does the Lord say of these times? “A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me, because I go to the Father” (vss. 16:16).

Emptiness comes but then it goes away – and even these difficult times are used by God. The Lord’s clear implication is that we should expect periods of emptiness, when we are to wait for His presence. Let us be reassured as the Prophet David was: “But be subject unto God, O my soul, for from Him is my patient endurance” (Ps 61:5).

Pain cannot be denied or evaded. The Lord encourages weeping and lamenting (Jn 16:20), but our tears should spring from the kind of certainty demonstrated by the Three Holy Youths when they faced the fiery furnace. “For there is a God in the heavens whom we serve,” they tell Nebuchadnezzar, “and He is able to save us from the burning fiery furnace; and He will deliver us from your hands, O king. But if not, let it be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods” (Dan 3:17-18).

Let our tears never arise out of despair or self-pity, but always come from repentance, flowing out of our “godly sorrow” (2 Cor 7:10). We remember the blessing conveyed to those “who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Mt 5:4).

Finally, the Lord uses the image of childbirth to inspire us in the midst of pain. We are to look beyond suffering, just as a mother, when she “has given birth to the child . . . no longer remembers the anguish” (Jn 16:21). Beyond Christ’s Passion lies His Resurrection. God is our surety for coping with pain, “and your joy no one will take from you” (vs. 22).

The Groom of the Church was fastened with nails, and the Son of the Virgin was pierced with a spear. Thy sufferings we adore, O Christ. Make us to behold Thy glorious Resurrection. – Orthros of Great and Holy Friday