

April 1 - Tuesday of the Fifth Week of Great Lent
Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 15:8-21

God's Eyes and Men's Hearts: Proverbs 15:7-19, especially vs. 12: *"Hades and destruction are manifest before the Lord; how can the hearts of men not be also?"* Consider Asa, the king of Judah, who came to the throne upon the death of his father, King Abijah. Chronicles reports that "Asa did what was good and proper in the eyes of the Lord his God" (2 Chr 14:1). In the tenth year of his reign his small kingdom was attacked by a huge Ethiopian army. God struck the Ethiopians and their army fled, principally because the godly king cried out to the Lord, "Lord our God, do not let man prevail against You!" (vs. 14:10).

Asa reigned in peace for another twenty-five years. During those peaceful years the king purged every trace of idolatry from the land, and "the heart of Asa was loyal all his days" (vs. 15:17). In the thirty-sixth year of his reign, however, he made a treaty with the king of Syria to counter a threat from King Baasha of Israel, his northern neighbor.

Chronicles reports that Hanani, the seer of God, chastised King Asa for relying on Syria rather than upon God. The prophet asserts, "For the eyes of the Lord look over the whole earth and strengthen every heart that is loyal to Him" (vs. 16:9). Since King Asa now relies on treaties rather than God, Hanani foretells continuous war for the rest of his reign. And so it came to pass.

The eyes of the Lord look continuously into our own hearts to see if we serve Him. No niche or secret recess within the human heart remains hidden from the Lord. Today's verses from Proverbs remind us that every issue in this life begins and ends in our hearts. Let us never forget that "the hearts of those without discernment are not safe" (Prv 15:8). Our Lord Jesus adds, "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me" (Jn 14:1). The spiritual health or malaise of the heart has daily and eternal significance.

The heart's well-being depends on fear of the Lord: "Better is a small portion with the fear of the Lord than great treasures with lack of fear" (Prv 15:17). The ruin of Asa's kingdom did not come about through military conquest; it stemmed from the king's failure of heart, when he turned from fear of the Lord to fear of King Baasha.

The eyes of the Lord see every movement of our hearts! Let us train ourselves to confess, "Ready is my heart, O God, ready is my heart" (Ps 56:10), for such is the way of the saints. May we know that God is always at work in us and through us, for "the prayers of the upright are acceptable with Him" (Prv 15:9). Should not the heart and spirit of each faithful servant of Christ rejoice, so that "his face is cheerful" (vs. 14)?

"The upright heart seeks perception" (vs. 15) and the "lips of the wise are bound" by the same (vs. 8), for God "loves those who pursue righteousness" (vs. 10). May we strive for a good heart and seek instruction in the things of God. We receive the promise in Christ that good men will be "at rest continually" (vs. 16). "The ways of idle men are strewn with thorny plants, but the thorny plants of the courageous are worn smooth" (vs. 21).

Let us rejoice with the psalmist and declare, "Behold, the eyes of the Lord are upon them that fear Him, upon them that hope in His mercy. To deliver their souls from death, and to nourish them in famine. Our soul shall wait for the Lord, for He is our helper and our defender. For our heart shall be glad in Him, and in His holy name have we hoped" (Ps 32:18-21).

Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open . . . and from whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse . . . our hearts by the inspiration of Thy Holy Spirit that we may perfectly love Thee. – Preparatory Prayer from the Rite of Saint Tikhon

April 2 - Wednesday of the Fifth Week of Great Lent
Second Reading from Vespers – Proverbs 15:22-25; 16:1-9

Righteousness: Proverbs 15:22-25; 16:1-9, especially vs. 4: “*He who seeks the Lord will find knowledge with righteousness, and those who seek Him rightly will find peace.*” This proverb presents us with a three-stage approach to the good life that yields peace, if we pursue it *rightly*. To live well begins when we “seek the Lord.” However, we must search for God correctly in order to “find knowledge.” Once we have gained this knowledge, we will naturally practice *righteousness*. If we advance through each of these stages, we are assured of the promised outcome – we “will find peace.”

Take note that this proverb is a precursor to the teaching of Saint John the Evangelist: “Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother. For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another” (1 Jn 3:10-11). As a disciple of Jesus, Saint John understands that active, tangible love for others is part of righteousness. And active love for others grows out of our life in Christ. United to Christ, who is true knowledge, we come to know the love of God for ourselves, and the Lord leads us in turn to love others so that we may attain peace.

When we examine the collection of proverbs in today’s reading, we are reminded that “all the works of the Lord are with righteousness” (Prv 16:5). True lovingkindness toward others, as a response to God’s love, is one of those “works of the Lord,” and therefore spiritually healthy. We know in our hearts that “this is more acceptable to God than to offer sacrifices” (vs. 3). We need only to recall the proud Pharisee, who exalted himself and gained nothing, and contrast him with the humble publican whose works were “evident before the Lord” (vs. 1).

God structures the world so that love for others is the true foundation of every flourishing human interaction. True and loving acts arise when we discern the truth and walk uprightly. Family life is blessed when wise children *gladden* their fathers and mothers (vs. 15:22). In business, properly weighted scales function as the true, working standard for all transactions (vs. 16:7). Righteous leaders and rulers in government speak with oracles on their lips and will not err in judgment, for such are “prepared with righteousness” (vs. 8) and they truly “[love] upright words” (vs. 9).

Conversely, there is a dark path followed by those “without understanding” (vs. 15:23). These people do not honor the councils they hold with others (vs. 24), and do “not obey counsel, nor . . . speak anything appropriate . . . for the common good” (vs. 25). Holy Scripture consistently sends this message: “Every high-hearted man is unclean before the Lord, and he who joins hands with the unrighteous will not go unpunished” (vs. 16:2). In fact, “the ungodly will be destroyed in the evil day” (vs. 1). Let us take note prayerfully and humbly before the Lord!

Scripture sets the choice before us. We are to *seek the Lord* whole-heartedly and acquire *knowledge with righteousness*, so that we can *find peace* (vs. 4) in the Lord. May we avoid becoming “as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. . . . Because his works were evil” (1 Jn 3:12). Saint John continues, “We know love, because [Christ] laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. . . . Let us not love in work or in tongue, but in deed and in truth” (vs. 16, 18). May we enthrone Christ as the ruler of our lives, for He alone “is prepared with righteousness” (Prv 16:8).

O Lord Jesus Christ, Thou hast taught us that all we do without love is worth nothing; help us to love as Thou lovest us, that Thou alone may be glorified in all we say and do. – Collect for the Sunday Before Lent

April 3 - Thursday of the Fifth Week of Great Lent
Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 16:13-17:8

Life or Destruction: Proverbs 16:13-17:8, especially vs. 21: “*The heart of a wise man shall understand the things from his own mouth, and he shall carry knowledge upon his lips.*” Television commercials, radio offers, internet appeals, video clips, newspaper ads, telemarketers, and electronic billboards are difficult, if not impossible, to avoid. These media pitch every imaginable solution to our problems, promising us pleasures, a path to riches, pain relief, new careers, training opportunities, fabulous vacations, and romance.

But wait a minute! What about the rising crime and the widespread wickedness and emptiness we see everywhere? Is not this media barrage merely another symptom of a deeper malaise swirling around our world?

Let me repeat: we are engaged in ongoing spiritual warfare. As Orthodox believers, we must depend on illumination, divine knowledge, and the Gospel in order to survive. We need a constant supply of godly wisdom to shield and direct us. Politicians, promotions, and panaceas will not suffice. Today’s reading from the Book of Proverbs highlights the difference between the barrage of worldly messages and true, godly counsel. God’s wisdom stores up good words like a sweet honeycomb, healing the frazzled soul (vs. 22).

We are reminded that humility and arrogance stand worlds apart, for the man of *gentle mind* is humble, while the *arrogant* are concerned only with conquests and spoil (vs. 17). Either we choose to take the *paths of life* (vs. 13), heeding rebukes (vs. 14) and speaking sparingly (vs. 15), or else we will fall and meet *destruction* (vs. 16). How much better to trust in God and be blessed (vs. 18)!

When men receive instruction, they either gain from it a life-giving understanding or direct it toward evil ends (vs. 20). Father Alexander Elchaninov says: “The man who denies his relationship with God, who refuses to be His son, is not a real man but a man stunted, the unfinished plan of a man” (*Diary of a Russian Priest*, p. 44). If we do not have knowledge on our lips, we should expect to enter “the depths of Hades” (vs. 23).

“A perverse man spreads evil things, and [his] torch of deceit kindles evils and separates friends” (vs. 26). He “leads them in ways not good” (vs. 27) and “determines every evil thing with his lips” – he is a veritable “furnace of wickedness” (vs. 28).

Where can we locate the source of the evil that fills the media with garish news and false promises? And where do we find righteous virtues such as patience and self-control? In answer to the first question, Proverbs directs us to “the bosoms of the unrighteous, but all righteous things come from the Lord” (vs. 31).

Why it is urgent that we embrace Scripture’s emphasis on *discernment* as a critical element in daily life? Let us take a good look at our own households! Only when “a house [is] full of many good things” such as peace (vs. 17:1), fairness between brothers (vs. 2), and “chosen hearts before the Lord” (vs. 3) do we have the opportunity to relish “a morsel with enjoyment in peace” (vs. 1).

“The entire world of good belongs to the faithful, but to the faithless, not even a penny” (vs. 7). Note that faithfulness and faithlessness stand in sharp contrast. Which of the two attracts the attention of the *lawless* (vs. 4)? Which leads to callous ridicule of others’ misery and which inspires compassion (vs. 5)? And which of the two will crown one’s life in old age, and which will not? (vs. 6, 7). The divergence is absolute, for “faithful lips will not adapt to a man without discernment, nor lying lips to a righteous man” (vs. 8).

Lord, I have fled unto Thee: teach me to do Thy will, for Thou art my God. For with Thee is the fountain of life: in Thy Light shall we see light. – The Doxology

April 4 - Friday of the Fifth Week of Great Lent
Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 17:19-18:5

Sin Has Many Facets: Proverbs 17:19-18:5, especially vs. 21: “He who loves sin rejoices in quarrels, and the hard-hearted man does not assemble with good men.” By studying the Book of Proverbs, we begin to discern the myriad ways in which sin manifests itself: socially, politically, in friends and neighbors, and especially in ourselves. These ancient aphorisms warn, exhort, and encourage us by exposing the telltale signs of sin. What they reveal is not pretty, but they give us much that we can take to heart.

The ancient scribes who recorded these proverbs do not label each sin specifically, but approach them from different vantage points. As we read, it can be instructive to ask what title we might assign to each proverb in order to pinpoint the sins it illumines.

For example, “A man without discernment applauds and rejoices over himself” (vs. 20). What is the sin of which this proverb speaks? We might label it self-adulation or self-congratulation.

Saint John Climacus applies the terms “unholy self-esteem” and “vainglory.” Expounding on vainglory, Saint John speaks of the tragic “dissipation of labors” and a “waste of sweat.” His point is that when we strive to rid our souls of the passion of self-esteem, we often congratulate ourselves on our accomplishment – but we fail to thank God. In that case we have labored for nothing, merely replacing one passion with another: vanity. The “sweat” we expended is wasted, for we have “shipwrecked in harbor” and betrayed our spiritual treasure.

Ultimately, self-esteem is the “child of unbelief,” by which we credit ourselves rather than God. It is the colleague of pride, which Saint John calls the “ant on the threshing floor” waiting to take away our harvest of virtue (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 22.2, p. 132).

The second half of verse 20 links this sin with another error, that of giving “surety” for a friend, i.e., co-signing a note or putting up collateral against another’s debt. What is wrong with making ourselves responsible for a friend’s obligation? The sin lies in jeopardizing one’s own home and family welfare.

Furthermore, by backing debt we encourage our friend to enter into bondage. He falls into the condition of God’s people who cry in anguish, “We borrowed money . . . pledging our lands and vineyards. . . . We are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves. . . . It is not in our power to redeem them, for other men have our lands and vineyards” (Neh 5:4-5). A later proverb states the command directly: “Do not give yourself as surety because you respect a person” (Prv 22:29). And there is the apostolic order, “Owe no one anything” (Rom 13:8).

