

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

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

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

We are not surprised to learn that they glorify and praise God as they depart, for “all the things that they had heard and seen [in Bethlehem, were] as it was told them” (vs. 20). The Child lies in a manger – a feeding trough – wrapped in swaddling cloths. Further, the shepherds share what is reported by Mary, His mother, and Joseph, her betrothed: an Angel instructed them to call the Child by the name Jesus, the very name given to Him at His circumcision (cf. Lk 1:31 and Mt 1:25). Let us be sure not to miss the evangelist’s point: on the eighth day, the Child receives the Hebrew name *Yeshua*, which means “savior” (in Greek, *Iesus*). Saint Luke is underscoring the fact that Jesus’ birth is no random event. God is fulfilling His purpose from eternity. The shepherds learn this truth at the time of His birth (Lk 2:11). Saint Luke wants us to understand that God comes to us humbly, as a man, in order to save His creation gone astray. He is salvaging the race He formed in His own image. The Evangelist weaves this message into his entire Gospel.

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

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

This king for all nations, born in David’s lineage, is the Lord Jesus, the very Child that captures the shepherds’ hearts in Bethlehem (Lk 2:15). “And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom” (vs. 40), for the grace of God is upon Him. Even as a youth, He amazes Joseph, Mary, and everyone in the Temple with His wisdom and knowledge of spiritual truth (46-47). The Seed of salvation who came forth from the Virgin’s womb is indeed the Savior of the world. As He matures, Christ Jesus fulfills the name given Him before His conception. “Glory to Thine ineffable condescension, O Word!” (Festal Hymn of the Circumcision).

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

**January 2 – Thursday of the Fourth Week before Lent (Publican and Pharisee)
Mark 12:38-44**

Two Cents' Worth: Mark 12:38-44, especially vs. 43: “So He called His disciples to Himself and said to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury. . . .’” Inflation has eroded the value of the penny to the point that most people will not bother to pick one up if they see it lying on the sidewalk. Nevertheless, we still hear people insist that they want to get their “two cents’ worth.” What of the widow in today’s reading? Does she, in fact, get her two cents’ worth?

Saint Jerome answers affirmatively, observing that while “the widow in the Gospel . . . was but a poor widow [she] was richer than all the people of Israel. She had but a grain of mustard seed, but she put her leaven in the measures of flour; and, tempering her confession of the Father and of the Son with the grace of the Holy Spirit, cast her two pennies into the treasury. All the substance that she had, all her possessions she offered in the two testaments of her faith.

“Her two pennies are like the two Seraphim which glorify the Trinity with their threefold song and are stored among the treasures of the Church. They are like the two legs of the tongs by which live coal is caught up to cleanse the sinner’s lips” (Letter 54, ACCS New Testament, vol. II, p. 177-8). By her pure intention, this widow bought heaven with two small copper coins.

Whenever we give tithes, pray to the Lord, worship at His holy altar, or invest our energy in any good work of the Kingdom of Christ, our offering rests solely on the foundation of our intentions, for better or worse. In the case of the widow, “since it was not money but rather her intention that prevailed, that woman received everything because she demonstrated firm conviction” (Saint John Chrysostom, *NPNF* First Series, vol. 5, p. 251).

When we examine carefully the vitality of our intentions, we often find that our souls are like poor beggars with little to offer our All-giving Lord. We proclaim at baptism, “I have united myself to Christ, believe in Him as King and God, and bow down also before Him.” Yet we must admit to ourselves that we “do not love God. For if I loved God I should be continually thinking about Him with heartfelt joy. . . . On the contrary, I much more often and much more eagerly think about earthly things, and thinking about God is labor and dryness” (*Way of a Pilgrim*, p. 146). At best, our souls contain only a half-penny’s worth of godly intention!

Nevertheless, we are to give what small bit of love and devotion we can muster to our Savior. “Lord, I believe, help my unbelief” (Mk 9:24). Let us offer our paltry love to our King and God and rejoice in doing so. Even our mite of imperfect love, when offered together with the mite of repentance, will be received with *joy in heaven* (Lk 15:7). Our poor widowed souls can always find hope in offering these two mites to God.

Never forget that it is Christ who sits “opposite the treasury and [sees] how the people put money into the treasury” (Mk 12:41). A sense of shame at our lackluster love can be the beginning of repentance. It is a tiny mite, but it counts for something. It represents the first waking breath of knowing how very greatly God loves us.

Let us keep this truth in mind as we reflect on the Giver, the One who loves and became poor for our sake, and we may become rich (2 Cor 8:9). We have no basis for pride in what we give, but let us pray, worship, and invest ourselves so that His love stirs up even a tiny response from our shrunken hearts. For when the widow “out of her poverty [puts] in all that she [has], her whole livelihood” (Mk 12:44), then God sees and blesses her soul with His great love. She gets infinitely more than two cents’ worth!

O Lord God Almighty, who alone art holy, who dost accept the sacrifice of praise from those who call upon Thee with their whole heart: Receive also the prayer of us sinners. – Prayer of the Proskomedia

**January 3 – Friday of the Fourth Week before Lent (Publican and Pharisee)
Mark 13:1-8**

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

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

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

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

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

The great scholar Leonid Ouspensky demonstrates that the icon, as liturgical craft, “does not define itself as an art belonging to one or another historical epoch, nor as the expression of the national peculiarities of one or another people.” Rather, “in its essence the icon . . . never served religion, but like the word, has always been and is an integral part of religion, one of the instruments for the knowledge of God, one of the means of communion with Him” (*Meaning of Icons*, p. 31). If you would hold fast to Christ, search for Him through His holy icons and reverence Him in the liturgy. Finally, remember that the Spirit brings Christ to us through the lives of the saints and the writings of the Church Fathers, for these luminaries both teach and show us how to practice and guard the truth in Christ.

