

September 1 - Saint Luke 4:16-22 Gospel for the Indiction: the Ecclesiastical New Year

What the New Year Brings: Saint Luke 4:16-22, especially vs. 21: *“And He began to say to them, ‘Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.’”* In AD 325, the First Ecumenical Council decreed that the Church’s year should begin September First. The Council had many reasons for selecting this date. Already, in the Roman Empire, September First was reckoned as the beginning of the civil year. The Jews had long celebrated a corresponding date as their New Year (Ex. 12:2), a day for them to celebrate the ingathering of the fruits of the earth and for giving thanks to God. Significantly, it was at Nazareth, during this festival of the ancient People of God, that the Lord announced His anointing in the Spirit for the salvation of the entire world.

When Christ our God first announced the purpose of His anointing by the Holy Spirit, He chose His home village of Nazareth. As Saint Cyril of Alexandria notes, He did so wisely “...that His fame should now spread abroad,” granting this favor “...first to the people of Nazareth, because, humanly speaking, He had been brought up among them.” Here is a wonderful announcement of the union of God with our benighted race, a message that continues from that New Year’s day to the present. The day is a joy for us as it might have been for the Lord’s neighbors in Nazareth. However, His fellow townsmen declined the opportunity (Lk. 4:28,29). Let us who know Christ as our Savior gladly continue to share the great hope that He brings to all mankind: God is united with our humanity, both in this life and forever.

Of old, mankind lost the Spirit and became destitute of Holy Communion by Divine command: “...My Spirit shall not remain with these people forever, for they are flesh” (Gn. 6:4), yet at New Year’s in Nazareth, God the Word announced the return of the Holy Spirit to all of mankind. For Him to speak of being anointed with the Spirit as God the Word would be absurd for He is One in essence with the Spirit in the Godhead; but, in His humanity, He announced His anointing with the Spirit - a proclamation with great consequence for all men, everywhere.

Subsequently, the Lord Jesus revealed that whoever believes in Him would have “...rivers of living water” flowing from his heart (Jn. 7:38). That was His way of saying that after He was glorified, those who believe in Him would receive the Holy Spirit (Jn. 7:39). After His Passion and Resurrection, on the Day of Pentecost, the outpouring of the Spirit began to happen and continues to the present. Do not hold back from Him. He is appealing to you. Press on to acquire the Holy Spirit, to be anointed by Him yourself, to have your life and all our lives restored to God according to Christ’s true, tested, and proven promise (Lk. 4:18).

On this day long ago, the Lord Jesus announced the acceptable time is come (vs. 19). Now, every minute, hour and day is ripe for sharing the news of Light to those dwelling in darkness, freedom for those bound and enslaved by habits and delusions, riches for all the poor souls of the world who are weak and broken by the impoverishment that comes from being born into death in this present existence (vs. 18). Now is “...the acceptable year of the Lord” (vs. 19). As you are joined to Christ, capture the excitement and the unlimited joy of the new day that is happening. Raise your voice with Him in our New Year proclamation.

As Saint Cyril of Alexandria says truly: Christ our God has “...overthrown the apostate tyrant Satan, and Himself shed the divine and spiritual light on those whose heart was darkened; for which reason He said, ‘I Am come a light into this world;’ it was He Who unbound the chains of sin from those whose heart was crushed thereby...” (Jn. 12:46). Glory to Him!

O God of all, transcendent in essence, Creator of the ages and Master, bless the crown of this year, saving by Thy boundless mercy, O Compassionate One, all who worship Thee.

September 2 - Tuesday of the Thirteenth Week after Pentecost
Mark 3:13-19

Jesus Christ as Sovereign: Mark 3:13-19, especially vs. 13: *“And He went up on the mountain and called to Him those He Himself wanted. And they came to Him.”* Saint Mark describes how the Lord Jesus appoints twelve men to be His closest disciples – an inner cadre of leaders to launch His Church into history. The Twelve form the core of His apostolate, an outreach team to go all over the world to disciple men and women, “teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:20).

Saint Mark highlights the Lord’s role as a sovereign ruler with authority, for when He “called to Him those He Himself wanted. . . . They came” (Mk 3:13). Many others are following Him for various reasons (vss. 7-8), but by their own choice. Jesus calls those He wants from among those who affirm His sovereignty, and who accept the roles He assigns.

We see a clear connection here with contemporary Orthodox Christian practice, in which the newly baptized person declares, “I believe in Him as King and God.” Our affirmation of the reign of Christ Jesus is the same as the one made by the first disciples. Obedient action follows, unless we are merely mouthing words. Let us examine the distinguishing marks of a person who truly submits to the sovereignty of Christ our God.

First, if we are to defer to the sovereignty of Christ, we must hear His call. While the call comes to us at the initiative of our Sovereign, listening and responding are required of the hearers (Mt 22:9, Jn 7:37). God asks for our obedience. As disciples, we put our destiny and our decisions into the hands of Christ as our King and God.

Second, our obedience to the Lord’s sovereignty is never a contrived matter. Our hearts must yearn for the things of God. The hunger to do His will is the key. Let us emulate the Prophet David, who writes, “My soul longeth and fainteth for the courts of the Lord. My heart and my flesh have rejoiced in the living God” (Ps 83:1-2).

King David determines that, in every matter, his actions will conform to the will of the Lord. “Behold, I am come to do Thy will, O my God, and Thy law is in the midst of my bowels” (Ps 39:11). David also shares the result of his obedience: “The Lord repaid me according to my righteousness; according to the purity of my hands, He repaid me. For I have kept the ways of the Lord and have not wickedly departed from my God” (2 Kgs 22:21-22).

A third mark of the person who submits to Christ is a ready sharing in the work of the Gospel. We submit to Christ, enter His Church, and lend our energies to the mission of the faithful. And what is that task?

In today’s reading, the Lord appoints the Twelve “to have power to heal sicknesses and to cast out demons” (Mk 3:15). As Christ gave this mission to the Twelve, so the Apostles passed on the power given them by the Lord to heal and to cast out demons. To this day, accordingly, the Church serves as a hospital for healing.

“So in the Church we are divided into the sick, those undergoing therapeutic treatment, and those – saints – who have already been healed,” writes Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos. “At depth humanity is differentiated into the sick in soul, those being healed, and those healed” (*Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 30).

Finally, when we acknowledge the Lord Jesus’ sovereignty as His disciples, we blossom and bear fruit, even become saints. We know and remember the Twelve by name. In similar fashion the memory of each true Christian becomes eternal. Those who honor Christ as Lord He honors in turn by healing them and entering their names into the Book of Life (Phil 4:3).

Thou only art the Lord, O Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father. Amen. – Doxology

September 3 - Wednesday of the Thirteenth Week after Pentecost
Mark 3:20-27

The Ongoing War: Mark 3:20-27, especially vs. 27: *“No one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. And then he will plunder his house.”* According to Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna, the Church Fathers “portray the spiritual life and the course of Christian history in images of the constant struggle between the evil force of Satan and his demonic cohorts and the goodness of God and those energized by His living force, the martyrs, saints, and angels” (*Orthodoxy and Psychology*, p. 37).

Such is the view of everyone described in today’s gospel: first of all Jesus, then the multitude pressing upon Him (vs. 20), “His own people” who consider Him to be “out of His mind” (vs. 21), and the officials who conclude that “by the ruler of the demons He casts out demons” (vs. 22). This spiritual battle between good and evil dominates the shared worldview of that age. Although there are sharp disagreements about who stands on which side, all agree that they are in the midst of an ongoing spiritual war.

Every serious Orthodox Christian tastes the bitterness of this struggle, for in our present era we are reading the latest chapter in a story that recurs throughout history. As Christians, we affirm that deliverance is ours “through the Incarnation of . . . Christ . . . from the bondage of the enemy.” Our recovery from bondage begins when we renounce “Satan, and all his angels, and all his works, and all his service, and all his pride” (Service of baptism).

Let us read this passage from Saint Mark within the context of our baptism into Christ, for God our Savior entered the “strong man’s house,” bound him, and plundered “his goods” (vs. 27). Our Lord has never ceased His attack on the enemy, nor His work of setting us free.