The love of strife (vs. 21) stems from the masochistic pleasure we take in seeing others wounded; it is *hard-hearted*. Quarrels violate the Gospel mandate, “Love one another” (Jn 13:34). What sin is depicted in the proverb that says, “A changeable man will fall into evils with his tongue” (vs. 22)? Changeableness corrupts our speech and expresses an unstable faith in God: “He who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. . . . He is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways” (Jas 1:6,7).

We turn next to the “uninstructed son” (vs. 23). According to Saint Mark the Ascetic, the uninstructed are dominated by three powerful vices: “ignorance, the source of all evils, forgetfulness, its close relation and helper, and laziness, which weaves the dark shroud enveloping the soul . . . so that evil becomes deep-rooted and persistent in the negligent soul” (*Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 159).

“A word in the heart of a man is deep water, and a river and fountain of life spring up from it” (vs. 18:4). All true words to the heart come from God. As we read, let us heed Him!

For in Thee is the fountain of life, in Thy light shall we see light. O continue Thy mercy! – Psalm 35:10-11

April 5 - Saturday of the Fifth Week of Great Lent
Mark 8:27-31

What About You? Mark 8:27-31, especially vs. 29: “*But who do you say that I am?*” The first eight chapters of Saint Mark’s Gospel record little discussion between the Lord and His disciples concerning their perceptions of Jesus. When He enlists them, they simply *follow* Him (Mk 1:16-20). He appoints the Twelve, “that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach” (vs. 3:14). He astonishes them with His miracles (vs. 4:41) and explains His teaching in detail (vss. 4:34; 7:17-23). Only then, on the occasion described in the present passage, does He probe their views concerning Himself.

How many of us who call ourselves Christians have reflected deeply on Jesus’ question? Perhaps we can answer this question: “What opinions have I heard concerning Jesus Christ?” The more important issue, however, is what we *believe* with regard to the Jesus who suffered many things and was rejected and killed and after three days rose again (cf. vs. 8:31). Where do we stand in relation to *this* Man?

The Lord’s first question elicits an objective reply: “Who do men say that I am?” (vs. 27). The disciples report the common opinions of the day, which reflect the Jewish milieu in which they live. Popular opinion holds that the Lord Jesus is not an ordinary scribe or teacher, but a man of supernatural powers. These evaluations of Jesus certainly imply that He is a most unusual person.

However, to say that He is John the Baptist is difficult in the face of the Forerunner’s recent execution (vs. 6:14). Likewise, identifying Jesus as Elijah or one of the other prophets cannot be done without drawing some extraordinary conclusions. None of the views the disciples mention, of course, express the conclusion that Jesus of Nazareth is God Incarnate.

Today we encounter an even wider array of views concerning Jesus than those found in Saint Mark’s Gospel. Some say He was a first-century Jewish rabbi, or a great prophet. He was the world’s outstanding religious teacher, or perhaps one of history’s greatest avatars of divinity. Many secularists strip away any notion of divinity and consider Jesus of Nazareth merely a wise teacher of high ideals.

Ultimately, the question stands as a watershed which determines whether or not we are Orthodox Christians. Do we declare, as we affirm during the baptismal service, “I believe in Him as King and God”? Do we “bow down also before Him, [and] bow down before the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit: the Trinity one in essence and undivided”?

Saint Peter speaks the mind of the Church when he says, “You are the Christ” (vs. 29) – the only anointed one of God, the Messiah. In the Gospel of Matthew, the Lord responds to Saint Peter’s confession by saying, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (Mt 16:17).

According to Saint John Chrysostom, this blessing applies to everyone who confesses Jesus as Peter did. “Yet surely unless he had rightly confessed Him, as begotten of the very Father Himself . . . had he accounted our Lord to be one of the many, his saying was not worthy of a blessing. . . . It cannot therefore be that one should learn the Son of any other than of the Father; neither that one should learn the Father of any other than of the Son,” the saint concludes (“Homily 54 on Matthew,” *NPNF* First Series, vol. 10, p. 333).

God does the revealing! God speaks to the human heart – and when He does, the words of the Gospel become our own declaration, our own response. Let us never answer the Lord Jesus out of habit, nor base our response on the unstable opinions of men or our own notions. We open our hearts and pray to God the Father to reveal His Son to us.

O Holy Father, hallow me – my mind, my heart, my very body. I die away from Thee. –
Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov

April 6 - Fifth Sunday of Great Lent (Sunday of Saint Mary of Egypt)
Mark 10:32-45

The Life-giving Cross: Mark 10:32-45, especially vss. 32-33: “Then He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them the things that would happen to Him: ‘Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him to the Gentiles.’” Yesterday, we were reminded that every human being will have to answer the Lord Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” (Mk 8:29). When Christ first asks this question, Peter speaks for the group, confessing the Lord Jesus to be “the Christ.”

Subsequently, the Lord expands the disciples’ knowledge of what it means to be the Christ or Messiah. He will triumph, but only through suffering and death – before rising on the third day. He does not permit us to separate *the Christ* from the reality of betrayal, wrongful condemnation, and death. These are essential elements of His gift of salvation for us, for in this way the God-Man defines Himself.

This assertion of a suffering Christ is one of three prophecies by the Lord concerning His Passion (vss. 8:31, 9:31, 10:32-33). The present prophecy is the most detailed of the three. Afterwards, James and John ask the Lord: “Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory” (vs. 10:37). How lightly the sons of Zebedee pass over the darker aspects of the prophecy: the delivery to the chief priests and scribes, condemnation, mocking, scourging, spitting, and execution!

“But let no man be troubled at the apostles being in such an imperfect state,” Saint John Chrysostom reassures us. “For not yet was the Cross accomplished, not yet the grace of the Spirit given” (“Homily 65 on Matthew,” *NPNF* First Series, vol. 10, p. 399). After Christ’s Passion and glorification, the disciples will be entirely changed, humbled, and awed. We, however, have the privilege of looking back at the Lord’s Passion through the lens of the Resurrection. The life-giving Cross thus confronts us with its two-fold truth: the suffering of our Savior meets our suffering as sinners. The Gospel requires us to “[look] into the perfect law of liberty and [continue] in it . . . not [as] a forgetful hearer” (Ja 1:25).

We have now arrived at the last Sunday of Great Lent. Soon we will focus on the solemn and saving events of Holy Week. As we meditate on the Lord’s Passion, may we, unlike the first disciples, understand the price He paid to release us from the bondage of death and sin. How wisely the Fathers of the Church assigned to this Sunday a dual focus on the life-giving Passion and on the story of Saint Mary of Egypt!

Saint Mary embodies true repentance, the very kind that embraces the Passion. Coming to herself and rejecting her former life, she venerates the life-giving Cross before embarking on a life of struggle and cleansing in the desert. Listen to how that blessed former harlot describes this momentous turning point in her own words:

“The holy day of the Exaltation of the Cross dawned while I was still flying about hunting for youths. . . . When the hour for the holy elevation [of the Cross] approached, I was trying to make my way in with the crowd. . . . [when] I was stopped by some force which prevented my entering. . . . Having repeated my attempt three or four times, at last I felt exhausted and . . . began to understand the reason why I was prevented. . . . It was my unclean life which barred the entrance to me. I began to weep and lament” (*Great Canon*, p. 89).

Mary begs the Theotokos to intercede with Christ for her, and the weeping, lamenting harlot receives the grace to see the Cross, adding, “I saw too the Mysteries of God and how the Lord accepts repentance.” She proceeds to spend forty years in the desert, repenting truly.

Having taken thee, O righteous Mary, as an example of true repentance, we beg thee to implore Christ our God to grant us the same gift and grace, that in faith and yearning we may sing songs of deliverance unto thee. – Verse adapted from the Sunday of Mary of Egypt

April 7 – Monday of the Sixth Week of Great Lent
Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 19:16-25

Compassion for the Poor: Proverbs 19:16-25, especially vs. 17: “The one who has mercy on the poor lends to God, and He will repay him according to his gift.” Our father among the saints, the Martyr Zotikos – called Protector of the Poor – was a man who embraced this proverb. Born into the nobility, he moved to Constantinople and cast off all worldly things. After he was ordained to the priesthood he founded a home for the poor, where special rooms were set aside for those with infectious diseases.

The Emperor Constantine the Great deeply admired Zotikos, and the good priest regularly enjoyed the company of the imperial family. Upon Constantine’s repose his son Constantius became emperor. Shortly thereafter, a plague struck Constantinople and, to contain the disease, Constantius ordered that infected citizens be thrown into the sea. Zotikos hastened to bring those suffering from the plague into his home and care for them. When his money ran out, he appealed to Constantius for money to buy precious pearls as a gift for him. The Emperor provided money and Zotikos used the funds to gather more victims.

When the Emperor asked about the pearls, Zotikos brought him to see the patients being cared for in his home for the poor. He explained, “These, O Emperor, are living pearls, which I have acquired with toil and money for your salvation.” The furious ruler condemned him to death and had him tied to a wild ass, which was driven about the city until the martyr died of his wounds (*Prologue From Ochrid* vol. 4, p. 393-4; Poulos, *Orthodox Saints* vol. 4, 229-30).

The ancient Mosaic law teaches us that “the poor will never cease from the land” (Dt 15:11). This point is reiterated by the Lord Jesus: “For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good” (Mk 14:7). In recognition of the continuing existence of poverty during our fallen age, God gives us various commandments concerning the poor, for example: “You shall not harden your heart, nor shut your hand from your poor brother” (Dt 15:7). This restraint is followed by a positive instruction: “But you shall surely open your hands to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs” (vs. 8). Material charity alone is insufficient – it is to be given with heartfelt personal concern: “Your heart should not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the Lord your God will bless you in all your works and in everything to which you put your hand” (vs. 10).

This duty of compassion appears throughout Scripture. The Prophet David says, “Blessed is the man that hath understanding for the poor man and the pauper. . . . May the Lord keep him, and make him to live, and make him blessed upon the earth” (Ps 40:1-2). Holy Scripture consistently recognizes that God blesses those who, from their hearts, consider the circumstances of the poor. The Prophet Daniel advises even a pagan king to care for the poor for the sake of his soul: “Therefore, O king, let my counsel be pleasing to you, to atone for your sins with alms and your wrongdoings with compassion on the poor. Perhaps God will be longsuffering regarding your trespasses” (Dan 4:27).

Saint Cyril of Alexandria notes that the Lord “teaches us . . . love for the poor . . . a thing precious in the sight of God” (*Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, Homily 103, p. 414). According to Saint Cyprian of Carthage, “When we have pity on the poor, we are lending to God at interest; and when we give to the lowly, we are giving to God” (*Bible and the Holy Fathers*, p. 533). And Saint John Chrysostom proclaims: “If there were no poor, the greater part of your sins would not be removed. They are the healers of your wounds, their hands are medicinal to you” (*Homily 14 on Timothy*, *NPNF First Series*, vol. 13, p. 455).

O Master, Father of compassions, unite us to every good work for those in want. – Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great

April 8 – Tuesday of the Sixth Week of Great Lent
Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 21:3-20

The Destiny of the Ungodly: Proverbs 21:3-21, especially vs. 6: “Destruction shall entertain the ungodly, for they are not willing to do righteous things.” The Apostle Paul warns, “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap” (Gal 6:7). Our own experience confirms this truth, for we often see negative consequences fall upon those who persist in sinful attitudes and evil actions.

This present selection from Proverbs associates thirteen negative attitudes or behaviors with their likely outcomes. Many of these sinful attitudes are commonplace among us and thus we would do well to ponder their eventual outcomes, so that by God’s grace we may restrain from evil and strive to acquire virtue.