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

January 4 – Saturday before the Holy Theophany of Christ
Matthew 3:1-11

Loud and Clear: *Matthew 3:1-11, especially vs. 2:* “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*” Let us not be disconcerted by John’s message, nor so unwise as to dismiss the Baptist’s words as a directive intended solely for the people living in *those days* (vs. 1). As Saint John Chrysostom indicates, Saint John “had arrived, making a way and preparing it beforehand . . . not bestowing the gift, which was the remission of sins, but preparing beforehand the souls of those who would receive the God of all” (ACCS Commentary on Matthew 1-13, p. 39-40).

Will we receive this “God of all,” He who truly did come and who continues, from then until now, to dispense the “remission of sins”? Yes, Jesus Christ; for even now Christ the Lord remits sins for those who heed what John preaches.

It is essential that we grasp the full content of Saint John’s message. His theme, clearly, centers on repentance from start to finish (vss. 2, 8, 11). Altogether, he clarifies three points in these eleven verses. First, John carefully distinguishes between himself and the Lord (vs. 3); John and his message merely are the prelude. Second, He directs his warnings to repent and confess “their sins” (vs. 6) to everyone, advising us to avoid evasion or reliance on our status as members of God’s people (vss. 7-9).

Third, Saint John delineates the difference between the baptism he offers and that of the Lord (vss. 10-11). “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance,” but the coming Messiah “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (vs. 11). John speaks clearly here of two different baptisms. Christians today may draw erroneous conclusions from this passage, failing to separate John’s baptism from the mystery of holy baptism into Christ Jesus.

Saint Symeon the New Theologian clarifies this distinction for the faithful in Christ. He notes: “Mourning [i.e., repentance] has a twofold action: like water, tears extinguish all the fire of passion and wash the soul clean of their foulness; and, again through the presence of the Holy Spirit, it is like fire bringing life, warming and inflaming the heart, and inciting it to love and desire of God.” Since most Christians do not remember their baptism as infants, and since all of us fall into sin during our walk with the Lord, we are likely to overlook the key phrase in Saint Symeon’s statement: “The presence of the Holy Spirit . . . is like fire bringing life.”

John the Forerunner’s baptism is a start in the right direction, a preparation for a new and straight way, for the great life which union with the Lord provides. Saint John’s baptism aims, through the gifts of true repentance, to expel “every evil and impure spirit which hideth and maketh its lair in (the fallen human) heart.”

Often it is said that “the life in Christ is a life of repentance.” We ought to hear that accurately, for when we fall into sin after our baptism and chrismation, we indeed must go back to that initial stage taught by Saint John: repentance. But here is the difference between us and John’s disciples: when we repent, we do not have to wait for Christ to come. He is among us now, lifting us, restoring us, healing us, forgiving us. We are united to Him.

John says prophetically: “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (vs. 11). We can avoid the missteps of the Pharisees and Sadducees (vs. 7) and actually bear fruits worthy of repentance (vs. 8). This is our goal! Christ our God has the power, might, and capacity to baptize us “with the Holy Spirit and fire” (vs. 11). Let us seek the Holy Spirit from Him, who frees us from slavery to our besetting sins. If we indeed “have found the true faith,” there is no need to repent endlessly of the same sins. We can seek the gifts of Christ’s might and put an end to what is not worthy of the Lord. We can ask Him for the Holy Spirit.

The Lord is my savior; whom shall I fear? He exalted my head above mine enemies. – Psalm 26:1, 6

DYNAMIS – Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry * 276 5th Ave * Ste 704-3036 * New York, NY 10001

January 5 - The Paramon (Day of Preparation) for the Theophany of Christ (Sunday)

Fruits of Repentance: Saint Luke 3:1-18, especially vs. 8: *“Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance.”* Saint Cyril of Alexandria identifies three essential fruits of repentance: first, “in the highest degree, faith in Christ; and next to it, the evangelic mode of life, and in general terms the works of righteousness in contradistinction to sin.” Above all the godly patriarch directs us to the motive that informs repentance. Then, he points us toward the characteristic worldview that flows from having “faith in Christ.” And this outlook, in turn, produces observable choices, behaviors, and efforts aimed at doing God’s will. These are foremost fruits of godly repentance.

In the present passage, the primacy of right faith in Christ appears clearly in the statements of the Holy Forerunner and Baptist John: “One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (vs. 16). Note that Saint John demonstrates the very repentance that he exhorts us to embrace by contrasting himself with Christ Jesus, the strongest, the worthiest, and the true Baptizer.

Even in the face of death, Saint John and the Lord Jesus spoke the truth fearlessly to persons of every station in society. Both paid with their lives, never wavering. John was beheaded for confronting the adultery of Herod and Herodias (Mk 6:14-29), while the Lord Jesus was executed by crucifixion after challenging the exploitation of the social, political, and religious elite of His day (Mk 11:15-12:40). Who was mightier, then? Saint John, of course, affirms that it is Christ our God, who will rise from the dead on the third day.

What then is the “faith in Christ” which Saint Cyril calls the “highest degree” of repentance? True faith in Christ asks us to respond obediently to the healing prescriptions of the Lord Jesus: “Arise, take up your bed and go to your house” (Mk 2:11); “Follow Me” (vs. 1:17); “Go home to your friends, and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He has had compassion on you” (vs. 5:19); “Go in peace, and be healed of your affliction” (vs. 5:34); “Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod” (vs. 8:15); “Take up the cross and follow Me” (vs. 10:21); and lastly, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature” (vs. 16:15).

Such prescriptions are given to us for the healing of our specific needs and debilities. Unwavering trust in Christ is required if we are to do what He orders and complete the tasks He sets. May fear never hamper us when the Lord prescribes His healing commands! Let us rather preach by how we live that the Lord is working with us and confirming His word through us (vs. 16:20).