Ironically, the materialist culture in which we live does not even consider whether or not Christ actually “casts out demons” (vs. 22). People around us are plunged into spiritual combat, but they often place the blame for this turmoil on terrorists, rogue nations, or greedy players in the world. Such mistaken views of history ensure our defeat in the conflicts which fill our daily lives. Why? Because we overlook the evil forces that instigate these battles.

Materialism rules out any possibility that spiritual struggle undergirds today’s conflicts. If we view life and history only superficially, we can never address the dark powers and evil rulers of this world who constantly warp our contemporary life. We are doomed to go on shadow-boxing, remaining victims rather than victors.

Imagine the response we would receive if we were to advise a politician, local official – or even a next-door neighbor – on society’s problems based on the worldview that our Lord Jesus Christ reveals in the present passage. Even the majority of professed Christians are ensnared by the pervasive materialist view of life. They would surely think, “He is out of His mind” (vs. 21). Some might demonize us as being in league with “Beelzebub” (vs. 22), i.e., one of the bad guys whom they blame for creating problems and making them victims.

Nevertheless, we rejoice. Although we disobeyed “the true God, who had created” us, were “led astray by the guile of the serpent” and banished “into this world,” God speaks “unto us through [His] Son.” He has “released us from the delusion of idols and brought us into a knowledge . . . of the true God and Father” and “unto the resurrection from the dead,” making a way for us to be victors in the ongoing spiritual war (Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great).

Arise, O God, judge the earth; for Thou shalt have an inheritance among the nations! – Great and Holy Saturday

September 4 - Thursday of the Thirteenth Week after Pentecost
Mark 3:28-35

Jesus Christ as Judge: Mark 3:28-35, especially vss. 29, 35: “*He who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation. . . . Whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother.*” In today’s passage we encounter Saint Mark’s first mention of divine judgment. Up to this point, the evangelist has presented the Lord Jesus primarily as the Savior of mankind, casting out demons and healing every form of bodily and spiritual sickness. The people are still forming conclusions about Him: some follow Him and learn from Him, while others repudiate Him because of their darkened reasoning. On the basis of their own spiritual disorder, men dare to judge God.

At this point in the text, in order to correct these misperceptions, the Lord Jesus addresses them concerning *their* ultimate judgment. There will be eternal condemnation as well as familial affection and warmth in the kingdom of God. He who will judge the living and the dead continues to pursue salvation for all men, even as He reveals that our present actions have eternal consequences.

In verse 28, the Lord discloses the full scope of God’s forgiveness, revealing a salvation expansive and inclusive beyond our human imagination. Our repentance is assumed, even though the Lord does not mention it, for He desires that all should hasten to the mercy of God (Ps 33:9-10). No sin remains beyond the pale of God’s forgiveness, not even blasphemy against God Himself. No one is unforgivable. We rejoice as the Lord shatters the black despair of the most wretched sinner!

God does not remove the consequences of our wrongs, but He assures us of His forgiveness. The good thief dies on the cross, but enters Paradise because He cried out to Christ to remember him. In the same vein, the Church Fathers teach us that we must not despair of receiving forgiveness from God. “Even if you are not what you should be, you should not despair. It is bad enough that you have sinned; why in addition do you wrong God by regarding Him in your ignorance as powerless,” says Saint Peter of Damascus. “He will receive your repentance” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 160).

The Lord Jesus, having stated that God’s salvation is boundless, reveals that God honors human freedom even in those who disdain His mercy (vs. 29). It is our choice. The Lord does not say that anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit *will never have* forgiveness, for such a statement would contradict what He just said (vs. 28). He says “he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit *never has* forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation” (vs. 29).

The Lord here declares salvation impossible for one who steadfastly maintains that the work of the Holy Spirit is evil or satanic. Sin and evil are not of the Lord, but they may come to reside in us and dominate us.

Can we repent of blasphemy? Of course! Sadly, we bring eternal condemnation upon ourselves. The Lord’s wording in verse 29 is a carefully chosen response to the scribes’ claim that His exorcisms are the work of unclean spirits, rather than from God (vs. 22).

The Lord’s concluding comments about His extended family (vss. 31-35) underscore the part we play in our own salvation. We reveal ourselves to be true members of His family by cooperating with divine salvation and striving to do “the will of God” (vs. 35). The Lord’s grace enables us to do His will, as the example of the Theotokos illustrates. When we do God’s will, we have a basis for calling upon him as “our Father.”

Help us; save us; have mercy upon us; and keep us, O God by Thy grace. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

September 5 - Friday of the Thirteenth Week after Pentecost
Mark 4:1-9

Jesus Christ is Life: Mark 4:1-9, especially vs. 8: *“But other seed fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.”* Many people in Saint Mark’s Gospel project their personal hopes and fears on our Lord Jesus. Christ our God always evokes strong reactions from those around Him. Over the centuries some have loved Him ardently, while others have hated Him venomously. We see these strongly divided opinions in the early days of His ministry, as the Evangelist Mark reports, and this continues to be the case even now.

Many people fail to honor the Lord Jesus Christ today, despite the fact that salvation remains the prevailing purpose of God down to this present age. To speak in the language of Jesus’ parable, let us not be dismayed because some new growth is choked, some scorched and withered, and some devoured by alien teachings. God aims to endow us with eternal life, if we will. Christ our God indeed cares about the outcome -- about the “catch” of His fishermen, about the “crop” that He longs to harvest from the seeds that He sows.

We must take care not to read this parable as an expression of mere desire on God’s part. The Lord speaks prophetically through the image of the sower. The Church sows life into our human affairs. The yields have continued through two millennia -- thirty, sixty, a hundred times over. The Lord’s desires will not be frustrated.

Note that the Lord Jesus starts the parable with the word “listen” (vs. 3), and ends it with this counsel: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (vs. 9). The harvest is underway -- join in, or get out of the way, is the message.

The Lord Jesus clearly teaches in this parable that there is irresistible power in life, physical and spiritual alike. Everything that can be called *life* flows from God; it comes from His Person. For this reason Christ our God says, “I am the . . . life” (Jn 14:6), which makes the parable exciting. He who is Life yields life many times over.

What are we to do in the face of this prophecy offered to us in parable form? How may we receive Life so that He flourishes within us? First, we must examine the parable in the light of first-century Palestinian farming, the context within which it was originally heard.

For planting to be successful, the seed must be covered to the correct depth required for that seed, whether it be wheat, barley, rye, etc. The method used in Galilee was first to sow, and then to plow. The plow blade was set to cover the seed with soil to the proper depth.

At times farmers cast seed by accident on ground that was rocky beneath the surface. Some soil was already infested with thorns. The loss of seed in the overall planting process occurred despite the fact that the farmer made every effort to broadcast his seed where it could be expected to grow. God scatters life where He knows it will produce best, but He anticipates losses.

When the Lord Jesus speaks of sowing, He is referring to the mystery of the kingdom of God (Mk 4:11). His consistent use of the image of the kingdom captures the imagination of His listeners, for they are a people whose land and nation are subject to foreign occupation. The parable draws them to Christ in the hope of discovering where true life might be found (vs. 1).

In the New Testament epistles we find little mention of the “kingdom.” The apostles focus their message on Christ. This shift occurs because the Lord Jesus is the kingdom of God; wherever He reigns is the realm of life. He is Life, for “everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life” (Jn 6:40).

O Master who didst bestow upon us Thy terrible and life-giving Mysteries, grant that they may be for us unto growth in Thy divine grace and the attainment of Thy kingdom. – Post-communion Prayer

September 6 - Saturday of the Thirteenth Week after Pentecost
Matthew 22:15-22

Why is Christ Hated? Matthew 22:15-22, especially vss. 15-16: *“Then the Pharisees went and plotted how they might entangle Him in His talk. And they sent to Him their disciples with the Herodians. . . .”* “The world has long since forgiven Julius Caesar,” writes Joe Sobran in “The Man They Still Hate.” “Nobody today finds Socrates or Cicero irritating. Few of us resent Alexander the Great or his tutor, Aristotle. No, only one man in the ancient world is still hated after two millennia: Jesus Christ.”