The consequences of pursuing an ungodly life generally fall into one of these three categories: wretched circumstances; repudiation by others; and destruction of one’s life and/or property. We turn first to the sins most likely to end in disaster and wretched circumstances: arrogance (vs. 4), lying (vs. 5), intemperance (vs. 10), and insensitivity – “closing one’s ears” – to the needy (vs. 12).

We are all familiar with the wretchedness of the “high-minded man . . . [who is] bold-hearted in his *arrogance*.” (vs. 4). The original text could also be translated: “The arrogant man is rash in his pride.” Know-it-all often make gross mistakes and fall wide of the mark – precisely because they are certain they are right.

When the *intemperate* person tries to cope with the results of his impetuous actions, he finds, sadly, that “there will be no one listening” (vs. 12). Surely it is better to curb our pride and *high-minded* certainty before we come upon hard times and find ourselves alone. Proverbs points out that “men without discernment” try to swallow a whole “treasury of desire” (vs. 20), but they would be better off “to dwell in a corner in the open air than with wrongdoing in plastered rooms and in a shared house” (vs. 8).

“A *lying* tongue pursues worthless things,” for any nice thing we win by deceit is actually one of “the snares of death” (vs. 5). Likewise, “destruction . . . [entertains] the ungodly, for they are not willing to do righteous things” (vs. 6).

Another predictable result of a sinful life is the acquisition of a bad reputation. Proverbs describes such reputations in verses 9-14. The *ungodly* are “not . . . shown mercy by anyone” (vs. 9), but are despised “in their evils” (vs. 11). Then there are the rash or the *intemperate* who do not restrain their impulses (vs. 10). The heedless and insensitive person is quick to close his ears so he does not have to “listen to the weak” (vs. 12).

The ultimate consequence of every kind of sin, especially when pursued consistently, is *death* and *destruction* (vss. 6, 10, 12, 17). Death may be physical, but worse yet is the living death of one who “wanders from the way of righteousness” and finds himself outclassed “in an assembly of giants” (vs. 15). Such spiritually shriveled souls are likely to be crushed.

Let us heed our Savior: “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Mt 7:13-14). We have no life in us (Jn 6:53) – but Christ gives us that life “more abundantly” in Himself and in His blessed kingdom (vs. 10:10). “The way of righteousness and mercy shall find life and glory” (Prv 21:20). Let us heed these wise words as coming from the Lord, for Christ gives life to all who follow Him, now and evermore.

We bless Thee, O God, and we entreat Thine infinite goodness, enlighten the eyes of our understanding and raise up our minds from the heavy sleep of indolence; open our mouths and fill them with Thy praise that we may unceasingly sing and confess Thee, the only true God. – Morning Prayer of Saint Basil the Great

April 9 - Wednesday of the Sixth Week of Great Lent
Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 21:22-30

Seven Grievous Sins: Proverbs 21:23-22:4, especially vs. 22:4: “*The fear of the Lord and riches and glory and life are the offspring of wisdom.*” Saint Peter of Damascus developed a comprehensive list of 298 passions after a thorough study of Holy Scripture. Of these, he considers gluttony, unchastity, and superfluous possessions to be the worst, ranking them first among the “eight ruling passions.” He contends that gluttony “leads to unchastity, which breeds avarice, which gives rise to anger when we fail to attain what we want – that is, fail to have our own way.

“This produces dejection, and dejection engenders first listlessness and then self-esteem, and self-esteem leads to pride. From these eight passions,” he concludes, “come every evil, passion, and sin” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 205-6, 213-4).

Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos concurs with Saint Peter that “the passions are not separated from one another in water-tight compartments” (*Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 259). The Church Fathers advise us to “examine carefully with what thoughts, dispositions, and passionate attachments [our soul] is specially occupied, and which passion is most predominant and tyrannically rules there. Then against this passion first of all take up arms and struggle to overcome it” (Theophan the Recluse, *Unseen Warfare*, p. 116).

Over the next two days we will examine seven grievous passions that assault the Christian who struggles for purity. Today’s passage from Proverbs directs our attention to *pride*, which is the source of imperiousness: “A troublemaker is called rash, arrogant, and boastful, and he who bears malice is called lawless” (vs. 23). Saint John Climacus characterizes pride as “the despising of men . . . a source of anger . . . the patron of pitilessness, the rejection of compassion, a bitter inquisitor, an inhuman judge” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 23.1, p. 138).

According to Saint John Cassian, “the demon of pride [is] a most sinister demon, fiercer than all that have been discussed up till now. He attacks the perfect above all and seeks to destroy those who have mounted almost to the heights of holiness. . . . Each of the other passions that trouble the soul attacks . . . the single virtue which is opposed to it. . . . But when the vice of pride has become master of our wretched soul, it acts like some harsh tyrant who has gained control of a great city, and destroys it completely, razing it to its foundations” (*Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 92).

Another passion described in Proverbs is *sloth*: “Desires kill a slothful man, for his hands choose not to do anything” (vs. 24). We receive strong counsel against this vice from the Apostle Paul, who writes, “For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies” (2 Thes 3:10-11).

Proverbs warns of *avarice* (greed) a few verses later. “The ungodly man desires evil all day long” (Prv 21:25). Saint John Climacus asserts that this sin is the most common root of evils among men and women living in the world. Our modern materialist culture, however, does not even recognize that avarice makes an idolater of every person it comes to dominate (Col 3:5).

Lastly, our reading addresses the passion of *anger* in this verse: “An ungodly man resists shamelessly to the face” (Prv 21:28). The Lord warns that anger against a brother without good cause is sufficient reason for being brought to judgment (Mt 5:22). Saint Philotheos of Sinai observes that “the enemy in his turn tries to subvert this commandment by stirring up strife and thoughts of rancor and envy within us” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 22).

May the Lord strengthen us against these sins, helping us to dispel them by prayer, so that the Holy Spirit may guide us to obey the wisdom of Proverbs.

Bring my soul out of prison, that I may confess Thy name. – Psalm 141:10

April 10 – Thursday of the Sixth Week of Great Lent
Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 23:15-24:5

Seven Grievous Sins, continued: Proverbs 23:15-24:5, especially vss. 24:3-4: “A house is built with wisdom, and it is built up with understanding. Storehouses are filled with perception from all honorable and good riches.” Today we continue our survey of seven grievous sins that plague those who take up the God-pleasing struggle for purity and illumination. The first vice we note in the present passage is *envy* or *coveting*.

Two proverbs in the reading take aim at this particular sin. “Do not let your heart envy sinners, but be in fear of the Lord the whole day long” (vs. 17). “My son, do not envy evil men, neither desire to be with them” (vs. 1). Envy begins in the heart and violates God’s command that “you shall not covet” (Ex 20:17). Envy is a dimension of covetousness: the wrongful desire to possess something for personal enjoyment. Furthermore, covetousness and envy yearn jealously for something that belongs to another – we want what is not our own. These sins of desire express our illicit longing to enjoy an object in order to gain some pleasure for ourselves.

Our Lord Jesus Christ pinpoints the root of coveting: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Mt 6:21). He continues, “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (vs. 24). Unless we defeat our tyrannous desire for possessions, our hearts cannot burn with true love for the Lord. Instead, we shall languish in unsatisfied desires to possess the goods of this world. Yearning for what is offered by *sinners* and *evil men* (Prv 15:17, 16:1) is especially dangerous, for our ill-conceived intentions to fulfill these desires only deepen and compound the sin within us.

Next comes *gluttony*. In this passage a particular form of this sin – drunkenness – receives prolonged attention: “Do not be a wine-bibber . . . at drinking parties, neither continue long at feasts” (vs. 23:20). “Who has woe? Who has tumult? Who has condemnation? Who has unpleasantness and gossip? Who has afflictions with no purpose? Whose eyes are pale? Is it not those who linger long with wines? Is it not those who hunt for the whereabouts of drinking parties? Do not be drunk with wine, but keep company with righteous men . . . for if you set your eyes to the bowls and cups, afterward you will walk about more naked than ground meat. And at last . . . the venom spreads through him as one bitten by a horned serpent” (vss. 28-32).

Gluttony encompasses such a range of tempting delights! Our struggles to maintain a healthy weight underscore our many defeats, as does our longing for material comforts and every sort of visual and tactile sensuality.

Finally, we are warned against *lust*, a sin often accompanied by the domination of some insatiable appetite. Proverbs cautions in particular against sexual lust, “for every . . . fornicator shall become impoverished, and . . . clothe himself with tattered and ragged garments” (vs. 21).

Here are stern warnings for our modern culture, which is saturated with sexual imagery and promotes neo-pagan excesses with the message that we may “indulge without guilt.” However, let us heed the wisdom of the Apostle Paul: “Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor . . . covetous, nor drunkards . . . will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 6:9-10).

O Lord, the passions threaten to overwhelm me, strengthen me to remain constant in Thy will.
– Prayer of Single Persons

April 11 - Friday of the Sixth Week of Great Lent
Second Reading at Vespers – Proverbs 31:10-30

The Bride of Christ: *Proverbs 31:8-31, especially vs. 28:* “*Many daughters acquire riches; many do mighty things, but you excel and surpass all.*” Holy Week is almost upon us, and soon we shall hear the haunting strains of the hymn sung at Bridegroom Orthros: “I behold Thy bridal chamber richly adorned, O My Savior; but I have no wedding garment to worthily enter in.” This hymn reminds the faithful that the Church is the Bride of Christ (Eph 5:22-33). More importantly, it urges us to attend diligently to our spiritual labors as we approach the Feast of Feasts.

Today’s passage from Proverbs describes the lifestyle of a godly wife, but at a more profound level it draws a verbal icon of the Church – the Bride of Christ. In the spirit of the Orthros hymn, these verses encourage us to become pure members of the Bride of Christ, so that the Bridegroom will welcome us joyfully to His great marriage feast.

Let us examine the ways of this Bride who is “is more valuable than precious stones” to her Lord (vs. 10). The Bride knows and receives Him in the power of Holy Spirit, for truly the “heart of her husband trusts in her” (vs. 11). Let us strive to lead *productive* lives that honor Christ our Bridegroom (vs. 12) by “trading” and *procuring* every good thing for the household of the Church (vs. 13). We are called upon to labor day and night to feed the faithful who are gathered with us in Christ (vs. 14).

Indeed, the Church is *buying* what the household of Her Lord requires (vs. 15) – the very “bread of angels” (Ps 77:28)? Have we not been richly fed by the Bride of the Lord? What has she ever withheld from us? Most certainly the Church appoints “tasks” to us, Her servants, for each soul among the faithful has a unique work to perform within the household of the Bridegroom (Prv 31:14). Let us be about our labors with diligence!

The Church is forever at work in this world, for many peoples and nations remain unattended – they are fallow farmlands requiring cultivation in Christ. She never hesitates to buy new lands with the sweat and blood of her martyrs, for “from the fruits of her hands she plants her plot of land” (vs. 15). Let us gird our loins and “strengthen [our] arms” for this work (vs. 16). Night and day the task awaits us (vs. 17).

The Church expects us to give ourselves fully to these efforts as she “extends her arms to do profitable things” (vs. 18), weaving the fabric of the Kingdom of God into every culture and society of this world. May we offer ourselves freely as the hands of the Bride of Christ when she “reaches out with her fruit to the needy” (vs. 19).

Above all, let us recall how the Bridegroom provides for His household. He leaves His Bride a home illumined by the Holy Spirit; He “is not anxious about those at home when He spends a long time elsewhere, for all her household are clothed” (vs. 20). At baptism we are clothed in the “garment of righteousness” in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that we might “put off the old man with his deeds, and . . . put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him that created him” (Col 3:9-10).

Do we belong to the Church? Do we bring honor to her Husband through our industry and our words, making Him “respected at the gates and when He sits in council with the elders” (Prv 31:22)? As members of the Bride of Christ, may we “not eat the bread of idleness” but rather “open [our] mouth wisely” (vss. 26-27). May we receive ever receive her kindness and grace, that we may grow rich in the things of the Spirit. And when Christ returns, may He praise us along with His Bride “at the gates” (vs. 28) of His Kingdom.