Note that obedience is primary for those who desire to be truly healed by Christ. Thus, when the Lord gives us a prescription, blessed are they “who hear the word of God and keep it!” (Lk 11:28). The Forerunner understands that we who have faith in Christ are to “fill the valleys” (Lk 3:5), hunger and thirst after righteousness (Mt 5:6), “level mountains” (Lk 3:5), become “poor in spirit” (Mt 5:3), “straighten crooked places” (Lk 3:5), be “pure in heart” (Mt 5:8), smooth the rough ways along the way (Lk 3:5), and serve as peacemakers (Mt 5:9).

Of course, if we seek above all else to acquire the Spirit with which the Lord baptizes (Lk 3:16), our lives will be shaped by the trust essential to our life in Christ. As a result, we no longer rely on ethnic, cultural, or religious heritage (vs. 8) but joyfully share with those in need (vs. 11). We reject the impulse to cheat, steal, or intimidate others (vss. 13-14) and become content with our station in life (vs. 14). We struggle within ourselves, working with the Lord’s help to cleanse the chaff of our lives from the threshing floor of our hearts (vs. 17).

O Divine Light, who hath been manifest in the flesh to those on earth, appearing to those in darkness, as Thy grace hath shone forth for all, may we also bear fruits worthy of repentance.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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**January 8 - Wednesday of the Twenty-ninth Week after Pentecost
Luke 21:5-7, 10-11, 20-24**

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

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

We know that between AD 33 and the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 the very signs that the Lord describes in today’s reading came about. Battles took place between kingdoms within the Roman Empire (vs. 10). There were earthquakes, famines, and outbreaks of plagues (vs. 11). Eventually, Jerusalem fell under siege by the Roman legions led by Vespasian and was ultimately conquered by his son Titus (vs. 24). Later in their careers, both of these military leaders became Roman emperors. Ironically, many Jewish pilgrims ignored Titus and his legions as they were approaching Jerusalem. They headed into the city for the Passover celebration, confident that the city would remain invincible under the hand of God. From an Orthodox Christian perspective, and as history proves, these pilgrims were foolhardy. The Lord Jesus warned them to flee when the armies came, for “Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles” (vss. 20-24). Anyone with a bit of historical knowledge must read verse 22 – “For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled” – in a sober light indeed.

Are those days completed? Is the last chapter written for Jerusalem? Let us briefly review the years from Christ’s birth to the fall of Jerusalem under Titus. In 4 BC the murderous Herod the Great died. Herod’s three surviving sons were appointed to rule over portions of his kingdom. Archelaus (Mt 2:22), to whom Jerusalem and Judea were assigned, proved so inept that the Romans removed him in AD 6. A series of Roman procurators then assumed control, one of whom was Pontius Pilate. In AD 41 Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great, briefly ruled Judea and Jerusalem. Although he died horribly in AD 44 (see Acts 12:23), Agrippa’s reign stirred up Jewish nationalism, which was further inflamed by a series of political blunders by the Roman procurators. When the procurator Florus raided the Temple treasury in AD 66, full-scale rebellion broke out. The revolt ended, four years later, with the Temple’s utter destruction and the enslavement or dispersal of Jewish survivors.

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

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

**January 9 – Thursday of the Twenty-ninth Week after Pentecost
Luke 21:28-33**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 10 - Friday of the Twenty-ninth Week after Pentecost
Luke 21:37-22:8

Embraced by Eternity: Luke 21:37-22:8, especially vs. 37: “*And in the daytime He was teaching in the Temple, but at night He went out and stayed on the mountain called Olivet.*” According to Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, “we Orthodox . . . through living in Christ . . . are running to meet the end of history and thus . . . the eternal embraces us at every moment of time. Therefore past, present, and future are essentially lived in one unbroken unity” (*Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 25).

In these verses from Saint Luke’s Gospel, Christ embraces the daytime by “teaching in the Temple,” spends the night “on the mountain called Olivet” (vs. 37), and arranges for the Passover meal in the afternoon “when the Passover must be killed” (vs. 22:7). The Eternal moves through time at every hour, touching us as we learn, rest, and celebrate. Let us never forget the presence of Christ but rather meet Him in every hour, for He makes now eternal and gives timeless purpose to everything.

There are many schools around the world that offer courses designed to build knowledge, skill, and discipline. If we attend such classes and listen to the teachers, we will most likely benefit to some degree. When people arrive early in the morning at the Temple to hear Christ, it is because they want to learn something – to be enlightened by the Eternal in their midst. They do not simply happen to hear His words: they *came to Him* deliberately (vs. 21:38). They want what He teaches. If we would learn from the Eternal, we must likewise come to Him. We seek Him out in our church temples, in prayer, in the pages of Holy Scripture, and from teachers who know Him and honor Him. We are to unite ourselves to Him.

Are we exhausted by the stress and daily wear of our lives? Do we desire rest? “At night” the Eternal “went out and stayed on the mountain called Olivet” (vs. 37). Those with Him took their rest there. He gave them those hours for rest. At every moment He invites us to join Him on the mountain and take our rest in Him: “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Mt 11:28-30).

The presence of the Eternal in every moment is not something we always welcome. His presence sometimes creates fear and may even stir up a desire to be rid of Him by whatever means. “And the chief priests and the scribes sought how they might kill Him, for they feared the people” (Lk 22:2). Why are the leaders afraid? The populace likes to hear Jesus so much that the people seek Him even in the Temple, the domain of the chief priests and scribes. The leadership must find a way to eliminate Him covertly, out of the public eye, lest the people retaliate for His murder.

Why do the chief priests and the scribes want to kill Jesus? The desire to destroy another arises when position, power, or control are threatened. The Eternal One holds the highest position, the greatest power, the ultimate control. At times His sovereignty threatens our self-sufficiency – or, if we are united to Him, the hatred directed against Him may fall upon us!