In today’s passage from Saint Matthew, we find three reasons why Christ was hated two millennia ago, and why He is loathed by many today. Then, hatred boiled up against Jesus to the point that He was crucified. This same hatred persists today because of His willingness to offend powerful people by confronting them with the truth (vs. 15), for He never deferred to people of influence (vs. 16). He also displayed an amazing capacity to outwit clever and skilled opponents (vs. 22).

Saint Matthew explains that the Pharisees make common cause with the Herodians in order to “entangle [Jesus] in His talk” (vss. 15). The members of this prestigious religious elite lower themselves so as to plot against Jesus with the partisans of King Herod, whom they detest. Such is their bitter rage over the Lord’s teaching, strange as that may seem.

If we study chapters 21 and 22 of Matthew closely, we find the reason for this hatred. Jesus delivers His Parable of the Two Sons in order to instruct the Pharisees that, for all their righteousness, “tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you” (vs. 21:31). To this affront He adds the Parable of the Wicked Tenants to emphasize His point. “The kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it” (vs. 21:43) – meaning the Gentiles!

To this our Lord adds a third parable, exposing the chief priests’ lack of respect for God’s kindness in the King’s Disdainful Guests (vss. 22:2-14). Of course “they sought to lay hands on Him” (vs. 21:46) and plot with the powerful Herodians.

In addition to Jesus’ teaching, His freedom to violate hallowed pious customs further irritates and alarms the powerful. He does not enter Jerusalem as a humble pilgrim, but accepts the role of king and Messiah of Israel. When He rides on the colt of a donkey to shouts of “Hosanna to the Son of David!” (vs. 21:9), people notice (vss. 10-11).

Furthermore, He enters the temple and physically disrupts the lucrative transactions between devout pilgrims and licensed business men (vss. 12-13). Knowing that the blind and lame are kept out of the Temple, Jesus welcomes them there Himself, “and He healed them” (vs. 14).

The Lord Jesus’ willingness to embarrass the powerful of society caps off everything He taught and did. To the indignant chief priests and scribes, He points out that “out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants [God has] perfected praise” for His actions (vs. 16).

And when the chief priests and laymen question His usurpation of their authority, He silences them with a question they fear to answer publicly (vss. 24-25). When He disarms their plot to entangle Him, He calls them hypocrites to their faces. They are compelled to marvel; but they are even more determined to “kill Him” (vs. 26:4).

Although the Pharisees and Herodians say it disingenuously, they speak the truth: Christ teaches “the way of God in truth” and does “not regard the person of men” (vs. 22:16). He sees into our hearts while we only guess what lies within us – He knows us inside out. Let us bow down before Him, as the Savior of repentant sinners; and plead, “Lord, have mercy!”

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

September 7 - Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 21:33-42

Tending the Lord's Vineyard: Matthew 21:33-42, especially vss. 38-39: *"But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him."* The elites of ancient Israel were aroused by Christ's Parable of the Wicked Tenants.' We, however, are blessed if we heed the parable and apply it ourselves. As members of His Body, the Church of which He is the Head, we are His vineyard. We are His vines, planted to bear fruit, and we are the tenants and servants with an eternal obligation to deliver the fruit of our Master to Him. His parable challenges everyone who chooses to call himself a Christian.

The Lord Jesus transforms us if we follow His good order, for Christ makes us more than mere tenants of His vineyard. At His Ascension, He instructs His followers "not to depart from Jerusalem" – that is, not to leave His Church – "but to wait for the Promise of the Father," i.e., the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4). The parable thus encompasses the entirety of life in Christ, warning us not to withhold from God that which is His (Mt 21:41).

At our baptism and chrismation we become members of the Church when "the Promise of the Father," the gift of God the Holy Spirit, is sealed upon us. The Spirit remains with us, daily performing what the Lord Jesus promised. He guides us into all truth, not on His own, "but whatever He hears He will speak" (Jn 16:13). Plainly, He is reminding us to deliver the fruit of the vineyard to our Master and God (Mt 21:34).

These "fruits" are faith, hope, love, and obedience to the will of God in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. We take up our cross and repent whenever we spoil some of the fruit. Let us never drive the Holy Spirit from our hearts by failing to heed Him, which destroys us. When the Spirit of God withdraws, it is death for us (see vs. 35).

To assist us in heeding the Holy Spirit, God the Father sends other servants – holy hierarchs and pastors who come to us on behalf of the Master, the heavenly Landowner (vs. 36). These servants help us render God's fruits to God by leading us in worship, preaching the word of God to our hearts, hearing our confessions, counseling us and teaching us. When we disdain their ministry, living counter to their wisdom and staying away from church, neither repenting nor confessing, we effectively "kill" their presence in our hearts, which leaves us barren. Pastoral care is a labor on behalf of life and against death.

The parable further reminds us that our Father has sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to us. We have united ourselves to Him. God's expectation is just, unless we choose to "kill Him and seize His inheritance" and "cast Him out of the vineyard" (vss. 38-39) – that is, out of our hearts and lives.

We can, for all intents and purposes, "kill" Him insofar as He is the Lord of our life. We know all too well how to shut off His voice in our conscience, stifling the need to confess to Him and avoiding worship and prayer. We remove our thoughts, words, and desires from God and make them our business, saying, "The vineyard is mine, *my* inheritance." We murder Christ in our hearts, but when we do so it is we who die.

Christ warns that if we persist in our rebellion, God will destroy "miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers" (vs. 41). Any time we drift into abusing the Church, the Holy Mysteries, or the privilege of being a tenant in God's vineyard, we should recognize it as a sinister invitation from the enemy. Let us rather render "to God the things that are God's" (vs. 22:21), and receive life, joy, peace in the Holy Spirit.

For all things are Yours and of Your own we give to You. – 1 Chronicles 29:14

September 8 – Saint Luke 10:38-42; 11:27-28, Feast of the Nativity of the Holy Theotokos

Deliverer of our Souls: Saint Luke 10:38-42; 11:27-28, especially 11: 27, 28: “*And it happened, as [Jesus] spoke these things, that a certain woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You!’ But He said, ‘More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!’*” By the exclamation of this “...certain woman from the crowd...” God reveals that Mary, the Theotokos, is ‘blessed,’ a truth she confirmed for herself prophetically (Lk. 1:48). Her womb was blessed, for Christ our God took flesh from that womb to redeem our humanity. Her breasts were blessed, for by them the Lord Jesus was nourished for earthly life and ministry. However, primarily, we call the Theotokos blessed because she heard “...the word of God and [kept] it” (Lk. 11:28).

The Theotokos is indeed blessed for she lived the conditions of blessedness disclosed by the Lord Jesus in the Beatitudes: poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, hunger for righteousness, mercy, purity of heart, and the enduring of persecution and slander because of Him (Mt. 5:3-12). She embodied within herself the way by which the Deliverer of our souls extends His blessing to our cursed and fallen race, so that, like her, we might achieve theosis.

The Beatitudes were given first place (Mt. 5:1-12) in the Lord Jesus’ initial teaching, in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:1-7:27). Likewise, the Theotokos was the first of the new race, of those called Christians, who strive to incorporate these truths as foundations for living. She models what God achieves when a person takes the Beatitudes as the working guide for choice and action. In response, the Deliverer of souls meets us in that effort as a yoke-mate (Mt. 11:29), bringing to our effort the additional power we require to attain blessedness.

What the Church knows from meditation and observation of the person and life of the Birthgiver of God is that her Son also was her Deliverer, enabling her to attain theosis, full blessed union of heart, soul, and body with the living God. Mary conceived Christ by accepting the opportunity she was given. The “...woman from the crowd...” (Lk. 11:27) rightly discerned the obedience and faithfulness of the Theotokos and the blessed deification she received.

The Beatitudes, then, become the perfect guide for striving. Can you imagine greater poverty of spirit than was displayed by the Theotokos? “He has regarded the low estate of His maidservant” (Lk. 1:48). Let us not be ashamed to say, “I have sinned against heaven and before Thee, and am not worthy to lift up my eyes to the height of Thy glory.” What greater mourning could there be than the sword that pierced her heart (cf. Lk. 2:35) when her beloved Son and the Deliverer of us all said, “Woman, behold your son!” (Jn. 19:26)?