Oh Christ, may we Thy children round about Thy table, like a newly planted olive orchard, obtain favor in Thy sight and shine like the stars of heaven in Thee, our Lord and God. – Hymn from the Marriage Service

April 12 - Lazarus Saturday
John 11:1-45

Death and Resurrection: John 11:1-45, especially vs. 25: “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.’” Three times before the Lord Jesus cries, “Lazarus, come forth!” (vs. 43), the dead man’s sisters and friends lament that Jesus has arrived too late. First Martha, then Mary, says, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died” (vss. 21, 32). The mourners ask each other, “Could not this Man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying?” (vs. 37).

Two assumptions lie behind these remarks. First, once death overtakes Lazarus, there is no hope of his returning to life. Second, the Lord Jesus’ ability to restrain death is limited to healing; His power is merely preventative. If only He had come before Lazarus died, He might have done some good! Plainly, the Lord shatters both suppositions when He calls Lazarus back to life. A man dead four days walks out of his tomb – dramatic proof that the Lord Jesus’ power over death overshadows even the miracles of modern medical intervention.

The Lord’s words in verses 25-26 demand that we reconsider our very concept of death. Let us, like those at Bethany, ponder the meaning of what the Lord says and does on this day. In doing so we shall find great blessing, for the raising of Lazarus prepares us to enter fully into the Lord Jesus’ own approaching Death and triumphant Resurrection in Great and Holy Week that lies ahead.

First, we note that the Lord makes use of Martha’s own statement about death and resurrection (“I know that he [Lazarus] will rise again in the resurrection at the last day” – vs. 24). Her words reflect a belief, commonly held among pious Jews of her day, that in the age to come the dead will be raised from the grave to face God’s judgment. Without contradicting her confession of faith, the Lord Jesus declares simply: “I am the resurrection and the life” (vs. 25).

Next, the Lord expands this article of belief beyond the scope of an event that will take place in the future, during the end times. Even as He affirms that the righteous will rise from the dead and live eternally, He links the prospect of everlasting life to Himself: “He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live” (vs. 25).

The Lord further deepens this truth by the use of an unexpected preposition. Although this subtlety is not reflected in most English translations, the Greek text literally reads, “He who believes *into* Me.”

This usage, rarely found outside the New Testament, is a favorite device in apostolic teaching. It emphasizes the spiritual reality that Christians are united to Christ. What does it mean to believe *into* Christ? Being united *with* or *into* the Lord is essential for eternal life (vs. 26). Through our union with Christ we are *made righteous* (Rom 5:19) and ultimately “raised up with Jesus” (2 Cor 4:14).

The implications of believing *into* Christ change how we live. We are to follow and obey Christ Jesus, placing His will above every other claim and demand. Christian living depends on our relationship with Jesus. Do we invest ourselves in Christ? Do we maintain our relationship with Him and place Him before all others? If so, we live *into* Christ.

Finally, when the Lord equates Himself with resurrection and life, He invites us to enter into a unique relationship with Him – one in which the Resurrection functions actively within every believer. This is the point of verse 26. The age to come – the Resurrection – becomes operatively possible within the believer who dies and is raised into Christ through baptism. Truly, “death no longer has dominion” over us when we are united to the Lord in heart, soul, body, and mind (Rom 6:9).

O come, all ye faithful, let us adore Christ’s holy Resurrection. For lo, through the Cross is joy come into all the world. Ever blessing the Lord, let us sing His Resurrection! – Sunday Orthros

April 13 - Palm Sunday – The Entry into Jerusalem
John 12:1-18

Missing the Mark: *John 12:1-18, especially vs. 16:* “His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things were written about Him and that they had done these things to Him.” As Orthodox Christians we embrace and defend God’s revelation of Himself, confirming the Gospel (Gal 1:8) and treasuring Holy Tradition. Our efforts may not always hit the mark, but nonetheless we affirm our intention to uphold the whole truth of the faith. We struggle to live and express that truth as fully as we are able.

Our ability to carry out this purpose does not depend on our having a series of answers prepared in neat, correct phrases. Rather, to be truly Orthodox is to exercise an inner listening with an attentive heart, nurturing a spirit that seeks illumination and wisdom from God. It requires deep humility concerning our personal capacities, for we resolve to place our trust in what the Church has always taught.

Today’s reading presents us with four examples of what can happen if we are almost – *but not quite* – right concerning the mission and teachings of Jesus Christ. Like us, the actors in this passage are fallible human beings who draw near the truth but miss the mark as a result of serious errors. Their tragic miscalculations are preserved in the Gospel to help us as we strive toward a more complete allegiance to God’s truth.

First, consider the case of Judas Iscariot. Let us not too quickly malign this man for asking, “Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?” (Jn 12:5). The Lord Himself insists that we show concern for the needy (Mt 25:35-40). Judas demonstrates that he has learned some things along the way, for on the surface his words reflect a degree of righteous concern.

The text, however, reveals that dire motives lie behind Judas’ decision to speak up. A deeper, twisted desire lurks beneath his expression of caring for the poor (Jn 12:6). Jesus responds to Judas by defending Mary’s actions, thus preventing those who are truly motivated by love for the poor from being led astray (vss. 7-8). Subsequent events, of course, reveal which of the two acted most appropriately, for Mary is the one who chooses “that good part, which will not be taken away from her” (Lk 10:42).

Next come the Jews who “knew that He was there; and . . . came, not for Jesus’ sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus” (vs. 9). Spectacles attract people seeking entertainment; some even flock to religious gatherings in the hopes of seeing miraculous events. Although the prospect of titillation sometimes draws the hungry to the faith, the Lord warns us against such shallow motives in the Parable of the Sower. Those who come to the faith but “have no root in themselves . . . endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word’s sake, immediately they stumble” (Mk 4:17). May we always be humble and cautious!

Now consider the crowd that greets the Lord as He rides into Jerusalem. These people are physically near the Truth, but they miss the heart of it. Many who greet the Lord will cry out later, “Crucify Him!” (Jn 19:15). Among the people cheering His arrival are those who are motivated by curiosity (vs. 12:18). The Lord Jesus may intrigue us, but in the end a fascination with the dramatic provides no foundation for eternal salvation. Let us turn to Him because He alone fill us with true love, humility, and self-sacrifice!

Finally, the evangelist reports that even the apostles “did not understand these things at first” (vs. 16). Only their meeting with the resurrected Christ – and subsequent illumination by the Holy Spirit – brings them to full understanding and commitment. Save us also, O Lord!

Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord. Confess to the Lord; for He is good. – Palm Sunday verse

April 14 - Great and Holy Monday
Matthew 21:18-43

By What Authority: Matthew 21:18-43, especially vs. 23: *“By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?”* This passage presents us with three instances of confrontation. First, a fig tree, accused of bearing no fruit, withers on command. Second, a son relents and obeys his father, while another son ignores the same order. Finally, a miserable destruction justly befalls some rapacious tenants. These three pictures of conflict stand as warning for us as we begin Great and Holy Week and the worship of our Lord’s Passion.

Only the day before Christ entered Jerusalem, the nation’s social and religious capital, to celebrate the high holy days (vss. 21:1-11). After disrupting the commerce associated with temple worship (vss. 12-17), he spent the night in Bethany. Now, on the following day, He reveals the nature of His conflict with “the chief priests and elders of the people [who] confronted Him as He was teaching” (vs. 23). He concludes with a prophetic declaration: “Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it” (vs. 43).

Let us examine the three images in this passage carefully. First, Jesus’ withering of the fig tree centers on the issue of fruitfulness, a metaphor He develops more fully in the parables He offers in answer to the challenge of chief priests and elders. By the time a fig tree leafs out, its branches are typically laden with fruit – unless it happens to be a self-sown or “male” tree.

The unproductive tree withered by Christ appears to such a volunteer. In Scripture the fig tree often symbolizes the nation of Israel, which was planted in the land by the Lord Himself. Its withering at the command of God, who intended it to bear fruit, is thus a stern commentary.

Next, in the parable of the two sons, the Lord readily applies His story to the chief priests and the elders. As the primary representatives of the religious and secular society of ancient Israel, they “saw [and yet] did not afterward relent and believe” (vs. 32).

We may know *about* the Lord, and yet never fully submit to Him. The Orthodox Christian life entails a determination to become children of the Light and heirs of eternal good things. However, this life is fraught with pitfalls, distractions, and assaults on our convictions and trust in the Lord. Our task is to preserve our baptismal garment and the earnest of the Spirit pure and undefiled until the dread Day of Christ our God. He will never desert us, although at times He may seem to be buried in the tomb. We know He is risen, for Christ is among us; He is and ever shall be!

Finally, we are reminded that all who participate in the life of the Church share one and the same path. Clergy and laity alike come to pray and worship God. After all, what is life in Christ? First and foremost, it is the gift of the Spirit! God endows; we are to preserve and prune so that our lives may bear fruit.

Indeed, we are merely tenants, for the life in Christ can never become our possession regardless of where we stand in the ranks of the faithful. We are servants; He is Master.

None of us knows how long the course of our life may run. Let us neither waste the years that we accumulate, nor presume to ownership. The resistance of the tenants to the owner’s legitimate request reflects their failure to recognize to whom the vineyard really belongs. May God ever illumine the eyes of our hearts!

As we enter Great and Holy Week, let us worship “unto vigilance of soul, unto forgiveness of sins, unto the communion of the Holy Spirit, unto the fulfillment of the kingdom of heaven and unto boldness toward” our good and gracious Savior, Jesus Christ (Divine Liturgy). May we bear fruit, incurring neither judgment nor condemnation!

Appear to us, O Light, that we may become sons and daughters of Thine undying light! –
Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov, *On Prayer*

April 15 - Great and Holy Tuesday

Matthew 22:15-23:39

Faith, Reverence, and Fear of God: Matthew 22:15-23:39, especially vs. 22:18: “*Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, “Why do you test Me, you hypocrites?”* Chapters 21-25 of Saint Matthew’s Gospel, which depict the events immediately preceding Christ’s arrest in Jerusalem, might be called the “pre-passion” narrative. Today’s reading focuses on the conflict between the religious leadership and the Lord Jesus, beginning with the Pharisees’ plot to “entangle Him in His talk” (vs. 22:15).

These adversaries deliberately seek to involve officials from the court of Herod Antipas, the ruler who executed John the Baptist. Their hope is that Jesus will indict Himself, thus providing Pilate, the Roman procurator, with sufficient reason to execute Him as a dangerous populist.

First, however, they must induce Him to make a verbal slip, since He does “not regard the person of men” (vs. 22:16). When the Lord is able to field their questions handily, they “left Him and went their way” (vs. 22). Next, the Sadducees try their skills against him, but to no avail (vss. 22:23-32). He rebuts their hypothetical problem, leaving the multitudes “astonished at His teaching” (vs. 33).

So far, the two power blocs of His own nation have made little progress in gathering damning evidence. The Pharisees now come back with their own experts on the Mosaic Law. One of them “a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him” (vs. 22:35), but He gives an impeccable answer (vss. 37-40).

At this juncture, the Lord suddenly switches from defense to offense. He asks, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose Son is He?” (vs. 22:42). Note how He elaborates on His question with Scriptural quotations that undermine their easy answer, thus putting an end to any further probing of His thinking (vss. 43-46).

Chapter 23 contains a scathing attack on Christ’s foremost antagonists, the scribes and Pharisees. However, the Lord seldom speaks to them directly. Rather, as the opening verse states, “Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples” (vs. 23:1). His message is intended for us! Of course, He knows that his opponents are in the crowd. Starting with verse 23:13, Jesus openly indicts the scribes and Pharisees on four major counts.

First, He criticizes them for “[shutting] up the kingdom of heaven against men,” neither going in themselves, nor allowing “those who are entering to go in” (vs. 23:13). Then He excoriates them for taking advantage of their status to exploit the vulnerable of society under a pious pretense (vs. 14). Observing how hard they work at convincing others to act like them, He accuses them of making each convert “twice as much a son of hell as yourselves” (vs. 15).