The Eternal invites us to Passover, the Eternal Pascha, that we might eat with Him at His table. He sends His apostles to prepare the table before us “in the presence of them that afflict” us (Ps 22:5). Will we remain united to Him, acknowledging that He fills every moment and partaking of the Passover Lamb “who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29)? Let us learn from Him and rest in Him, so that we may set aside our fear and join Him at the Paschal banquet.

Thou art our God, and we know none other beside Thee; we call upon Thy Name. –The Paschal Hours

**January 11 - Saturday after the Theophany of Christ
Matthew 4:1-11**

Purpose of Temptation: Matthew 4:1-11, especially vs. 1: “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” Even the Lord Jesus experienced temptation, as we read in this passage, but why? Saint John Chrysostom explains: “He endures . . . to wrestle against the devil: in order that each of those who are baptized, if after his baptism he have to endure greater temptations, may not be troubled as if the result were unexpected” (Homily 13 on Saint Matthew, *NPNF* First Series, vol. 10, p. 80). Saint Seraphim of Sarov adds: “We must always be attentive to the assaults of the devil; for can we hope that he will leave us without temptation, when he did not leave our Founder and Source of faith and Perfecter, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself?” (*Little Russian Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 57).

Temptation is our human lot (1 Cor 10:13). The Lord goes into the desert to be tempted so that His disciples will understand how and when temptations are going to come. As the great commander of the armies of heaven (Rv 19:14), He aims to enhance our survival in combat. We must be prepared, like soldiers, to watch our flank.

Surprisingly, this Gospel teaches us that temptations come to the faithful, just as they did to the Lord Himself, *at the leading of the Holy Spirit* (Mt 4:1). The Holy Spirit drives Christians to oppose the whisperings of the prowler. Why? As Saint John Chrysostom explains, the purpose is “to teach thee that thou art become much stronger” as a Christian, and “that thou mayest continue modest, neither be exalted . . . that thou mayest in this way be made stronger and better tempered than any steel . . . [and] that thou mayest obtain a clear demonstration of the treasures entrusted to thee” (Homily 13, p. 80).

What about temptations in the case of the non-Christian? In such cases temptation is barely perceptible, for secularists and those of other religions are already under the management of the enemy. They blithely pursue whatever the devil sets out as bait.

Temptation comes especially when we are isolated (vs. 1). “[The Lord] is led into the wilderness to show us that the devil tempts you when he sees us alone and without help from others,” says Blessed Theophylact. “Therefore we must not put our trust in ourselves without any counsel from others” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Matthew*). Eve, for example, is trapped while she is separated from Adam. Saint John Chrysostom teaches us to flock “together continually, that we may not be open to the devil’s attacks.”

Another reason temptation comes to us is because we are honored by God. The Lord rises from the baptismal water, the Spirit comes upon Him (vs. 3:16), and the Father glorifies Him: “This is My Beloved Son” (vs. 17). This same great honor belongs to us, for we have been joined to Christ. We died and rose with Him from the blessed waters. We were sealed as His own in the Holy Spirit, and now He feeds us with the Holy Gifts. The devil is mad with envy and schemes to cheat us out of our heritage.

Temptation may also come when we are deprived or demeaned. The name of the devil, Diabolus, means “slanderer.” When he tells Christ “if You are the Son of God” (vs. 4:3), he insinuates that the Lord has been abandoned. We who are washed in the name of the Holy Trinity are never abandoned, however. We must never trust feelings of abandonment; as we sing at Orthros, “God is the Lord, He hath shown us light!”

Finally, the temptation to turn from God may come about as a result of the allure of power, riches, and pleasures (vs. 8). The devil exquisitely paints such pictures to arouse our passions and lead us to fall. He even offers bread made from stones when we are hungry! (vs. 3). Beware, O my soul, of any offer that includes the fast track to fame and the world at your feet, with no Cross.

Blessed is my God, and let the God of my salvation be exalted. O my Deliverer from enemies . . . from them that arise up against me wilt Thou lift me high. – Psalm 17:47-48

January 12 - Sunday after the Feast of Theophany
Matthew 4:12-17

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 13 - Monday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost
Mark 8:11-21

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

To attain a living faith in Christ as God, it is not enough to see Him remove a fever (vss. 1:30-31), forgive and heal a man (vss. 2:11-12), calm a storm (vs. 4:39), or feed a crowd (vss. 8:19-20). It is impossible, for Christ tells us: “Assuredly . . . no sign shall be given to this generation” (vs. 12). We must meet Him in a new place that lies beyond the scope of reason, outside the confines of our darkened and hardened hearts. He takes hold of us and unites us to Him in “a supernatural relationship,” if we dare to accept Him. We reach out, but He unites. “How is it you do not understand” (vs. 8:21)? This union is God’s reasonable gift beyond reason.

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

January 14 - Tuesday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost
Mark 8:22-26

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 15 - Wednesday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost
Mark 8:30-34

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 16 - Thursday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost
Mark 9:10-16

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 17 - Saint Anthony the Great
Luke 6:17-23

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 19 - Twenty-eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 18:35-43

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Christ begins with “Blessed are you poor” (vs. 20), also translated as “*the poor.*” Most translators, taking note of the fact that the Lord Jesus aims His teaching “toward His disciples” (vs. 20), have rendered this line in the second person: “*you poor.*” Poverty, however, is not in itself part of God’s intention for His people (Dt 8:7-9). Our attitude toward material goods, however, may be either blessed or cursed, and poor and wealthy alike may fall short of the mindset of God’s kingdom. How much emphasis do we place on our relative wealth or poverty? According to Saint Cyril of Alexandria, blessed disciples “care not for wealth, and are superior to covetousness, and despisers of base gifts, and of a disposition free from the love of money, and who set no value upon the ostentatious display of riches” (*Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, p. 129).