“Let us not be exalted in our own thoughts, but humble ourselves and cry contritely, God forgive us our sins.” What greater meekness could we seek than what she prayed: “...Behold, the maidservant of the Lord” (Lk. 1:38). Let our hunger for righteousness say with her, “...Let it be to me according to your word” (Lk. 1:38), and pursue the mercy she discloses in saying, “...They have no wine” (Jn. 2:3). We, too, may introduce peace into confusion as she did: “Whatever He says to you, do it” (Jn. 2:5). Consider her personal cross as she stood before the Cross of the Lord in silence and deep trust. May she be our icon in all afflictions and trials.

Following the Dormition of the Theotokos, when her tomb was opened for Thomas, the company of Apostles discovered that the Deliverer “Who dwelt in her ever-virgin womb did translate her to life,” for her body was missing from the sealed tomb. May He also bless us to follow her in keeping His Beatitudes!

O Christ, Lover of mankind and Deliverer of our souls, having wrought salvation in the flesh for the lost, renew us to life immortal, through the prayers of the Holy Theotokos.

September 9 – Tuesday of the Fourteenth Week after Pentecost
Mark 4:24-34

Christ as Standard: Mark 4:24-34, especially vs. 34: *“But without a parable He did not speak to them. And when they were alone, He explained all things to His disciples.”* Christ is known for His parables, but these stories require some digging and reflection on our part before we can fully grasp their meaning. We must take time to assess our own lives in terms of the parable’s message. If we simply read a parable and move on without further rumination, we lose. As Christ cautions us, “Take heed what you hear” (vs. 24), without passing over what may appear obvious.

“Take heed” (vs. 24) may also be translated as “look at.” Perhaps it sounds somewhat strange to say “*Look at* what you hear.” Christ is counseling us to listen carefully to what we hear – and to apply the eye of our heart and mind, our deep center or *nous*. When we hear something, we are to look at the words and meaning prayerfully, for Christ our God ultimately explains “all things to His disciples” (vs. 34).

When we look at Christ’s teaching, we must never forget that the standard for understanding His meaning is the same standard God will measure back to us in return. If we *heed* as disciples, then “more will be given” to us (vs. 24). Let us take time and reflect, for this is the Lord’s life-giving advice! Consider Christ Himself, and let Him be our standard as disciples. We pity the poor person who is not united to Christ, who goes it alone in this world.

The beauty of having Christ as our measure and standard for reflection is that He opens up each parable for us, in the process illuminating our whole life with all its perplexity. What we struggle to figure out for ourselves He makes plain as day, as the saying goes. Farming, for example, is risky business, but the big plus in agriculture is growth. The seeds in the field sprout and yield. Yes, there is labor in preparing the ground, broadcasting the seed, nurturing and watering, but growth is there, working on the side of the farmer. We can affect growth, but God gives it – it is the Lord’s miracle.

When the central aim of our life is to love and serve the Lord Jesus Christ, then He becomes our standard. As we consider the activities before us, we hold up Christ in order to evaluate our choices. We pray to Him for the strength to follow His wisdom, to please Him and act as wisely as He gives us light.

Growth will come. Even if our material reward is limited, we will enjoy the blessing of seeing growth and discovering that the field of our heart now yields a harvest of better choices and responses. We may not be able to explain how this happens, but we know when it does. The “harvest has come” (vs. 29)!

The tiny mustard seed has amazing power, for growth is embedded by God in all living seeds. The Lord Jesus draws attention to the mustard seed in His next parable (vss. 31-32) because in the first century it was considered to be the smallest and most insignificant of seeds. And yet in time it grows and “shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade” (vs. 32).

“The enigmatic present manifestation of the kingdom [is] embodied in Jesus’ person,” biblical scholar William Lane reminds us, “but remember the mustard seed. The day will come when the kingdom of God will surpass in glory the mightiest kingdoms of the earth.”

We are blessed to witness Christ growing in our hearts right now – a profound wonder! When we listen to the Lord’s teaching as we are “able to hear it” (vs. 33), He explains everything to us (vs. 34). What a gift He is to us!

By You we have been brought forth, my God and derive our existence and vision to serve. – Saint Symeon the New Theologian

September 10 - Wednesday of the Fourteenth Week after Pentecost
Mark 4:35-41

Fright and Fear: Mark 4:35-41, especially vss. 40-41: “But He said to them, ‘Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?’” And they feared exceedingly. . . .” The earth is a vast expanse of oceans, seas, and lakes. No wonder frail mankind, despite some mastery over God’s created order, has never lost respect for stormy seas! “They that go down to the sea in ships, doing their work in many waters, these have seen the works of the Lord, and His wonders in the deep,” the psalmist reminds us. “He spake, and a wind of tempest arose, and the waves thereof were lifted up. They mount as high as the heavens, and they go down into the abysses; their soul was melted with evils. They were troubled, and they reeled like one drunken, and all their wisdom was swallowed up. And they cried to the Lord in their affliction” (Ps 106:23-28).

Every few months we hear news comes of a ship lost at sea. We may recall that Christopher Columbus’ flag ship, the Santa Maria, ran aground in a hurricane in 1492. In 1975, the freighter Edmund Fitzgerald disappeared with all hands lost as she neared Whitefish Bay of Lake Superior. A ferry capsized recently in Philippine waters, and only a few onboard survived.

Naturally, when “a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that it was already filling” (Mk 4:37), the sailors on the Sea of Galilee immediately rouse their Teacher. The words of the fishermen to the Master disclose their fright; they are scared. Heavy waves can quickly swamp a tiny fishing boat, and these sailors are certain that they are “perishing” (vs. 38).

Do they wake Jesus because they are upset by His sleeping at this critical time? Do they hope for rescue by means of His prayers, or do they simply wish that He not be taken unaware? The Lord asks them, “Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?” (vs. 40). He addresses the spiritual storm within them. It drowns their trust in Him, for according to Saint Nikolai of Zicha, “fear comes from sin, sin from the devil, and the devil is the father of lies” (*Prologue From Ochrid*, vol. 2, p. 363).

With supernatural authority, Christ our God rebukes the wind and calms the sea (vs. 39). He intends to awaken his disciples from their trembling and bring them to a righteous fear – a holy awe and dread of God. In this passage the Evangelist Mark uses the word *delia*, meaning timidity or fright, and also *phobos*, meaning “fear of the Lord.” The disciples’ initial fright is *delia*, while their Master’s control over the elements evokes *phobos*: “Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!” (vs. 41).

What of us? The God-man calmed the Sea of Galilee, assuring us that all dangers are in His hands. In times of peril we may forget about Christ, retreating into the sinful human reaction of fright and even blaming God. Perhaps we think about Christ but do not fear the Lord, still wondering if He will act. Or, we may choose to fear the Lord who knows all dangers and their outcomes.

The fear of the Lord is “pure, enduring for ever and ever” (Ps 18:9). The wise embrace it as the way of life. When we fear the Lord, our timidity is replaced by awe before Christ the Life-giver. We are “led to recognize His authority as Master and Creator” (Saint Basil the Great, “On the Holy Spirit,” *NPNF* vol. 8, p. 14).

If the Lord Jesus Christ is awake within us, then fear of the Lord stabilizes us naturally. “When your anger is roused, you are being tossed by the waves. . . . Your heart is imperiled,” asserts Saint Augustine. If we “long to retaliate” or seek “the joy of revenge, it is shipwreck. Why? Because Christ is asleep in you. . . . Rouse Him, then . . . let Him keep watch over or within you, pay heed to Him,” for “in the fear of the Lord is hope of strength” (*ACCS New Testament* vol. II, p. 65).

In my trials, O Jesus, grant me the repentance of Thy disciples and fear of the Lord.