He lays bare the emptiness of their vows of integrity, for they make solemn oaths which do not really honor God (vss. 16-24). What Christ truly denounces here is any and every kind of piety that neglects justice, mercy, and faith. The outward appearance of being “righteous to men, but inside . . . full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (vs. 28) is a fearsome prospect for every member of the Church. God preserve us from this state!

In the final verses, Jesus of Nazareth momentarily lifts the veil of His divinity and speaks as God the eternal Son of the Father: “How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” (vs. 23:37). May such a condemnation never fall upon any of our parish communities!

Holy Week directs us to focus on Christ’s sacrifice for our sake. If we allow our faith, reverence, and fear of God to become a sham, then all is desolate. Let us repent and prostrate ourselves before Him, crying, “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God!”

If in aught, O Lord, we have sinned, forgive as Thou art a good God and lovest mankind. – Bridegroom Orthros

April 16 - Great and Holy Wednesday (Pre-sanctified Liturgy)
Matthew 26:6-16

Generosity and Covetousness: Matthew 26:6-16, especially vss. 13-15: “‘Wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her.’ Then one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, ‘What are you willing to give me if I deliver Him to you?’” These verses present us with stark opposites: generosity and covetousness. Of these two conditions of the heart, the first is natural and life-giving; the second produces an aberrant distortion of God’s creation.

All but one of the Ten Commandments tell us to pursue or refrain from specific *actions*. Only the commandment that directs us not to covet (Ex 20:17) specifically addresses an inner state of the heart. In the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:1-7), the Lord Jesus erases this superficial distinction, revealing that all ten commandments concern matters of the heart. We are not animals who merely act and react, but spiritual beings, made in the image of God, with the ability to love, honor, and worship.

In today’s passage from Matthew, we encounter the heights of generosity as well as the murky depths of covetousness. Let us choose to ascend the heights to blessed generosity! As we observe the Lord Jesus visiting Simon, a leper (vs. 26:6), we are struck by His example of divine generosity. “Not without purpose did the evangelist mention the leprosy of Simon,” Saint John Chrysostom says. “For inasmuch as the leprosy seemed a most unclean disease, and to be abhorred, and yet . . . Jesus had both healed the man (for else He would not have chosen to have tarried with a leper), and had gone into his house” (“Homily 75 on Matthew,” *NPNF First Series*, vol. 10, p. 451).

The generosity of God exceeds every human notion of unselfishness, for He enters into the worst of the human condition with His healing love. Furthermore, the generosity of Christ does not end with His healing of Simon. It is also poured out on the woman who honors Him by anointing His head with “very costly fragrant oil” (vs. 7).

Sadly, the woman’s act of worship elicits the disciples’ indignation. “Why this waste? For this fragrant oil might have been sold for much and given to the poor” (vss. 8-9). The loving Christ rises to her defense, reframing the event to reveal the underlying generosity of her actions.

“She has done a good work for Me. For you have the poor with you always, but Me you do not have always. For in pouring this fragrant oil on My body, she did it for My burial” (vss. 10-12). Here, Christ Jesus is preparing us to perceive His own boundless, overflowing generosity. He assumes a body as one of us and embraces death and burial for our salvation!

We are also inspired by the woman’s generosity, for, as Saint John Chrysostom writes, “In truth the deed came of a reverential mind, and fervent faith, and a contrite soul. . . . For if she hath wrought a good work, it is quite evident she shall receive a due reward” (p. 453). This reward is expressed in the Gospel: “In the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her” (vs. 13).

In contrast to generosity’s beauty, Judas’ ugly coveting makes us tremble. “Then . . . Judas Iscariot went to the chief priests and said, ‘What are you willing to give me if I deliver Him to you?’” (vss. 14-15). The commandment against coveting, directed as it is to the heart, is a warning that unchecked greed unchecked will lead us to active transgression. Let us beware the greed that set Judas on the path to betrayal!

O my God, keep me from envy, jealousy, stinginess, and longing for anything that is another’s; rather grant me a gracious, generous heart toward all, even as Thou hast toward me. – Prayer of Self-Examination

**April 17 - Great and Holy Thursday – Fifth Gospel Reading for the Vesperal Liturgy
Matthew 26:40-27:2**

Five Indictments: Matthew 26:40-27:2, especially vs. 41: *“The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”* The stunning revelation in this portion of Matthew’s Gospel is the confession of weakness by the future leadership of the Church. These eleven men, chosen by Christ Himself, spent three years in close association with the Lord. And yet they panic in a crisis and flee, putting personal safety first. The evangelist’s forthrightness about these failures should not be overlooked by us, especially in this day and age when every effort is made by public figures to cast their words and actions in the best of light. This extraordinary frankness bears further examination.

The Evangelist’s record in these verses is replete with examples of common human foibles such as inattention, feigned friendship, caving into the pressure to fight or flight, and denying that which we hold dear. This Gospel certainly confronts us with weaknesses that we easily find in our own life story! Our Christian faith not only allows such deleterious admissions to emerge, but actually encourages them. Why?

In these same verses, Christ our God encounters these very same weaknesses. However, He chooses to place them before God and to pray, “O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done” (vs. 42). We have a God who understands weakness!

Consider this statement, which He offers to His disciples: “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (vs. 42). Many of us are plagued with sleepiness at the wrong times. For example, any sort of work that we undertake after lunch can fall victim to an inevitable drowsiness. Once, a woman who came seeking my help watched me fall asleep as her troubles poured out. She later said, “When I saw you fall asleep, it actually helped me realize that my troubles were not all that important.” What grace for my disgrace!

We are constantly bombarded by so much stimuli that falling into drowsiness becomes an easy way out. How often do we heed the Lord’s admonition, “Could you not watch with Me one hour? (vs. 40), only to see ourselves fail. Jesus’ caution is vital: “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation” (vs. 41).

Likewise, we are schooled to be polite so as to never insult others. In public, we often put on a pleasant mask of respectability and friendliness – a learned behavior useful in some circumstances. However, when moral issues essential to the heart and soul are at stake, what is worse than the “Judas kiss” (vs. 49) of polite dishonesty? What seems like appropriate behavior in our day-to-day social interactions becomes deadly if we are never really present when it counts.

When faced with a threat, we must choose between two instinctive responses: fight or flight. Both reactions appear in this passage. “And suddenly, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword, struck the servant of the high priest, and cut off his ear” (vs. 51). Jesus deflects the instinct to fight, for He “touched his ear and healed him” (Lk 22:51). The disciples, however, then choose flight (Mt 26:56). We are reminded to look for the healing way between the two alternatives!

What about the actions of Peter? He cannot bring himself to flee; instead he follows Jesus “and sat with the servants to see the end” (vs. 58). Yet only Christ is able to drink the cup for our salvation (vs. 42). He remains silent before His accusers until put under oath (vs. 63). Then He confesses, “It is as you said” (vs. 64). At the end, Peter “went out and wept bitterly” (vs. 75). The chief disciple teaches us that our repentance always begins with tears.

Receive me today, O Son of God, for I shall not divulge Thy mystery to Thine enemies, nor give Thee a kiss like Judas, but like the thief shall I confess Thee. Remember me, O Lord. – Vesperal Liturgy of Great and Holy Thursday

**April 18 - Great and Holy Friday – Third Passion Gospel at Orthros
Matthew 26:57-75**

Who Is on Trial? Matthew 26:57-75, especially vs. 59: “Now the chief priests, the elders, and all the council sought false testimony against Jesus to put Him to death” Let us first consider the reputation of the Evangelist Matthew, who recorded this brief description of the trial of Jesus before “the chief priests, the elders and all the council.” Saint John Chrysostom advises us: “You have seen the power of [Christ] who called, so consider also the obedience of [Matthew] who was called: how he neither resisted nor disputed” (“Homily 30 on Saint Matthew’s Gospel,” *NPNF First Series*, vol. 10).

As a disciple, Saint Matthew obeyed the command to “follow Me” (vs. 9:9). Is his testimony trustworthy? Although he is among the eleven when Jesus is apprehended, he reports honestly that “all the disciples forsook Him and fled” (vs. 26:56). Here we have a blunt and self-incriminating statement from a man who will later give his life for witnessing to Christ.

What of those who “laid hold of Jesus [and] led Him away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled” (vs. 57)? The Lord indicts them with a question: “Have you come out, as against a robber, with swords and clubs to take Me? I sat daily with you, teaching in the temple, and you did not seize Me” (vs. 55).

The outcome of Jesus’ trial is predetermined, for “all the council sought false testimony against Jesus to put Him to death” (vs. 59). They meet in the dead of night, away from the public eye, to avoid distractions or embarrassing interruptions. With malevolent intent, they seek witnesses who will help them cover up their unscrupulous actions (vss. 59-61).

The Lord Jesus, however, provides the very testimony that the authorities need to impose a death sentence. With His words, He actually makes the case for the council (vs. 64-66). In effect, the Lord puts the Council on trial. As a result, everyone present at the trial is condemned by His openness. Dodging the truth is very difficult and, in fact, ultimately impossible.

Who truly is on trial in this passage? Let us ponder this account by Father George Calciu of his experience in solitary confinement in a Romanian communist prison on Pascha.

Around eleven or twelve o’clock, the chief of the prison came into my cell. Sure, the guard had to report to him all my actions. . . . The colonel came into my cell because he knew that I had said, “Christ is Risen.” He was sure that I would say the same words to him. I heard his voice. I heard his steps in the corridor, and I knew what he wanted to tell me . . . and he knew what I had to tell him – it was like a play. He entered the cell. I did not face the wall. I faced him directly and I said, “Christ is Risen!” and he said, “Did you see Him?” . . . “No, I did not see Him. I did not see Him, but I believe what the apostles and the martyrs say. Did you see the North Pole? Did you see Stalin or Marx? But you believe in them by the authority of those who wrote about them. Because of the authority of the apostles, of the priests, of the martyrs, I believe in Jesus Christ. And I know that He really did rise from the dead.” He had no response, but he left me alone. So this day of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ was a very quiet, holy day for me. I did not celebrate the Liturgy because I knew that Jesus Christ had come into my cell and changed the minds of these guards. He closed the mouth of the colonel, and He gave me the words - not big words - but just what I needed to say (*Father George Calciu: Interviews, Homilies, and Talks*, pp. 82-83).

With patience Thou didst cry out, O Lord, to the law violators, saying, Ye have stricken the Shepherd and dispersed my twelve disciples; but I am able to bring more than twelve ranks of angels. But suffer ye long that may be fulfilled that which I have revealed through my prophets. – Great and Holy Friday Orthros

**April 19 - Great and Holy Saturday – Vesperal Divine Liturgy
Matthew 28:1-20**

The Resurrection: Matthew 28:1-20, especially vs. 9: “And as they went to tell His disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, ‘Rejoice!’ So they came and held Him by the feet and worshiped Him.” The *dynamis* or power of God that raises the Lord Jesus from the dead is poured out upon everyone He meets, for our Savior blesses all who come to Him and take Him by the feet, worshipping Him and obeying Him (vs. 9). He numbers us among those who know the joy and power of His Resurrection. When we meet the risen Christ, we often encounter Him unexpectedly, but always “with fear and great joy” (vs. 8)!

Such is the experience of the Apostle Paul, who willingly “suffered the loss of all things” to gain Christ and to know Him “and the power of His Resurrection” (Phil 3:8, 10). He reacts to His meeting with Christ much as do the women who arrive at the empty tomb. True, he meets Him in a very different spirit, for he is on his way to Damascus “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1), while the women come to the tomb in loving grief and devotion.

The angel reveals the Resurrection to the myrrh-bearers and leads them from dread into joy, showing them “the place where the Lord lay” and then directing them to “go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead” (Mt 28:6-7). In the account of Saul’s conversion, we see a similar pattern: once he meets the Lord Jesus, he responds with submission and obedience. “So he trembling and astonished, said, ‘Lord, what do You want me to do?’” (Acts 9:6). He is transformed before our eyes into the servant Paul, an apostle.