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

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

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

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

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

January 21 - Tuesday of the Thirty-First Week after Pentecost
Mark 10:2-12

The Culture of Divorce: Mark 10:2-12, especially vs. 9: *“Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.”* The Church calls the Lord her Bridegroom, and she knows herself as His bride (Mk 2:19-20; Jn 3:29; Eph 5:21-32; Rev 21:2). We who are united to Christ have profound reasons for rejoicing in this mystical union, for we belong to the heavenly Bridegroom and are “no longer two, but one flesh.”

Contemporary society, by contrast, is a culture of divorce – not simply because the majority of people accept marital divorce, but because of the deep spiritual divorce penetrating the souls of many men and women today. In modern parlance this spiritual divorce is called secularism; in the biblical and Orthodox traditions it is known as *godlessness*.

The frightening implications of secularism are apparent in the lives of those divorced from God and withered in heart, with no inkling of the blessings that flow from being “one flesh with Him.” These poor lost souls have few resources with which to escape the scourge of secularism that lashes their every relationship. As a result they embrace divorce as a good “solution” when marriages “fail.”

Divorce is now commonplace, and many nominal and immature Christians confront marriage without the resources of our heritage. Many wind up drinking the bitter cup of divorce. Only the blessing of being one Body with the Lord Jesus gives us the necessary strength, encouragement, and illumination to resist and struggle against the secular solution of divorce. Every divorce between Christians warns us to enter deeply into our first union with Christ, that we may victoriously oppose the culture of brokenness.

Whatever our life status – never married, celibate, married, divorced, remarried – all of us are caught up in a life-and-death dialogue with our culture’s godless spirit and predisposition to divorce. If and when we choose to flee from the Bridegroom, it is urgent that we realize we are divorcing ourselves from that which “God has joined together” (vs. 9). God is not about to walk out on us, nor abandon us. It is not His nature.

Union with Christ implies endurance “both now and ever and unto ages of ages.” He therefore asks us to repent of our “hardness of . . . heart” (vs. 5). We see how Christ teaches the Church to kindly restore those who are divorced and even permits remarriage. There is, however, no overlooking past failures. Confession, penance, and absolution are required. The Church expects its members to remain chaste. Fornication, adultery, and divorce are sins, but not unforgivable sins. Those united to Christ take up their crosses and continue striving to keep themselves pure.

Additionally, Christians must embrace God’s evangelical vision of marriage in order to remain strong amidst the stormy winds of life. The Bridegroom has come and taken us to Himself. Let us recognize earthly marriages as vocations for illuminating the world with the light of our blessed union with Christ. What a saving beacon true Christian marriages can become!

Christian couples have the privilege of giving the floundering world this message: “God has not abandoned you. He loves you. He welcomes you home. His arms are outstretched.” Let us appreciate marriage in this light! When Christian couples grasp this truth and seek to make their marriages into living icons of God, they allow the grace of their union with Christ to flow into the world. Earthly marriages can be opportunities to bless. Those who are single and bonded to Christ the Bridegroom also proclaim, by their manner of life, the power of true marriage in a culture of divorce.

O Master, send down Thy grace upon all Thy servants, married and single. Preserve them, O Lord, as Thou didst preserve Noah in the ark, and let Thy gladness come upon them. –Orthodox Marriage Service

January 22 - Wednesday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost
Mark 10:11-16

Becoming Little Children: Saint Mark 10:11-16, especially vs. 15: “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it.” In this verse, Christ our Savior states the essential prerequisite for life in Him. If we would have Him take us in His arms, lay His hands on us, and bless us (vs. 16), we must convert and “become as little children” (Mt 18:3). He then reveals *how* we are to be transformed into pure children who are touched by Him (Mk 10:13) and blessed with new life.

Saint John Chrysostom explains why “the soul of a little child is pure from all the passions.” First, even if he sees “the queen with a diadem, he prefers her not to his mother clad in rags . . . and nothing more than necessary things doth he seek.” Furthermore, “the young child is not grieved at what we are grieved, as at the loss of money and such things as that, and he doth not rejoice again at what we rejoice, namely, at these temporal things.”

Saint John concludes that we, by choice, “should practice these things, which young children have naturally” (Homily 62 on the Gospel of Saint Matthew, *NPNF* First Series, vol. 10, p. 385). The secret of becoming little children lies in the recovery of our natural, God-given virtues.

Our Gospel passage clearly states that the children did not come to the Lord on their own accord. They are “brought . . . to Him” (vs. 13) by parents who make the loving effort to take them to Christ. If we do not allow ourselves to be borne in the arms of our mother, the Church, then we will haplessly pursue the virtues of this world, which are not virtues at all. If we depend on our imperfect, rational human minds, we will invariably be led astray. Fortunately, we receive good parenting by listening to the Church Fathers, who in turn follow the apostles. These Fathers are the “main guide for those who wish to be saved and . . . attain Christian perfection,” according to Saint Nil Sorsky.

The Lord sharply corrects His disciples when they prevent the children from coming to Him (vs. 13). Following His example, let us contradict within ourselves anything that prevents us from coming to Him as innocents (vs. 14). Acquiring pure, simple, natural virtues takes diligent work, for we must oppose whatever arises from the sinful self, the world, and the demons. These evil forces constantly suggest that we should indulge rather than restrain ourselves.

Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos encourages us: “When a person struggles to subject his body to his soul and his soul to God, the virtues of body and soul are produced” (*Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 285). Let us persist in this work of restraining and retraining. Christ’s desire for the *little children* to come to Him (vs. 14) prompts us to cultivate the virtues taught by the Church.