September 11 – Thursday of the Fourteenth Week after Pentecost
Mark 5:1-20

Possession: Mark 5:1-20, especially vss. 12, 13: “*So all the demons begged Him, saying, ‘Send us to the swine, that we may enter them.’ And at once Jesus gave them permission. Then the unclean spirits went out and entered the swine . . . and the herd ran violently down the steep place into the sea, and drowned. . . .*” The thought of demon possession is dreadful, frightening, and repulsive. The mere idea of a person being invaded by foul spirits sobers us as we reflect upon the scriptural passages describing possession by Satanic power. Alas, others struggle to make sense of the violent madness that afflicts our world, for without an understanding of the demonic there is no way to explain mass murder and the other wanton assaults against anything with a degree of goodness and purity.

As Orthodox Christians, we are blessed to be sheltered by the Church. She offers us a clear stance and effective prayers against such evil. In this reading, Saint Mark provides several specific teachings to help us resist the snares of the evil one.

We may liken possession – the occupation of a person or group of people by a spiritual power – to slavery, in which one becomes another’s property. However, spiritual possession is far more pervasive and insidious than being owned by another human being. A dark “other” infests and corrupts every aspect of the person’s body, mind, and soul.

Possession is invisible to our sensory organs, although it often manifests itself in the sort of unnatural behavior described in this passage (vss. 3-5). The essence of spiritual possession is the residing of a dark spiritual presence within the victim, distinct from any physical force or process. A conscious, willful, and contriving being lives *inside* the afflicted. For the possessed, it not so much a question of being “out of his right mind” as a state in which his thinking and actions are clearly under the control of another.

For this reason, the Lord Jesus speaks to the spirit as an entity distinct from the possessed man (vs. 8). Further, Christ our God addresses this unseen being as an “unclean” spirit (vs. 8). He demands his name; the answer is “Legion; for we are many” (vs. 9). The possessed man is swarming with “unclean spirits” (vs. 12).

The change from singular to plural occurs in verse 10: “*he* begged . . . that He would not send *them*.” These spirits are *unclean* in the sense of being impure, lewd, despoiled, and immoral. It is their evil nature that explains the demons’ adverse reaction to Jesus, the all-pure One: “I implore You by God that You do not torment me” (vs. 7). Demonic possession indicates the presence of a corrupt being – hence the fierce reaction to the encounter with the “Son of the Most High God” (vs. 7).

Such evil spirits are destructive (vss. 3-5), violent (vs. 13), and isolating (vs. 5) to those they inhabit. They create a living death for their victims, always with the ultimate aim of destroying them. Demons are powerful, as the broken chains and other futile efforts to control the demoniac show. Further, they pose a constant threat to the lives and property of others (vss. 4, 13).

Now comes the good news concerning demonic possession: the evil spirits are subject to God. Jesus terrifies them. They are bound to fear Him, for He has power to cast them out. He can exorcise them from their victims, for as Saint John the Evangelist states: “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 Jn 4:4).

Let us never allow the demons to alarm or frighten us. We are to call at all times upon the name of the Lord Jesus, who keeps us in our “right mind” (vs. 15).

Free us always, O Lord, from evil spirits that would instill dark control within us. – Adapted from the baptismal prayer of exorcism

September 12 - Friday of the Fourteenth Week after Pentecost
Mark 5:22-44, 35-6:1

The Victorious Kingdom: Mark 5:22-24, 35-6:1, especially vss. 41-42: *“Then He took the child by the hand, and said to her, ‘Talitha, cumi,’ which is translated, ‘Little girl, I say to you, arise.’ Immediately the girl arose and walked. . . .”* At our baptism the Church prays that we might “be made worthy of the kingdom incorruptible.” Jairus’ daughter is indeed made worthy of the kingdom, for when the young girl rises from her death bed, she gains the victory alluded to by the Prophet David, “He sent from on high, and He took me; He received me out of many waters” (Ps 17:16).

Indeed, God’s sovereignty shatters the tyranny of sin, evil, and sickness. In the passages that precede the present account, we read of several victorious interventions of God’s kingdom. Christ our God stops the wind and waves on the Sea of Galilee and frees His disciples from their faithless fear (Mk 4:38-40). He asserts the authority of the kingdom of God by restoring to “his right mind” (vs. 5:15) a possessed man whom “no one could bind” (vs. 5:3). This man He sends home to announce “what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He has had compassion on you” (vs. 19).

Now, the invincibility of the kingdom of God in the face of sickness is also revealed. A ruler of the synagogue comes to the Lord Jesus to implore Him “earnestly, saying, ‘My little daughter lies at the point of death. Come and lay Your hands on her, that she may be healed, and she will live’” (vs. 23).

Before the Lord Jesus reaches the ruler’s home, a woman with a prolonged illness (a twelve-year issue of blood) touches the hem of His garment. The Lord sends her away in peace, healed entirely of her affliction (vss. 25-34).

In each of these encounters the Lord Jesus emphasizes that His kingdom becomes manifest when God is approached in faith. The disciples’ trust suffers when their boat is swamping. Yet still they come to Jesus (vs. 4:38), who transforms their unbelieving fright into reverent awe (vs. 41). The possessed man “ran and worshiped Him” (vs. 5:6); thereafter, he “began to proclaim in Decapolis all that Jesus had done for him” (vs. 20).

In the case of the young daughter of the ruler, her death prompts some members of his household to run after their master to urge him not to “trouble the Teacher any further” (vs. 35). The Lord Jesus, however, challenges the ruler to hold onto whatever faith has led him ask for His help: “Do not be afraid; only believe” (vs. 36).

When Christ come to the ruler’s home, the mourners are weeping and wailing (vs. 38). The Lord of the kingdom confronts these mourners, who believe that the girl is dead, saying, “The child is not dead, but sleeping” (vs. 39). When these professional mourners know better and begin to ridicule Him, He put the faithless ones outside. They are beyond the reign of God’s kingdom of Life.

Then He goes in to the girl, taking with Him those who preserve a modicum of faith. In their presence He grasps the hand of the motionless girl and says, “Little girl, I say to you, arise” (vs. 41). The clouds of doubt and gloom are dispersed, for “immediately the girl arose and walked” (vs. 42).

Seemingly irresistible powers – sin, chronic sickness, deceptive demons – constantly batter our faith. We quail especially before the prospect of inevitable death. The kingdom of God, however, overcomes not only sin, evil, and sickness, but even the dread ultimacy of death. We citizens of the victorious Kingdom defy them all with the words, “I shall not die, but live” (Ps 117:17)!

Illumine us who with faith do worship Thee; and rescue us from fire eternal. – Orthodox Funeral Service

September 13 - Saint Matthew 10:37-11:1, The Saturday before the Elevation of the Cross

Who is Worthy? Saint Matthew 10:37-11:1, especially vs. 38: *“And he who does not take his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me.”* The set of declarations from the Lord Jesus in Saint Matthew’s Gospel ends by saying, “...when Jesus finished commanding His twelve disciples...He departed” (vs. 11:1). Christ gave clear instructions to the Twelve, but His words apply not just to the Twelve, but also to all members of the Church through all time. Christ’s stringent demands may not be avoided by saying, “They were for the Twelve, for Church leaders, or for the clergy.” No! In the passage, especially in verses 24-42, are commands from the Lord to be obeyed by you and me - if we would be worthy disciples.

Take this thought another step: we ought to connect the commands in this collection to the great command or Commission of the Lord given to all Christians: “Go therefore and make disciples of 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” (Mt. 28:19,20). The point is that Christ our Lord is speaking of discipling - the shared task of all Christians - to bring others into the life-bestowing and saving fellowship of the Church, over which the Lord Jesus Christ is the Head and Lord and Master.

However, if we intend to obey Christ as Lord worthily, we will need to undertake this task solely out of love for Him, a love above even the love we have for our parents or our children - should it come down to that (Mt. 10:37). The Lord Jesus’ command implies that, when following or obeying Him, we must be willing to stand up to death in all of its forms, however demeaning (vss. 38,39). Participation in this common effort of the Church is the task of all: Apostles, Prophets, righteous saints, and even humble servants who support the work in the smallest ways, like giving “...a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple...” (vss. 40-42).