As we read the conclusion of Saint Matthew’s Gospel, many facets of the Resurrection appear. The Evangelist reveals to us an active, risen Lord, so that we too may rejoice, come to the Savior, hold Him by the feet, worship, and obey Him. May all of us who meet the risen Christ become His servants, for the outcome of the encounter is always the same: obedience to Him. The power of the Resurrection dawns upon our hearts and souls and evokes the desire to trust and obey.

Saul of Tarsus receives the command to “go into the city [of Damascus] and you will be told what you must do” (Acts 9:6). The women receive a single, basic command, first from the angel (Mt 28:7), then from the Lord Himself: “Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me” (vs. 10). When Saul obeys, he becomes a “chosen vessel of [Christ] to bear [His] name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15). The women obey, and their news impels “the eleven disciples [to go] away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them” (Mt 28:16).

The *dynamis* underlying the Resurrection is passed on to us by the risen Lord through the first leaders of the Church – the eleven of His own choosing – who meet Him on the appointed mountain. In Christ is vested “all authority . . . in heaven and on earth” (vs. 18), which includes His boundless power as God.

Christ our God gives direction to the entire Church with the Great Commission, beginning with its apostolic leaders: “Going, therefore, disciple all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (vss. 18-19).

Note that the Great Commission contains but one commandment: we are to “make disciples of all the nations” (vs. 19). *Baptizing* (vs. 19) and *teaching* (vs. 20) are ancillary to the process of discipling. The power of the Resurrection is indeed expressed in the Lord’s very command to us!

O Christ, continue the power of Thy Resurrection within Thy Church to disciple the nations.

April 20 - Great and Holy Pascha
John 1:1-17

Be Illumined: John 1:1-17, especially vs. 14: “*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*” “Let God arise, and let His enemies be scattered!” we sing in the Paschal verses (stichera). “Today a sacred Pascha is revealed to us. Pascha new and Holy, Pascha mystical, Pascha all laudable, Pascha which is Christ the Redeemer.” What a blessing it is to celebrate this bright and beautiful feast with the first in a series of readings from Saint John’s Gospel! This mystical and profound work offers a true feast that satisfies the insatiable hunger of our spirits – a luminous banquet of joy.

The Gospel of John starts with a magnificent prologue that announces Pascha as our light and life. It confirms the fulfillment of Saint John the Forerunner’s testimony and identifies grace and truth with Jesus Christ. “Come, let us drink from the fount of incorruption!”

The prologue begins at eternity, for here the Logos, the eternal Word of God, is and was and shall forever be. In the Logos – in Christ – lies the very source of “life and light” (vs. 4) Indeed, the Evangelist John declares that everything wells up and flows from Him: “All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made” (vs. 3).

Clearly, God the Word is neither a creature nor a product of God’s fashioning. He *is* God, the One who creates and fashions. On this Day of Resurrection, when the world is renewed, we discover once again that He is the very Life and Light that creates, illumines, and regenerates us in His image (vs. 4).

Saint John the Forerunner is the last of the Old Covenant prophets to *bear witness* to the Light (vss. 6-8). He is also the herald of the New Covenant, introducing the themes of the great symphony that the Master Musician executes on behalf of the nations. The Lord Jesus bases His saving teaching on the Forerunner’s first statement: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 3:2, 4:17). Pascha is the kingdom that Saint John declares to be *at hand*, and which the Lord of Life has brought *upon* all mankind (vs. 12:28).

The prologue also foreshadows the frenzy of denial and ignorance that will be raised against the Lord Jesus, and which will culminate in His Crucifixion. Although “He was in the world, and the world was made through Him . . . the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him” (Jn 1:10-11).

However, there were – and still are – the humble and meek among us who, by the grace of God, hear the great theme. These few understand the life-giving message and embrace the incarnate Life and Light. “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God” (vs. 12). Herein lies the irony of Pascha: those people who were “His own” rejected their Passover. That Pascha lives, however, and is ever among us!

Pascha, above all, “is Christ the Redeemer.” He is no mere ideal, nor a metaphor and symbol of spiritual truth. Pascha is the Person of God in the flesh, the Lord Jesus Christ. O ye faithful, let us touch Him (1 Jn 1:1), for “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14). This same Word bursts forth from the tomb, for death cannot confine “His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father” (vs. 14).

The apostles received His “fullness . . . grace for grace” and overflowing (vs. 16). Like the apostles, we are endowed with Life Himself. Let us love and serve Him who first loved us, “for grace and truth” have come to us. *Christ is risen!*

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

April 21 - Bright Monday
John 1:18-28

One Among You: John 1:18-28, especially vs. 26: “John answered them, saying, ‘I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know.’” If we strike a match on a moonless night in the open country, that brief flare of light will catch our eye and may even disclose that “there stands One among you” (vs. 26). This other person might be standing quite near us, and yet he might have remained hidden were it not for the flare of the match.

During the days when Saint John the Baptist is preaching in the wilderness, the Lord Jesus emerges from the quiet village of Nazareth and into public life. He is abruptly revealed as the unique flash of divine Light that illuminates the entire landscape of human history. This “light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it” (vs. 5).

After the Lord Jesus ascended into heaven (Acts 1:9), His apostles desired that all men would receive Him and “become children of God” (Jn 1:12). Guided by the Holy Spirit, they passed on to faithful men (2 Tim 2:2) the essentials of what they had seen and learned during the three years they lived in the presence of the Light.

Their message begins with a well-known Biblical truth: “No one has seen God at any time” (Jn 1:18). However, this general truth can now be adorned with an array of new insights gleaned from their experience of the Light. Thus they boldly add: “The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him” (vs. 18).

The details recorded in the Gospels are best understood from the perspective of apostolic experience. God the Son, living on earth as a man, redefines the meaning and value of every person and every human action. The humble fisherman John becomes an apostle, evangelist, and theologian. John the Baptizer becomes John the Forerunner. The Passover seder, in which the Jewish nation recalls its liberation from bondage in Egypt, becomes the Mystery of the Body and Blood of Christ (vs. 6:51-58).

The Forerunner knows he is “sent from God. . . . to bear witness of the Light” (vs. 1:6-7). His preaching and manner of living naturally attract attention from the religious authorities. They send priests and Levites to ask him, “Who are you?” (vs. 19).

John sets the record straight with three negative statements: “I am not” the Christ (vs. 20) or the Messiah; “I am not” the Prophet Elijah (vs. 21) who has come back to prepare for the Messiah’s arrival; I am not “the Prophet” that Moses predicted would come and foretell the Messiah’s arrival (vs. 21). John draws a definite boundaries around himself by saying, “I am not these.”

John then *affirms* the arrival of the “true Light” (vs. 9). According to him, it makes no difference how we label the One who is coming. What is important is that His arrival is accompanied by the Lord’s demand that men repent, cleansing their lives of whatever stands between them and their Creator.

John adds, “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness” (vs. 23), and he has one message: “Prepare!” John already knows through the Holy Spirit (see vss. 32-33) that He who comes is greater than all the prophets!

The official investigators, who were sent to inquire about the meaning of John’s baptism, become uncomfortable with his answers. The Forerunner seizes this moment to underscore his message: “Make straight the way of the Lord” (vs. 23), for “there stands One among you whom you do not know” (vs. 26). John reminds us that we will be asked give account of ourselves before our Creator. The coming of Jesus, God-in-the-flesh, tells us that the hour of universal accountability draws near.

Help us, save us; have mercy on us; and keep us O God by Thy grace! – Litany of Supplication, Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

April 22 - Bright Tuesday
Luke 24:12-35

The Breaking of the Bread: Luke 24:12-35, especially vss. 30-31: “As He sat at table with them . . . He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they knew Him. . . .” The Church knows the risen Lord whenever she gathers, takes bread and, blessing God, breaks it and partakes of the Holy Gifts. We manifest the Church each time we fulfill these simple actions. We declare, “Christ is among us!” and hear the reply, “He is and ever shall be!”

This passage from Saint Luke reveals the fullness of the relationship between the Divine Liturgy and Christ’s presence. In the meal that the Lord shares with Cleopas and Luke, we encounter the nascent liturgical commemoration. Two are gathered, and One joins them, fulfilling Christ’s proclamation: “Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (Mt 18:20).

The Divine Liturgy is continually offered as the Church journeys through time, even when the gathering consists of only two disciples, as with Cleopas and Luke. To the end of the present age, whenever and wherever the faithful gather, Christ is among us. The Resurrection on the first day of the week foreshadows the gathering of glorified Church with her Lord on the eighth and eternal day, in that timeless assembly called the Supper of the Lamb (Rv 19:9).

The Evangelist Luke tells us that the two disciples are walking to a village located sixty Roman stadia (seven miles) from Jerusalem (Lk 24:13). In Scripture, the life journey of the faithful is often called a *walk*, as when the Lord tells Moses that He will try the people “whether they will walk in My law or not” (Ex 16:4). As they walk, “they [talk] together of all these things which had happened” (vs. 14).

These same *things which had happened* still occur in the Church. During Great Lent, and then again with deep devotion during Holy Week, we reenter the very events that the two disciples discuss. In the moments of defeat, when “the chief priests and . . . rulers delivered Him to be condemned to death, and crucified Him” (vs. 20), we encounter the living mystery of Jesus of Nazareth. We read and sing and pray to Him “who was a Prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people” (vs. 19).

Such recollection of events is not limited to our annual celebration of Pascha. We reenter those events continually, week by week. We fast on Wednesdays and Fridays because He was betrayed and crucified on those days. We come together on Sunday, the first day of the week, holding the hope “that it [is] He who [is] going to redeem Israel” (vs. 21). We share the wonder of the news from the Myrrh-bearers that “He [is] alive” (vs. 23).

And behold, Christ joins us! We worship Him as He opens the Scriptures for us (vs. 27). To sustain us in our walk, He reveals Himself to us in the breaking of the bread, which he gives to us (vs. 30).

The disciples’ eyes are *opened* when He does these things (vs. 31). These actions have not changed. They occur each and every time we assemble during our walk through this present life. Our hearts burn within us while He talks with us. When He tells us, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20), we rejoice, for Christ is among us. He is and ever shall be!

We thank Thee, O our Father, for the life and knowledge which Thou hast revealed to us through Jesus Thy Servant. Glory is Thine through all ages. Just as the bread broken was first scattered on the hills, then was gathered and became one, so let us Thy Church be gathered from the ends of the earth into Thy kingdom, for Thine is glory and power through Jesus Christ. – Didache 9:3-4

April 23 - Bright Wednesday
John 1:35-51

The Betrothal: John 1:35-51, especially vss. 35-37: “Again, the next day, John stood with two of his disciples. And looking at Jesus as He walked, he said, ‘Behold the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus.” In the original Greek the word “followed” has a twofold meaning: first, that John’s disciples start down a path after Jesus, and second, that they commit themselves to be His disciples. In both cases we perceive that the Forerunner’s remark – “Behold the Lamb of God!” – has moved them deeply.

Saint John Chrysostom describes the response of these two disciples with a powerful analogy: “So it was with Christ. He came to join to Himself the Church; He said nothing, but merely came. It was His friend, John, who put into His the bride’s right hand, when by his discourses he gave into His hand the souls of men” (“Homily 18 on the Gospel of John,” NPNF First Series, vol. 14, p. 63).

At the very moment when the two disciples *follow*, the Church comes into existence. The Head and two members are joined for eternity as the Bridegroom and the Bride. Ever since then the souls of the faithful have been placed, one by one, into His loving and gracious hand. He never refuses to receive us as His own forever. This is how the Holy Church grows: each one of us commits our hand to the Bridegroom.

Before the celebration of this betrothal comes a moment of personal surrender, when our soul goes out to Christ and we put ourselves into His hands. Perhaps it occurs when we first receive the sacred Mysteries. Regardless, each person who enters the Church experiences a moment when he accepts Christ’s invitation. Let us consider what leads the first six members of the Church to enter into this betrothal.