“Self-control and love rid us of impassioned thoughts,” Metropolitan Hierotheos continues, “By controlling anger and desire we quickly do away with evil thoughts. Vigils also contribute a great deal. . . . Let us receive everything with a good thought. Even if everything is ugly, let us receive it with equanimity, and then God will right the anomalies of things” (p. 239)

Every Christian who makes the effort – positive and negative – described above discovers how monumental a task it is to come to Christ as a little child. If we seek purity of life and holiness solely by means of our own strength, we risk becoming discouraged. The fatal delusion of self-sufficiency eventually plunges us into despair.

Let us rather depend upon the Church and the Holy Spirit to bring us to Christ, teaching us to receive the healing touch of His hand and His blessing (vs. 16). The Spirit gives us new birth through the Church and helps us to put on the new man. Saint Gregory Palamas asserts that “the deified saints . . . are engendered by God, God gave them the power to become children of God” (*Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 352).

Burn Thou the thorns of all my transgressions, cleanse my soul, and hallow my thoughts. – Post-communion Prayer of Saint Simeon the Translator

January 23 – Thursday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost
Mark 10:17-27

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 24 - Friday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost
Mark 10:23-32

Setting the Heart: Mark 10:23-32, especially vs. 25: “*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.*” Many years before the Lord took flesh and dwelt among us, the Prophet David perceived the grave danger in wealth, warning, “If riches flow in, set not your hearts thereon” (Ps 61:10). Wherever our heart is fixed – whatever matter delights it, whatever goal is foremost in its yearning – becomes the compass guiding our whole life. As the Lord Jesus says, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Mt 6:21).

Why, then, does Christ focus on riches in particular? He warns three times that wealth makes it difficult “to enter the kingdom of God” (Mk 10:23, 24, 25). Is there something inherently wrong with wealth in and of itself? Not at all! The danger of riches lies in how the heart orients itself to them. For fickle-hearted mankind, riches repeatedly prove to be a stumbling block, the shoals upon which many have wrecked themselves in this life and for the age to come.

Saint Augustine of Hippo notes the paradox: “It is hard to be saved if we have them; and impossible if we love them; and scarcely can we have them, but we shall love them inordinately.” The threat is that we will love riches inordinately and *set our heart* upon them.

The setting of the heart defines the matter, for that upon which we set our heart shapes our thinking and actions. If our primary attention is fixed on gaining a fortune, we may or may not attain our goal. But let us who profess Christ as our Lord recall the further observations of Saint Augustine, who says that riches “are gained with toil and kept with fear. They are enjoyed with danger and lost with grief” (Sermon 133, ACCS NT vol. II, p. 145). Let us not be foolish and set our heart on elusive riches.

The Prophet David shows us the proven way: “Delight thyself in the Lord, and He will give thee the askings of thy heart” (Ps 36:4). We *delight* in the Lord when we set our heart on Him, heeding and keeping His ways. If we ask only for what pleases Him, we receive the request of our hearts in “good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over” (Lk 6:38). God, who is rich and owns everything, places all that we have at our disposal. He is especially generous toward those who set their hearts on Him and seek “first the kingdom of God and His righteousness” (Mt. 6:33).

The *astonishment* of the disciples (Mk 10:24, 26) is not difficult to understand. They hear the Lord but also understand how deeply the human heart yearns for created things: money, status, people, goals. The Master’s declaration chills them and makes them afraid (vs. 32). Who possibly can be saved?

Poverty, of course, does not guarantee salvation either: “Rich and poor, listen to Christ. . . . Most of you are poor, but you too must listen carefully to understand. And you had best listen even more intently if you glory in your poverty. Beware of pride, lest the humble rich surpass you. Beware of wickedness, lest the pious rich confound you. Beware of drunkenness, lest the sober excel you” (Caesarius of Arles, Sermon 153.2, ACCS NT vol. II, p. 145).

Given our sin-weakened condition and the fickleness of our fallen nature, how is it possible for us to *set our hearts* on the Lord above all else? Christ Himself is able to “establish [our] hearts blameless in holiness before [our] God and Father” (1 Thes 3:13). Let us learn from Him how to *leave everything* that separates us from Him (Mk 10:28). Then we will no longer be “wise in [our] own conceit, but fear God and depart from all evil” (Pr 3:7).

O Christ God, who willed to lie in the hands of the old man Simeon as Thou didst ride in the chariot of the cherubim, deliver us from the woe of passions and save our souls. – Orthros verse for the Meeting of the Lord in the Temple

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 26 – Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 15:21-28

Learning to Pray: Matthew 15:21-28, especially vs. 25: “Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, ‘Lord, help me!’” How many prayers offered up to God seemingly fall on deaf ears! Like the woman of Canaan, we often ask but find that nothing happens – or so it seems. We have all had the experience of petitioning the Lord with no result, as if God chooses to remain aloof; we receive no hint that He has heard a thing. He “answer[s] not a word” (vs. 23) but remains silent.

Whenever this happens, let us return to this portion of the Gospel, meditate on it, and learn how to petition the Lord Jesus – on His terms. We see here a mother crying out in prayer to God Incarnate, who at first appears to turn a deaf ear. Actually, this verse is giving us detailed, step-by-step instructions on how to pray so that our petitions will be answered. The Lord Jesus does answer the request that the mother presents at the beginning! Take note: the Lord is entirely faithful to His promise that “whatever you ask in My name . . . I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son” (Jn 14:13).

What do we learn from this exchange between our compassionate God and the distraught mother who prays to Him? The most important point becomes apparent when we focus on what results He achieves during this meeting. He leads the mother to a new and fruitful inner state that glorifies Him and gains her the answer she desires. Let us inquire, at each step in the process, about state of her heart and what the Lord seeks to achieve by His response.