Christ alone has the right to make a stringent demand on us like this, to invade our private, intimate family life or to suggest that we stand ready to put our very lives on the line if necessary. His commands are bold, the sort given within the military, and then only in the extremes of combat or battle training. Of course, God has the right to demand such thing of us, He Who says, “I am the Lord your God...You shall have no other gods before Me” (Ex. 20:2,3).

When caught in a conflict of allegiances, between earthly ties and faithfulness to the Lord, Christ asks that our first love be for Him. During Israel’s wilderness sojourn, God praised the tribe of Levi; for, when pushed to choose, they said to their parents, “I have not seen you; nor did he know his brothers or his own children; they guarded Your oracles and kept Your covenant” (Dt. 33:9). Life in Christ is putting ‘first things first,’ and it may entail hard choices.

“Taking one’s cross” and following Jesus expresses a readiness to face death if need be. But remember: death, as understood in the Church, embraces much more than physical death, though it certainly may include violent, ignominious, bodily death of a sort like crucifixion. One must look at the majestic sweep of the entire Incarnation, the humbling and emptying of Himself undertaken by God the Word on our behalf; and He did it all in love for us. So, to be worthy, ‘following’ must be done out of a similar kind of love, a love ready to let go of anything “...for My sake...” (Mt. 10:39). But, also, we are to love others at great cost if need be.

The Lord does not seek heroes, but a response of love. Receiving Apostles, Prophets, and Saints is wonderful, but so is simply giving a small cup of water to a thirsty, needy person (vs. 42).

O Loving Lord, direct me to divine wisdom and power that I may accomplish all that Thou dost ask according to Thy will, to the profit of others, and to the glory of Thy Holy Name.

September 14 - Exaltation of the Precious and Life-giving Cross
John 19:6-35

The Power of the Cross: John 19:6-35, especially vs. 11: *“Jesus answered, ‘You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin.’”* Pontius Pilate hesitates during the judicial proceedings against Jesus, for when Christ our God points out that Pilate’s power is finite, the Roman governor wavers (Jn 19:11-12). Pilate senses the truth momentarily, but then he brushes it aside in order to proceed with the trial before him. We, however, are blessed, for our Lord chooses to reveal the full power of the Cross to the faithful.

Since we know that the personal power of God resides in the Cross, we approach this cruel instrument of execution in personal terms: we greet it by falling down before it and adoring it as the footstool of Christ our God. Through the Cross, we experience God’s capacity to guide and heal us, to raise the dead, and to save mankind.

The Church provides us with accounts of the Passion to help us understand the importance of the Cross. As we examine today’s portion of this record, let us pay special heed to the words of the Lord Himself.

We begin with the Lord Jesus’ statement quoted above (vs. 11). This verse comprises His sole response to the accusation of blasphemy – the charge that “He made Himself the Son of God” (vs. 7). The Jewish leaders do not actually deliver Him to Pilate on this basis. Rather, they insinuate that He is an evildoer and criminal (vs. 18:30). Only when the mob clamors for His crucifixion do they accuse Christ of claiming divine sanction.

The Lord Jesus poses a puzzle for the chief priests. He does not fit popular expectations of the Messiah, and yet He assents to their question, “Are You then the Son of God?” (Lk 22:70). He thereby conveys that He knows He is divine, which is blasphemy in their eyes (vs. 71).

In a similar way, our Lord’s answer to Pontius Pilate signals that He accepts the title “Son of God” and affirms the claim of Messiah. Jesus’ reply, suggesting that He considers Himself the Messiah, conveys to Pilate the serious potential for rebellion and a popular uprising.

The Gospels attest that the Jewish leaders eventually prevail over Pilate’s hesitation (Jn 19:12, 15), for they are determined to be rid of Jesus (vs. 11:53). The next word the Lord utters is delivered from the Cross (vs. 19:26), His “footstool.”

Christ addresses His mother, the Theotokos (“Woman, behold your son”) and tells Saint John, “Behold, your mother” (vss. 26-27). Here He is asserting that He was “born of woman, born under the law, to redeem” all who are under the Law (Gal 4:4-5). His intent is to silence those who would spiritualize the Gospel. He declares that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Cor 5:19). See how greatly God values humanity, even sharing pain and death with us!

Our Lord makes clear that everything taking place is according to His plan. When He is dying, the Lord says, “I thirst” (vs. 28; but see Ps 68:26). According to Saint John Chrysostom, “This death was of a new kind . . . in the power of the person dying, for death came not on His body before He willed it. . . . Therefore also He said, ‘I have power to lay down My life; and I have power to take it again’ (Jn 10:18)” (“Homily 85 on Saint John’s Gospel,” NPNF First Series, vol. 14, p. 318). God has the power of life and of death according to *His* will.

Finally, knowing that His redemptive work is now complete, the Lord Jesus adds, “It is finished!” (vs. 30). “Today, as the Cross is elevated, evil spirits are driven away; today the whole creation is delivered from corruption . . . all gifts have shone forth upon us” (festal hymn).

O Lord, save Thy people and bless Thine inheritance, granting to Thy people victory over all their enemies; and by the power of Thy Cross preserving Thine estate. – Hymn of the Exaltation of the Cross

September 15 - Monday of the Fifteenth Week after Pentecost
Mark 5:24-34

Desperation: Mark 5:24-34, especially vs. 27: *“When she heard about Jesus, she came behind Him in the crowd and touched His garment.”* Each of us, depending on our personal experience, needs, and knowledge, will sometimes risk taking a chance in the face of life’s circumstances. Today’s Gospel provides important bits of spiritual and physical information about a woman who faces such a moment of choice in her life. Will she dare to approach the famous rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, known for his ability to heal “all kinds of of sicknesses and all kinds of diseases” (Mt 4:23)?

This particular woman, for twelve long years, has been seeking help for a disorder that dominates her health and very existence – an unremitting “flow of blood” (Mk 5:25). This flow has now continued without ceasing for twelve years! We are not referring to the normal menstrual cycle common to women in their child-bearing years, but twelve years of endless hemorrhaging.

Surely, here is sufficient reason to seek help from medical practitioners of any and every sort. Such practitioners certainly existed in ancient Palestine, just as they do in our present era of scientific medicine. Doctors today, for all the advances and discoveries of modern science, still merely “practice” when it comes to dealing with the diseases of our bodies.

Note the phrase – “when she heard about Jesus” – that prefaces the action in verse 27. It is amazing how quickly news gets around, even in an isolated rural setting. For anyone suffering from a maddening ailment of the sort afflicting this woman, reports of a traveling healer like Jesus would immediately attract attention. Plainly, word about the Lord is the hot topic of the day, for a great multitude follows Him during his itinerant ministry (vs. 24). Jesus is a celebrity!

What she hears leads to a plan to regain her health without compromising herself or Jesus. The evangelist explains her thinking on this point: she intends to come “behind Him in the crowd” (vs. 27) and touch him unnoticed. In this way, she will avoid exposing herself – and Him – to punishment and public censure.

On the one hand, she is determined to approach Him; she has heard the prevailing talk about His ministry, which leads her to think that He can heal her endless bleeding. After all, he has done as much and more for others: “If only I may touch His clothes, I shall be made well” (vs. 27). On the other hand, she knows that for a women with a discharge from her body to approach a man openly violates the Law, and could prove dangerous (see Lv 15:19-27).

Let us look carefully at what actually happens. Surreptitiously, the woman touches Jesus’ garments and instantly knows she is healed. The Lord, realizing “that power had gone out of Him,” inquires, “Who touched My clothes?” (vs. 30). Although the physical interaction is simple, two spiritual actions are hidden from view. These have eternal value, for the acts of the woman and the Lord become a life-giving revelation.

At this key juncture, the Lord’s disciples become involved (vs. 31). Let us, as disciples, reflect on Mark’s report expectantly, for now we, too, are drawn into the meeting between the Lord and the woman. Let us learn from the woman, who “fearing and trembling, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell down before Him,” confessing her faith (vs. 33). May we respond as she does, so that we may “go in peace, and be healed of [our] affliction” (vs. 34).

Saint Peter of Damascus reminds us that “there are many mysteries hidden in the divine Scriptures, and we do not know God’s meaning in what is said there. . . . It is stupid and uncouth, declares Saint Dionysios the Areopagite, to give attention not to the meaning intended but only to the words. But he who seeks with holy grief will find.”