The first apostle, Andrew, is aptly known as the “First-called.” He and his friend are loyal disciples of the Forerunner. Even before the two turn from John to follow Jesus (vss. 29, 35), the prophet is already preparing them for the Lord who is “coming after me” (vs. 27). In these verses the Forerunner refers to the Savior in eleven different ways, calling Him Christ, One among you, the Lamb of God, etc. After these many revelations, it takes only one final remark to complete the Forerunner’s work.

Tradition holds that Andrew’s unnamed companion is John, the Beloved Disciple whose gospel account we are now reading. His reluctance to identify himself by name is evident on other occasions including the Last Supper (vs. 13:23), the Crucifixion (vs. 19:26), the empty tomb (vs. 20:2), and the Sea of Tiberius (vss. 21:7, 20). Like Andrew, He follows Jesus because of the Forerunner’s word.

Peter comes, in turn, because he trusts the testimony of his brother Andrew: “We have found the Messiah” (vs. 41). How valuable is the witness of one’s family! God can, and does, use our testimony to bring our loved ones to the betrothal. Let us never prevent them from coming!

Friendship also brings many to Christ, as Philip and Nathanael demonstrate. Philip is Nathanael’s “hometown” friend. The Lord Jesus also touches his heart through his association with Andrew, Peter, and John, who also come from Bethsaida (vs. 44). Likewise, our own witness to the larger community has spiritual significance. Neighbors will see the presence or absence of our faith. We may offer bridges – or set up barriers – for those who live down the street, or who know us from work, play, or community affairs.

O Blessed Master who hast called us to Thyself, inspire our witness to Thee that all may know the power of Thy forgiveness and the hope of salvation which is found in Thee alone. – Episcopal Book of Common Prayer

April 24 – Bright Thursday
John 3:1-15

Deepening the Issue: *John 3:1-15, especially vs. 11:* “Most assuredly, I say to you, *We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness.*” The conversation between Nicodemus and the Lord Jesus in this passage contains a stylistic device that recurs frequently in Saint John’s Gospel. We might call it the “deepening” of the issue—a transition from the initial subject of inquiry to a matter of greater profundity. When He answers a question, the Lord sometimes changes the topic completely, making the leap to what appears to be a wholly unrelated matter. At other times the shift is more gradual, enabling us to trace the steps from the starting point to the deeper reality He wishes us to see.

In the early chapters of Saint John’s Gospel we encounter no fewer than four instances of this deepening. When the startled Nathanael confesses, “You are the Son of God!” (vs. 1:49), we notice how the Lord Jesus reframes the question by His response. “Do you believe? . . . You shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” (vss. 50-51).

In the second example, at the wedding in Cana, the Lord’s mother tells Him, “They have no wine” (vs. 2:3). In this case the Lord’s reply – “My hour has not yet come” (vs. 4) – seems unrelated to her comment. When the temple authorities challenge Him for driving out the money changers, they ask, “What sign do You show to us, since You do these things?” (vs. 2:18). The Lord deepens the issue by referring to His earthly mission: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (vs. 19).

When Nicodemus approaches the Lord in chapter 3, this “ruler of the Jews” also wants to talk about the Lord’s *signs* and miracles (vs. 3:2). Christ responds by plunging into a discussion of spiritual regeneration (vss. 5-8), then turns to the grand design that underlies the Incarnation (vss. 11-21).

Nicodemus interprets the Lord’s miracles or signs as proof that “God is with Him” (vs. 2). However, the Lord immediately takes control of the discussion by insisting that one must be *born again* to “see the kingdom of God” (vs. 3). His point is that the kingdom of God is present, but cannot be seen by those who, like Nicodemus, notice only tangible results or effects. Because they are not spiritually regenerated – born again – such people fail to perceive the Kingdom.

The Lord then deepens the topic of regeneration further, speaking of *how* we are spiritually reborn. A new birth is required “of water and the Spirit” (vs. 5), a clear reference to the mysteries of baptism and chrismation. Subsequently, the Lord Jesus explains how these mysteries transform a person spiritually, saying, “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (vs. 6). Rebirth, as an action of the Holy Spirit, is beyond human control, and “so is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (vs. 8).

Nicodemus is utterly perplexed by this line of reasoning (vs. 9), but the Lord Jesus continues to assert the authority of His revelation (vs. 11). The “earthly things” by which men may find the “heavenly things” (vs. 12) can only be learned from “He who came down from heaven, that is, from the Son of Man” (vs. 13). The Lord concludes His teaching with the essential, life-giving message that we, along with Nicodemus, need to hear: “Whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (vs. 15).

In Thy mercy, O Lord, may I ever preserve my baptismal garment and the earnest of the Spirit, keeping them pure and undefiled unto the dread Day when Thou shalt come in glory. – Baptismal Prayer

April 25 - Bright Friday
John 2:12-23

The Temple is Restored: John 2:12-22, especially vs. 19: “Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’” The history of ancient Israel’s national shrines begins with the portable tabernacle in the wilderness, used during the time of Moses, and ends with the third temple built in Jerusalem by Herod the Great, which was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. Worship in these successive temples follows the pattern delivered to Moses at Mount Sinai and recorded in the Book of Leviticus. The principal ceremonies are sacrifices, described in chapters 25-31 of Exodus.

The first permanent temple is built by King Solomon, David’s son, in 960 BC. Babylonian armies raze that temple in 586 BC, but Jewish exiles return to construct a second temple in 536 BC. Finished in 516 BC, this temple remains in nearly constant use until it is replaced by Herod. A new inner sanctuary of immense proportions is completed in 19 BC, but the outer porticos and courts are finished only two years before the Jewish revolt of AD 66. This third temple, the largest and most imposing of them all (Mk 13:1), is the very shrine from which the Lord Jesus drives away the merchants who are “doing business” (Jn 2:14).

The Lord Jesus’ challenge to the authorities to “destroy this temple” (vs. 19) actually refers to His own Body rather than a manmade structure. After the Crucifixion, the temple authorities are indeed convinced that they have destroyed Him – but the Lord keeps His promise and restores in three days the very “temple” they put to death.

When Christ our Lord says He will *raise up* this temple, He touches at the same time on the inner mystery of His “cleansing” of the Jewish temple and “the power of His resurrection” (Phil 3:10). Let us consider the role of the Temple under the Old Covenant and how the Lord replaces them all, once and forever.

The desert tabernacle and all of the subsequent temples were created to serve as the holy place for God’s people to worship. In this one shrine all the tribes could gather, “the tribes of the Lord, as a testimony for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord” (Ps 121:4).

At times God visibly manifests His presence to His people (Ex 19:18-20; 3 Kgs 8:10-11). However, the Lord’s abiding concern is that their lives be pure in His sight. Through His prophets He declares that He rejects their sacred assemblies whenever the people condone evil and injustice (Is 1:12-17). Most of all, God opposes the mixing of alien pagan worship with true worship (Ez 8:13-18). The people’s unity with God must always come “in justice and righteousness” (Jos 24:14).

In the person of Jesus Christ, God the Son becomes man. From that moment onward the conditions for worshiping the Almighty God are radically revised. “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God” (Rv 21:3).

The Lord never withdraws His demand for holiness of life. Thus He purifies the building dedicated to His worship by driving out the money changers. Later, He makes a perfect offering of Himself for the sins of all mankind. He eliminates forever the blood-sacrifice of animals, for His Passion and Resurrection open the gates of heaven to all who truly repent, uniting themselves to Him and striving always to walk in His ways.

O Lord, save Thy people and preserve the fulness of Thy Church; sanctify those who love the beauty of Thy house, and forsake us not who hope on Thee. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

April 26 – Bright Saturday
John 3:22-33

He Who Comes From Heaven: *John 3:22-33, especially vss. 31-32:* “*He who comes from above is above all. . . . And what He has seen and heard, that He testifies, and no one receives His testimony.*” Recent archaeological digs have unearthed hundreds of tubs and pools around Jerusalem that were used in the first century for ritual baptisms. Scrolls from the famous Qumran site reveal that the Essenes promoted ritual bathing and cleansing during this era. Turning to today’s lesson, we observe the disciples of Saint John the Forerunner – and of Jesus – actively practicing baptism.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that John’s disciples become involved in disputes with other devout Jews about purification (vs. 25). They display a competitive spirit on behalf of the Baptizer in light of the popularity of the Galilean who has recently come into Judea: “Behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!” (vs. 26). The Forerunner, however, humbles himself in relation to Jesus: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (vs. 30).

In speaking of Christ, the Forerunner makes three assertions: He comes from heaven, He is first in authority, and He speaks heavenly truth. On this basis, Saint John proclaims a qualitative distinction between his relationship with God and that of Jesus: “I have been sent before Him. . . . [while] He. . . comes from heaven” (vss. 28, 31). Elaborating further, he asserts: “He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth” (vs. 31).

With this statement the Forerunner affirms the faith of the Orthodox, upheld by the Church in opposition to the claims of Arius and other heretics. Christ our God is not a mere creature – not even a superlative, special creation of God through whom the Father created the universe, as Arius proposed. Even after taking on human flesh He remains God of God, one in essence with the Father, since before time and forever.

Saint John’s references to the Bridegroom and friend of the Bridegroom emphasize the same point. The relationship between God’s people and the Lord is often likened to a marriage: “As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so the Lord shall rejoice over you” (Is 62:5). Thus, as Saint John Chrysostom points out, the Forerunner is consoling his disciples by “showing them that it was not a man, but God, who surpassed them in honor; and that, therefore, they must not wonder if . . . all men came unto Him: for . . . this was the nature of divine things” (“Homily 29 on Saint Matthew,” *NPNF Series One*, vol. 14, p. 101).

Christ’s divine identity leads the Forerunner to affirm that Jesus is higher in authority, for He ranks ahead of him and of every other human being: “He who comes from above is above all” (Jn 3:31). According to Saint John Chrysostom, “Christ hath need of nothing, but is Himself sufficient for Himself, and incomparably greater than all” (“Homily 30,” p. 103).

John the Baptist consistently directs all glory and respect to the Lord Jesus, whom he identifies as “Lamb of God” (vs. 29), “He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit” (vs. 33), and “the Christ” (vs. 28). The insistent fact of Christ’s divinity dominates this Gospel passage. What the Lord Jesus says – and even more so, who He is – expresses Truth. The Lord’s words contain more than mere information: they provide eternal salvation for all who “[receive] His testimony” (vs. 33).

According to the Forerunner, everyone who receives the Lord’s testimony has “certified that God is true” (vs. 33). The word “certified” referred originally to the placing of one’s seal of authenticity on a document. Thus, when a man receives Christ, he does not merely reach agreement with a human being. He submits himself to God’s will, affirming the authenticity of Jesus’ lordship and committing himself to Christ as Lord and God.

Dost thou believe in Him? I believe in Him as King and God. – Baptismal Liturgy

April 27 – Thomas Sunday (Second Sunday of Pascha)
John 20:19-31

Avoiding Christ: John 20:19-31, especially vs. 31: *“But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.”* We would do well to examine our willingness to believe in the Lord Jesus as the One who offers life. At the very beginning of Saint John’s Gospel, the Forerunner challenges us to accept Jesus as the God who is above all men by nature, the living truth of God embodied as man (vss. 1:15-18). He issues this challenge even *before* Christ’s healings, teachings, ministry, and Resurrection. Today’s reading describes events that take place after the Lord’s Resurrection. Nevertheless, the Baptizer’s challenge remains: Will we commit ourselves to Christ as God?

Why does the Apostle Thomas cry out, “My Lord and my God” (vs. 20:28)? Thomas has heard reports that Christ has risen from the grave. He has had time to consider whether he believes the reports, or not. Now, in the company of the other apostles, he comes face to face with Him who was dead. Christ challenges Thomas to look at His wounds and touch them: “Do not be unbelieving, but believing” (vs. 27). What will it be for us – do we accept Him or do we avoid Him?