The Canaanite woman at first cries out, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed” (Mt 15:22). And yet He “answered her not a word” (vs. 23). God does not respond merely because we cry in front of Him, whether in a whimper or out of genuine need. Our pain is not enough for God. He knows pain, as His Passion proves. He understands that we often cry out when confronted with serious dilemmas, as Judas cries to the Temple authorities to stop the Crucifixion. Yet the Lord desires us to move away from simply crying over our circumstances and to enter into His presence.

The woman in her misery cries out then to the Lord’s disciples when she receives no answer from Christ (vs. 23), yet she has not yet come directly into His presence. Knowing that she is listening, He states to the disciples: “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (vs. 24). His remark seems to cast aspersions on her as a pagan idolater, but actually He is seeking to awaken her to Himself.

The effect of His words is to snap her out of her self-pity. She realizes that she stands before the Messiah, who is able to heal the ills not only of the Jews but of every people whatever their culture or religion. He is the universal Savior.

The Canaanite woman’s answer reflects the change of heart that Christ seeks from each of us. He promises to answer us if we ask in His Name – that is, if we submit to His power and authority, recognizing Him as Lord and acknowledging our utter dependency on Him. The woman’s appeal is heard when it becomes direct, rather than oblique. She enters His presence, worships Him, and says, “Lord, help me!” (vs. 25).

Here is progress, but the Lord is not finished healing her. He cleanses her heart by yet another reference to the social gulf between them (vs. 26). She in turn casts away culture, heritage, and pride in favor of humility, the queen of virtues (vs. 27). Because she evinces “great faith,” He pronounces her daughter cured and grants the mother’s desire (vs. 28).

Lord Jesus Christ our God, in Thy lovingkindness regard the prayers of all who call upon Thee with their whole heart, and hear our humble prayers. – Prayer of Intercession

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 28 – Tuesday of the Thirty-second Week after Pentecost
Mark 11:11-23

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

January 29 - Wednesday of the Thirty-second Week after Pentecost
Mark 11:23-26

Our Father in Heaven: Mark 11:22-26, especially vs. 23: *“For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says.”* Many of us review our lives and confidently affirm that we have achieved something of worth without needing help from God. The worldly man – fed on self-reliance and brimming with confidence – believes that he can industriously *move mountains*. He will tear down his old barns, put up bigger ones, stuff them full of achievements, and take his ease for years to come (Lk 12:17-19).

However, Christ our God bids us to pray, trusting in God to provide (Mk 11:24), forgiving others (vs. 25), and calling God our “Father in heaven” (vss. 25, 26). He asks us to work upon the fabric of this world by relying on Him. In this context our self-confidence is unnatural. Christ asks us to always assume that “our help is in the name of the Lord” (Ps 123:8).

Perhaps we do pray to our Father in heaven, looking to Him to provide what we require. But we must consider carefully who this Father of ours may be. Of whom do we say, “He is in heaven”? As we search the Scriptures we find a consistent record of His self-disclosure. The Church documents the character of God, our Father in heaven, in Holy Scripture and shows what He expects of us.

And what does the Lord require? According to his prophet, we are “to do justly, and to love mercy, and to be ready to walk with the Lord your God” (Mi 6:8). Come into our Father’s household. Learn that our *Father in heaven* created us, sustains our existence (Acts 17:28), outlines how we ought to live, act, speak, think, and feel. He provides everything we need to walk with Him. As children we depend on our earthly fathers, respecting them and doing their bidding. Likewise, we say to our heavenly Father, “Hallowed be Your Name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:9-10).

If we are to depend, year in and year out, upon our Father in heaven, we must “be diligent to present [ourselves] approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tm 2:15). The child of God who genuinely cares about the will of his Father in heaven seeks with care to discern and carry out His will (Jn 14:15).

When we desire to do the will of God, it leads us to worship the Lord among His people, praying and living as He instructs in the bosom of God’s family. From our fathers in Christ – and our aunts, uncles, big brothers and sisters – we learn how greatly we need the healing presence of our Father and our family in order to be transformed and restored to His design.

Let us then apply our Father’s teaching and instructions! Forgive, that we may receive His forgiveness. Love, that we may receive His love. Get rid of hatred, because He has no hate in Him. Never commit murder, not even in thought. Do not steal, lie, or corrupt others, nor misuse the bodies He has given us. We know all this well enough.

Our greatest obstacle when standing before God is our pride, our delusion of self-reliance. Of this sin Blessed Theophylact says: “A proud man should rebuke this mountain, this passion of pride which besets him and strives to drive him away from God’s protection and providence, for it is pride that makes a proud man say that he can accomplish all things by himself without God’s help. Such a man ought to say to his pride, ‘Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea’” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Mark*, p. 99).

Our Father in heaven, make us worthy to live before Thee with a seemly disposition and virtuous life, guided by Thy righteousness on the path of salvation which Thou dost provide. – Service of Supplication on the First Day of the New Year

January 30 – Synaxis of the Three Holy Hierarchs
Matthew 5:14-19

The Three Great Hierarchs: *Matthew 5:14-19, especially vs. 19:* “...whoever does and teaches [the least of these commandments], *he shall be called great in the Kingdom of heaven.*” This feast Day honoring Basil the Great (d. AD 379), Gregory the Theologian (d. AD 389), and John Chrysostom (d. AD 407), began at the end of the Eleventh Century through the intervention of the three Saints themselves. They acted to stop arguments among the pious concerning which one of them was of greater rank than the others. Each Saint already had a day of commemoration in January, yet popular arguments went on. Then, the three Saints appeared to the Bishop of Euchaita, John Mauropos, in a dream. They told him that before God’s Throne they all stood in equal honor. Further, they advised Bishop John to compile a common service for the three of them, which he did. The date of January 30th was set for the common Feast, using the passage from Saint Matthew 5:14-19 for the Gospel.