The image of God was truly preserved in you, O Mother. . . . You taught us to disregard the flesh, for it passes away,^[L]_[SEP]but to care instead for the soul, since it is immortal. – Hymn of Saint Veronica

September 16 - Tuesday of the Fifteenth Week after Pentecost
Mark 6:1-7

Honored Except Among His Own: Mark 6:1-7, especially vs. 4: *“But Jesus said to them, ‘A prophet is not without honor except in his own country, among his own relatives, and in his own house.’”* An old sailors’ adage advises us to watch the morning sky: “Red sky at morning, sailor take warning.” The origins of this bit of folk advice are hazy, but I still take note whenever there is a red cast to the morning sky, perhaps as a result of growing up in a Navy family. Our friends at the National Weather Service, however, claim greater precision: “The computer has been responsible for an impressive improvement in the accuracy of weather predictions. Over a ten-year period, the forecasting of rain has improved to the point where the outlook for tomorrow is now as accurate as the forecast for tonight used to be.”

These thoughts lead us to consider the Lord’s observation about the honor afforded to prophets. An honest study of Scripture supports what Christ says about the righteous ones called prophets, whose works appear in the Old Testament. They were quite right in their predictions – and widely dishonored among their own people. Indeed, the same risks face those who preach today, warning us against the dangerous spiritual trends in our society.

For further affirmation of the terrifying truth contained in the warnings of Christ and His apostles, we turn to Saint Paul: “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap” (Gal 6:7). Such truths apply not only to individuals, but to societies as well. Societies that indulge in every sort of immoral and unethical behavior will reap a predictable harvest of wrong-doing, crime, disordered health, and civil unrest. It follows as night follows the day.

Let us, then, identify four truths about healing. First, everyone who values the healing touch of the Master has hope of finding true health – even if we live in countries, neighborhoods, or households where Christ is dishonored and distrusted. Although He was crucified by pagan Romans, in an era of wretched indulgence, He rose from the dead, traveled on a worldwide circuit, and is open to all comers.

Second, we understand that Christ’s healing is available to us if we, as mortal human beings, allow Him to *lay His hands* on us (Mk 6:5). He heals all who are sick, including the immoral, the high-born, and the nobodies.

Third, the Chief Physician’s circuit embraces every community, household, family, and person in this world who welcomes His therapy. He shows respect to neither age nor to race, financial worth, gender, nation, nor a host of other distinctions.

Fourth, we note that those who are trained under the Master, whom He calls to Himself, are sent out two by two, in fellowship with others duly authorized. To these He gives power over unclean spirits (vs. 7). Even today, these disciples will respond to our honest appeals.

Now, to be honest, a host of questions still remain concerning these four guidelines for finding health at the hands of the Chief Physician. Some questions may be offered as dodges by those who do not wish to give up what little power and authority they currently possess. There will always be those unwilling to meet Jesus Christ on His terms.

Yes, there are “conditions of service” that Christ and His healing teams will not violate. Nevertheless, we see matters of life and death being addressed in virtually every country and out-of-the-way place in the world – a prophetic ministry truly wonderful to contemplate.

Grant speedy and steadfast consolation unto Thy servants, O Jesus, when our spirits are cast down within us. Depart not from our souls in affliction. Be not far from our thoughts in time of trouble, but always defend us. Draw near unto us, Thou who art everywhere present. As Thou art ever with Thine apostles, so also unite Thyself unto those who long for Thee.

September 17 - Wednesday of the Fifteenth Week after Pentecost
Mark 6:7-13

What About Me?: Mark 6:7-13, especially vs. 7: “*And He called the twelve to Himself, and began to send them out two by two, and gave them power over unclean spirits.*” Let us take note of the nature and scope of this verse’s message, for it is issued to all the faithful. The Lord calls us, His disciples, to Himself. He sends us out in teams, and He gives us power over unclean spirits.

Conversely, if we are not called by the Lord, and do not team up with others who belong to Him, we do not receive power over unclean spirits. So much for independent operators! What is most important for us to grasp, as members of the team we call the Church, is that each and every disciple is called to the same apostolic task. To answer the Lord’s call, however, entails certain requirements.

Our response to Christ depends on our understanding that the Lord calls on all of us within the Church (much as He sends the Twelve forth here) to proclaim “that people should repent” (vs. 12). Even inexperienced disciples – as the twelve are at this point in time in their relationship to Christ – should not imagine that the Lord’s call is restricted to the clergy, or to missionaries and laypeople with specific “religious” assignments or positions. Having united ourselves to Christ at baptism, we are united to the Lord’s basic purpose. Christ requires each of us to accept this call.

There are disclaimers, however, so read on. Perhaps we have seen someone walking the streets with a signboard that declares, “Repent.” Numerous cartoons have caricatured this particular display. Odd as such an approach may seem, such public declarations represent a genuine effort to obey Christ’s most basic assignment to His disciples. Does this include us? Yes, although fortunately we are not required to parade with a signboard!

If we wish to complete our assignment, we should note the list of things we will *not* need as part of our apostolic training program, or journey: food, money, even extra clothes (vss. 8-9). None of these are necessary as we seek to carry out the Lord’s apostolic task. As we go from place to place, our preaching “that people should repent” (vs. 12) may be rejected. Indeed, some “will not receive you nor hear you” (vs. 11). In such cases, “when you depart shake off the dust under your feet as a testimony against them” The Lord will deal with those who avoid Him in another way.

Note that we have been labeling our task as “apostolic.” This term does not merely refer to the work of the Twelve, nor to their present-day successors, the bishops. An apostle is simply a person sent to deliver a message from a higher authority. The apostolic work thus belongs to each one sent by Christ; it entails the godly efforts of every disciple.

Our Lord specifically sends His servants to *preach*, also translated as “proclaim.” However, pulpit oratory is not required of every disciple. What, then, does the Lord expect of His servants?

This Gospel passage suggests that we disciples proclaim Christ out of our personal experience. Clearly, there is a semantic link between verse 7 and the actions in verses 12 and 13. Christ conveys to His disciples the ability to cast out demons and heal the sick by anointing them with oil. Holy oil from icon lamps and other sources may be used by laypeople to anoint the sick, in the firm expectation that God heals many forms of sickness: physical, emotional, spiritual, and interpersonal. This proved to be the case even before the Church came into being, and continues to this day.

We can trace a line from the Forerunner through Christ to His commissioned disciples (vs. 7). Every disciple of the Lord is authorized to express trust in the Lord by anointing and praying with the sick, whether they are believers or not. The disciple’s faith and love for the Lord bears on the results, and the recipient’s openness is also effective. May Christ our God help each of us risk expressing our faith on behalf of others!

Be mindful, O Lord of the sick, the suffering, the sorrowing, the afflicted, captives, and the poor.

September 18 - Thursday of the Fifteenth Week after Pentecost
Mark 6:30-45

We Are Filled: Mark 6:30-45, especially vs. 42: “So they all ate and were filled.” In Christ we are all filled to overflowing with the amazing benevolence of our God and Father. This includes those who have served Christ and respect Him, those who mistrust, reject or ignore Him, and even those who hate Him virulently. God the Word, who brings us into being, cannot be said to be stingy. Having prepared this world for us, even now He is actively sustaining this tiny planet as our home and haven in the vast expanse of a universe devoid of love, protection, and benefactions.

Our species, *homo sapiens*, possesses dual or perhaps triple sets of sensory organs to cope with the many dimensions of life on our planet. Our physical senses – touch, sight, hearing, smell, and taste – are matched with a set of spiritual senses that enable us to meet one another with love, kindness, bravery, joy, peace, longsuffering, goodness, self-control, faithfulness, and gentleness (see Gal 5:22). To these fruits of the Spirit God adds the capacity to know Him – to encounter God with contrition, awe, repentance, worship, glory, peace, even the ecstasy of immediate communion with our Creator.