It is quite easy to avoid Christ, escaping His claim on our lives by staying away from Church and her Eucharistic worship. Out of sight, out of mind, is the method chosen by many. The disciple Thomas, too, “was not with them when Jesus came” (vs. 24). What does he know of the gladness and the joy when Life touches and renews them (vs. 20)? Thomas demands more than a story; he wants tangible proof (vs. 25). When he rejoins the other disciples, the Resurrection is still hearsay – the experience of others – and has no vitality for him.

Let us never forget that the living presence of the Lord in His fulness occurs every time the Orthodox faithful gather to celebrate the Divine Liturgy. When we stay away, the clamor of the world deadens our hearts to the Lord Jesus’ presence. Of course He is everywhere, but where do we meet Him fully? How do we “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps 33:8), apart from the liturgy?

The world furnishes us with excuses for *not* going to Church, *not* being forgiven (vs. 23), *not* hearing His peace (vs. 21), *not* being filled with the life-giving Spirit (vs. 22), and *not* receiving His true Body (vs. 27). Instead, it suggests pleasures in abundance: extra sleep, travel, sports, hobbies, entertainment, and ease. The world corrupts; the Lord heals and fulfills. We either choose to join in the liturgy, in the work of the people of God, or we avoid this decision to our loss. “Unless a man is within the sanctuary, he lacks the Bread of God,” says Saint Ignatius. “Therefore he who does not come to the assembly is already proud” (Sparks, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 79).

We may find other ways to avoid the Lord’s claim on us – for example, establishing conditions for our submission to Christ as God. “Unless I see . . . and put my hand into His side, I will not believe” (vs. 25). Such assertions are fueled by our self-assurance and pride. To demand objective, verifiable evidence seems entirely reasonable at first blush, but it exposes our reliance on mere human “wisdom.” The world is filled with people who use their own wisdom to brush aside the Lord’s demand on our lives.

God will not prevent us from tossing aside the claims and the presence of the Lord Jesus in our lives. He allows us full freedom to set up our standards of evaluation – to reduce the size of the playing field, if you will, in order to prove what pleases us. The end result is a life based on materialism, self-indulgence, and the passions. If God becomes merely another hypothesis, where do we find the mystery that fulfills life? “Where is the disputer of this age?,” Saint Paul asks. “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?” (1 Cor 1:20).

Turn the obstinacy of my heart into fervent faith, that I may cry out from the depths of my soul, Thou art my Master and God, who didst arise from the dead. Glory to Thee! – Vespers for the Wednesday of Thomas Week

April 28 – Monday of the Second Week of Pascha (Thomas Week)
John 2:1-11

The First of Signs: *John 2:1-11, especially vs. 11:* “*This beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory; and His disciples believed in Him.*” The first eleven chapters of Saint John’s Gospel comprise a distinct unit. They are structured around seven signs or miracles wrought by the Lord: 1) changing water to wine (2:1-11), 2) curing the nobleman’s son (4:46-54), 3) healing a paralytic (5:1-15), 4) feeding the five thousand (6:1-14), 5) walking on water (6:15-21), 6) giving sight to the blind (9:1-41), and 7) raising Lazarus (11:38-44).

In today’s reading, the evangelist indicates the dual purpose of these signs. First, they direct attention to the Lord Jesus’ divinity and glory; secondly, they emphasize commitment to Christ as Lord (vs. 2:11). The setting for the first sign is a wedding reception, which leads to a significant verbal exchange between the Lord and His mother (vss. 3-6). The miracle is the transformation of a large volume of water into premium wine (vss. 7-10).

At first, the occasion seems like an ordinary wedding celebration to which Christ is expressly invited. However, His presence at the wedding changes the entire equation of the event, which serves as “the introduction of the Spirit of Christ to the world,” according to Archimandrite Theodor Mika, “[at] the greatest feast known to man at that time: the wedding feast” (Manley, *Bible and the Holy Fathers*, p. 38). The manifestation of the divine glory of the Incarnate God and Savior at this marriage in Cana thus attests to the mystical potential of every marriage.

God creates mankind as male and female, instructing them to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gn 1:28). Christ expands on this basic truth of Scripture and reveals marriage to be one of the holy mysteries. Marriage, especially for the faithful, is raised above a legal contract between a husband and a wife. Redemption, salvation, forgiveness, and union with Christ become integral to the mission of husbands and wives. Living in the Church and in the world, they are called to represent the divine Bridegroom and His Bride to the fullest extent possible.

According to Father John Meyendorff, “the Orthodox Church implicitly integrates marriage in the eternal Mystery, where the boundaries between heaven and earth are broken and where human decision and action acquire an eternal dimension” (*Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective*, p. 23). The Lord Jesus pours out His glory upon the sacrament of marriage. By stating that Jesus’ disciples “believed in Him” (Jn 2:11), the Evangelist John shows that Christ has expanded marriage into a holy mystery.

The Theotokos initiates another glorious spiritual action with her words, “They have no wine” (vs. 3). In identifying this need to her Son, she manifests her gift as a ready intercessor with Christ.

The Lord’s reply does not constitute a harsh rebuttal, for He simply clarifies that He is no longer under her authority nor subject to her wishes (see Lk 2:51, Mt 12:47-48). His formative years are over. Note that she takes no offense at His words, but continues her intercession. “Whatever He says to you, do it” (vs. 5). The glory of God is disclosed by magnifying the role of His mother as first among intercessors for those in need.

And what do we make of the changing of the water into wine? Our limited ability as human beings is contravened by the grace and love of Christ our God. The Lord Jesus discloses His desire to transform our earthly relationships into life-giving, heavenly bonds filled with His Spirit. As God incarnate, He turns life-events into holy mysteries.

O Lord, Thou wonderful turner of water into wine, bring Thy divine flame to our extinguished fire. Turn the water of our being into divine wine, that we may be like Thee; and, being so, may live in Thine eternal kingdom with Thy glorious angels. – Saint Nikolai of Zicha

April 29 – Tuesday of the Second Week of Pascha (Thomas Week)
John 3:16-21

All about Love: John 3:16-21, especially vs. 16: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” This passage from Saint John’s Gospel is actually the conclusion of the Lord’s conversation with Nicodemus; the first part of that conversation (vss. 1-15) is read on Bright Thursday. The passage begins with one of the most quoted verses of Holy Scripture (vs. 16), which encapsulates the message of the whole reading. God loves every one of His creatures, and He affirms this love through Christ by the most tangible and direct of actions.

God, from the depth of His being, is love. This love is not limited to a one-time action, nor bound by a conditional time-frame. God’s love flows out of His essence. Elsewhere, Saint John declares directly, “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8). Let us examine how the word of the Lord in this opening verse enhances the meaning of the entire reading, giving life to every verse. At the same time, the passage serves as a detailed exposition of the message delivered at its beginning.

The Lord Jesus declares that God’s concern is to “save” and not to “condemn” (vs. 17). Why, then, does the Lord place the emphasis on condemnation (vss. 17-20)? The answer is quite simple. God sees a condemned race – His own creation – perishing and given over to the oblivion of death. The Source of Life looks lovingly upon a creation permeated by death. Its self-destruction is an affront to His very nature.

Indeed, death hovers over us as the dark tragedy woven into the life experience of every human being. In humility we acknowledge that we have brought this condemnation upon ourselves. How did we cause such a condemnation? The answer appears in verse 19: “Men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.” We choose to stand apart from God’s outstretched, loving, life-giving hand.

Our loving Lord is Light. If He comes to illumine the world, how then do we still love darkness? Our choice is self-defeating, and yet our practice of evil underscores our love of darkness (vs. 20). From Adam to the present, we have consistently loved darkness (compare Gn 3:8 and Jn 3:20).

As it was in the beginning, when God first gave life and breath to humankind (Gn 2:7), so it was with the coming of God in the flesh. With His love, Christ the Life-giver woos us away from death that we might gain everlasting life (Jn 3:16). He only asks that we believe in Him, trust Him, and commit to Him. Then we and all the world “through Him might be saved” (vs. 17).

Since we are made in God’s image (Gn 1:27), the capacity for love is part of our inmost essence. When the Only-begotten Son of God comes into the world, He shows us our potential to love. He does more than display for us an ideal – in a supreme act of love, He directly attacks the evil that negates our capacity to love. The Lord Jesus most assuredly is all about love, for He even embraces death in order to give us life in Him.

God restores us to life through the gift of His Son, so that we may dwell with Him in His eternal Kingdom. He does not abandon us to condemnation. He makes His forgiveness tangible (1 Jn 1:1-3) so that we, who are dependent upon what is concrete, may trust in Him. When He becomes incarnate, making Himself one of us, Christ our God gives us a solid basis on which to trust Him (vs. 18), to know the truth (vs. 21), to come to the light (vs. 21), and to avoid condemnation. God loves His world, and the Lord Jesus is palpable proof. We need not perish eternally, but may choose everlasting life in Him.

Save us, O Son of God, who art risen from the dead, who sing unto Thee, Alleluia. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

April 30 - Wednesday of the Second Week of Pascha (Thomas Week)
John 5:17-24

Hearing and Believing: John 5:17-24, especially vs. 24: “*Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.*” How do we describe the spiritual state of the person who avoids condemnation on the Day of Judgment? The Lord affirms in verse 24 that those who *hear* and *believe* in Him have already attained everlasting life. This *life* of which the Lord speaks has become a gracious reality. Life, for the faithful, is not limited to life after death: we may embrace it now. We move out of our former manner of living – a state called death – into a mode of spiritual existence called life.

What is the character of the life of which our Lord speaks? First and foremost, it is a gift. Christ the Son of God is Life-giver; as God, He has the power to give life even to the dead. “For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will” (vs. 21).

However, the Lord sets forth two conditions under which mortals receive this life. First, we must *hear* the word of the Son and, secondly, we must *believe* in the Father who sent Him (vs. 24). Here we discover the reason why the bulk of this passage (vss. 17-23) is devoted to the unity between the Father and the Son. The Son’s capacity to give “life to whom He will” (vs. 21) arises directly from His unity with the Father. (Of course, the Jewish authorities who oppose the Lord did not miss Jesus’ implied claim to divinity as He is speaking of His unity with the Father – vs. 18.)

Hearing – one of the five senses – may be considered a natural human attribute, so we must consider carefully what kind of listening the Lord Jesus requires. Holy Scripture consistently speaks of hearing as more than audition; it also implies obedient action. One who *hears* God necessarily obeys what he hears (Lk 8:15). Jesus’ oft-repeated remark, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Mt 11:15; 13:43), is another way of stating this requirement.

Our behavior must flow out of what we hear in our heart. We are to be deliberately attentive when reading Scripture and determined to heed and apply what God says. This urgency to listen to the Lord should also permeate our participation in the Divine Liturgy and in the mysteries of the Church. Our constancy in prayer can be measured in actions consistent with divine truth. “Impassibility does not consist in mortifying the passionate part of the soul,” says Saint Gregory Palamas, “but in . . . directing its energies to divine things . . .” (Vlachos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 298).

In the opening verse of this passage (vs. 17), the Lord speaks of His own work and of the Father’s. To heed God is to enter, as best we can, into the work of the Holy Trinity. The Son watches the Father and does nothing on His own. We, in turn, watch the Son and do “whatever He does . . . in like manner” (vs. 19). When we do, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit show us greater works, that we may marvel (vs. 20).

God the Father would have us *believe* in Him and honor Him. As with hearing, the true mode of believing in God requires obedient action. Believing in God is a commitment of our heart and soul to Christ. As a result we seek actions pleasing to Him, ensuring that our behavior is in harmony with the loving work of the Father and the Son.

When we cross the line into proactive hearing and obedient belief in God, we have “passed from death into life” (vs. 24). Such a transition is possible even in this moral life, as the apostles and Church Fathers teach us. God gives us the grace to hear, to believe in Him, and to act upon these gifts.

Thou who hast given unto us, Thy servants, remission of sins and a life of regeneration, illumine our hearts with the light of Thy countenance, that we may maintain our faith unassailed. – Service of Chrismation