These verses from Matthew’s account of the Lord Jesus’ teaching capture the qualities of these three great hierarchs and reveal why the three are worthy of veneration, for they are gleaming examples of God’s capacity to take humble men and transform them into spiritual giants. In Christ, they are “...the light of the world” (vs. 14), a “...light to all who are in the house” of God, the Church (vs. 15), and worthy to be called “...great in the Kingdom of heaven” (vs. 19).

This world is a tragically dark place, sotted with atrocities, cruelty, ignorance, and “...full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness” (Rom. 1:29). Its persistent condition is cause enough for weeping before the God of Heaven Who revealed Himself in blinding Light and beauty and love and goodness in Jesus our Lord. Christ came into this dark den of iniquity and death to unite Himself to us and provide us with on-going Communion in which we may be filled with His illumination. He encourages us to cast off the darkness of our hearts and “...take light from the Light that can never be overtaken by night.”

Here’s the point: some of us have run to Him and received light into the blind eyes of our hearts and “...followed Jesus on the road” (Mk. 10:52). Basil and Gregory both had the best of pagan and Christian education, and chose the Light. John Chrysostom studied under the great pagan orator, Libanus, and chose the Light. Thereafter, the Light of Christ shone so brilliantly from these three great hierarchs that men all over the world honor them, study their works, and seek their prayers so that Christ might illumine them as He has these illustrious ones. Indeed, through Christ and in Christ they “...are the light of the world” (Mt. 5:14).

Most certainly they give “...light to all who are in the house” (vs. 15) of the Church. The Liturgies of Saint Basil and Saint John Chrysostom are the regular means by which our church communities celebrate the Mystery of Christ in praise and thanksgiving to God, and partake of Christ the Light in His Life-giving Body and Blood, made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit. As for Gregory, in AD 381 his efforts at the Council of Constantinople established the Nicene Creed as a beacon of the Light of Truth concerning our Lord Jesus Christ and the entire Holy Trinity.

The three Hierarchs must “...be called great in the Kingdom of heaven” (vs. 19). “With what beautiful songs shall we clothe those God-mantled ones, who are heavenly initiates, preachers of Orthodoxy, and heads of those who discourse in theology? Basil the great revealer of divine things, Gregory the divine Theologian, and the venerable, golden-tongued John, have been worthily glorified by God the Trinity, Possessor of the Great Mercy.”

Let us now extol those vessels of light, those radiant lightning bolts, Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, and John Chrysostom, that God may pour His Light upon us as well.

January 31 - Friday of the Thirty-second Week after Pentecost
Mark 12:1-12

Bearing Fruit: Mark 12:1-12, especially vs. 9: *“The owner of the vineyard. . . will come and destroy the vinedressers, and give the vineyard to others.”* This parable contains a prophecy of the fate of God the Son. Christ Jesus is sent by the Father to win the respect of His people; they indeed will take Him and kill Him and cast Him out of the vineyard (vs. 8). As a result, the Lord Jesus will give “His people to other husbandmen, that is, to the apostles” (Blessed Theophylact, *Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Mark*, p. 102).

We are God’s vineyard, charged with bearing fruit and offering “the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name” (Heb 13:15). We are to abide in Him or risk being “cast out as a branch and . . . withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned” (Jn 15:6). Let us give God His due in the time allotted to us.

Sin is around us and within us. Its allure deceives us so that we often fail to consider the consequences of not *abiding* in Him. It is easy to live for the moment, without thinking about what follows from our actions. However, our petty resistance and refusal to pay our dues only deepens the gulf between us and the Giver of Life.

When we look at the fall of Adam and Eve, we notice how rapidly they descend after that tiny bite of forbidden fruit. They are driven from Paradise and foul murder soon follows (Gn 3:23; 4:8). Turning to the century only recently past, we find the latest chapter in this sordid human record: mass executions, genocide, the destruction of whole cities, and terror unspeakable.

We dwell close to Life. We are united to the Lord in baptism, sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, and partake of Christ’s own life-bearing Body and Blood. “In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will” (Eph 1:11).

Why should we hoard – or worse, squander – the fruit gained in the Orthodox vineyard? Let us consider the fate of the wicked vinedressers and share “some of the fruit of the vineyard” (Mk 12:2) garnered in Christ. First, we are to honor the servants whom the Lord sends – our pastors and bishops. We kiss their hands and offer them the fruits of our labors in the Lord’s vineyard.

What are those fruits? Our God loves truth and wants to make us whiter than snow, turning His face away from our sins, if we simply offer Him “a broken spirit, a heart that is broken and humbled” (Ps 50:17). Let us heed Saint Makarios of Egypt: “Being bountiful and full of love, God awaits with great patience the repentance of every sinner, and He celebrates the return of the sinner with celestial rejoicing, as He Himself says, ‘There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents’” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 315). The power to give lies with us; give Him the gift of true purity.

Second, we are to resist every corrupting movement within our hearts and give freely, “for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 9:7). Dag Hammarskjöld, the famed secretary general of the United Nations, writes: “Weep / If you can, / Weep, / But do not complain. / The way chose you – / And you must be thankful.” After all, God “didst bring us from non-existence into being, and when we had fallen away didst raise us up again, and didst not cease to do all things until [He] hadst brought us up to heaven” (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom).

When we meet Christ in the Holy Mysteries, He is looking for our respect. When He comes in the garb of the poor, we remember all He has given to us. We offer thanksgiving to the Life-giver in our words and actions: “We praise Thee, we bless Thee, we give thanks unto Thee, O Lord, and we pray unto Thee, O our God” (Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great).

Serve ye the Lord with fear, and rejoice in Him with trembling. Lay hold of instruction. . . . Blessed are all that have put their trust in Him. – Psalm 2:11-13