Yes, God knows us far better than we know ourselves and showers us with unimaginable blessings. Let us consider those who shared in the loaves and “were filled” (Mk 6:42, 44). The Evangelist Mark states that there were five thousand men present (vs. 44); very likely this number was even larger, for women and children were likely not included in the tally. It seems reasonable to assume five thousand is an estimate based on a rough calculation of the men present. Given that women played an important part in the Lord's ministry (Mt 27:55-56), the actual number may well have been higher.

The Venerable Bede offers another perspective, noting that “the number one thousand, beyond which no calculation of ours extends, ordinarily indicates the fullness of the things which are being treated.” His view seems to suggest that the “five thousand” merely represents a very large number – akin to our imprecise use of terms like billions, trillions, or a gazillion today.

Later in Saint Mark's Gospel, Christ feeds a multitude of four thousand (Mk 8:1-9). The context of this latter Gospel account suggests that the event occurs in an area dominated by Gentiles, rather than Jews. The first feeding of a multitude, as it turns out, takes place in an area settled largely by Jews.

We may recall the struggles of early Christian communities regarding the inclusion of Gentiles in their fellowships, and the difficulties faced by Saint Paul when Gentiles enter his churches. We can draw the conclusion that Saint Mark favors welcoming the Gentiles, based on the number of fragmented leftovers he reports at these respective feedings.

By traditional Jewish reckoning of the first century, there are twelve tribes of Israel. In addition, there is a division of mankind into Jew and Gentile. At the first feeding, the fragments collected amount to twelve full baskets, corresponding to the Jewish tribes alone.

At the second feeding, however, there are seven loaves. When the multitude has been filled, there remain seven baskets. This number indicates a mighty gathering of all peoples in creation: the two Hebrew kingdoms of Judah and Israel plus the traditional Gentiles, or nations. As in our Eucharistic gathering, all are fed in abundance who embrace Christ.

Thou, our bread, our true refreshment, art a never failing sweetness imparting lasting life. – Prudentius, *The Bread of Life*

September 19 - Friday of the Fifteenth Week after Pentecost
Mark 6:45-53

God Is with Us: Mark 6:45-53, especially vs. 51: *“Then He went up into the boat to them, and the wind ceased; and they were greatly amazed in themselves beyond measure, and marveled.”* In today’s reading the Evangelist Mark directs our attention to our own frailty. He asks us to surrender all the delusions and fears we have about life, to embrace Jesus as our Lord, and to welcome Him into the little boat of our lives as we sail the turbulent seas of our existence. Saint Mark clearly intends for us to turn to Christ as Savior in the midst of all of life’s false saviors, and to take Him aboard rather than face life apart from Him.

The Evangelist uses the first four verses of today’s reading to highlight our physical separation from the Lord. Christ orders the disciples into the boat by themselves, apart from Him. He sends them off to rely on their own resources. To further underscore the separation of the disciples from the Master, Saint Mark shows us how completely they are on their own (vs. 47).

Christ remains on the land, quite apart from the disciples, having chosen to remain behind to send the multitude away. The Evangelist here invites us to ponder the times when we are consciously apart from the Lord. These may be the hours in which we are obeying Him in the routine course of our lives.

But as sometimes happens – and as it happens to the disciples – we can find ourselves enveloped in the darkest segment of night, in the early morning before any hint of dawn. The disciples are “straining at rowing for the wind was against them” (vs. 48). How often we row and yet make no progress! Adversity comes to us, whether through our fault or not.

Next, the Lord “came to them, walking on the sea, and would have passed them by” (vs. 48). Our Savior sometimes comes near to us through His own choice, not in response to any request from us. The “would” implies that Christ our God extends real freedom to all His disciples. He will pass us by if we refuse to acknowledge Him, if we permit the wind and waves to capture our attention and divert us from His presence. Yes, there are times when we may fearfully misinterpret that presence; we imagine that we see ghosts and become troubled. Nevertheless, He assuages our fears. Be of good cheer! (vs. 50)

What is it, then, that we allow to trouble our hearts and minds? By what means do we tempt ourselves and give permission to ghosts to haunt our imagination? Surely it is those suppositions that we generate and which arise from our own fantasies and fears. Perhaps these fears form out of our failure to understand “about the loaves,” or perhaps we permit our hearts to become hardened, and to remain so (vs. 52).

Let us consider our heart for a moment as a parcel of land we are seeking to cultivate. Concerning hardness of heart, Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos says: “At first the ground may be soft and relatively easy to plow. But as we continue digging, we reach a level full of pebbles. Further down we reach solid rock. It is like sowing on granite. Nothing can penetrate it. . . . because of three things: over preoccupation with worldly affairs, focus on physical pleasure, and obsession with wealth.”

Now comes the test. We reach a moment, as does every disciple, when we give voice to our fears. We forget about our Savior and Master! But let us recall the words of Saint Symeon the New Theologian: “We must endeavor to receive the Holy Spirit within ourselves *and to keep Him* [emphasis mine]. Thus those who are strangers to the constant violence and difficulty, lowliness and tribulation, claim that they have the Holy Spirit within them. With the works and sweat and the toils of virtue nobody obtains this reward. Therefore . . . ‘Show your works [first], and [then] seek the reward.’”

O Master, Christ our God, help me accept the water that Thou givest that I may never thirst again, but live from the water of Thy true fountain and receive The Spirit’s life eternal. – Based on John 7:39

September 20 - Saturday after the Exaltation of the Holy Cross
John 8:21-30

The Cross – Ultimate Revelation: *John 8:21-30, especially vs. 28:* “*Then Jesus said to them, ‘When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and that I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things.’*” All four Gospels confirm that the Lord Jesus awakened intense opposition among the scribes and Pharisees during His brief three-year ministry – an antagonism that culminated in His Passion. The present passage from Saint John needs to be read with this in mind, for the Lord’s remarks are directed to these leaders, seeking to open the hearts of as many as possible. The result is that “many believed in Him” (vs. 30), at least temporarily.

Our Lord proceeds to make four assertions in the course of this passage. First, He asserts that He is God (vss. 23, 28). Second, failure to believe in Him consigns non-believers to die in their sins (vss. 21, 24). Third, what the Lord says is of God, therefore true (vs. 26). Finally, the truth He proclaims will be confirmed by His Father, in an ultimate manner, by means of the Passion and Resurrection (vss. 28-29).

The Crucifixion looms large in these verses, as indicated by the references to His *hour* (vs. 20), His *going away* (vs. 21), and His *lifting up* (vs. 28). We are to follow closely what the Lord teaches here to discern the role of the Crucifixion in God’s plan of salvation.

First, the Lord Jesus asserts that His Passion is a state, place, or condition into which He is going, and where the Jewish leaders cannot go (vss. 21-22). This declaration provides a context in which we may understand the Lord’s claim, “I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world” (vs. 23).

Christ’s declarations constitute an affirmation of His divinity (“I am from above”). They also contain a logical conclusion derived from His initial declaration that the Passion is uniquely an action of God (“Where I go you cannot come” – vs. 22). Only God can effect atonement for the sins of the world. First and foremost, the Cross is a saving action of God, and not a work to which men contribute anything creative (Ps 48:7-8).

The second assertion is that failure to believe in Christ Jesus consigns us to die in our sins (vss. 21, 24). The Church likewise proclaims this life-giving message: “We preach Christ crucified . . . the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:23-24). We are dependent on God for salvation, which impels us to baptize and make disciples of all nations (cf. Mt. 28:19), initiating mankind into the Lord’s saving mystery.

Christ’s third assertion affirms the truth of His message of salvation through the Cross. The Lord says, “I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things” (vs. 28). The message comes from God and is not of human agency.

Our Lord knows perfectly well that this revelation does not register with His opponents; indeed, it still does not make sense to many who read and hear it. The proof of His message is yet to be realized through the Passion and Resurrection: “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He” (vs. 28). Ultimately, however, this message will only be understood by “those who are called, both Jews and Greeks” (1 Cor 1:24).

The Passion of our Savior and His death-defeating Resurrection together confirm the central place of the Cross in God’s plan of salvation. As the Apostle Paul declares, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them” (2 Cor 5:19). The Lord chooses the Cross as His means for saving us.

We adore Thy Cross, O Master, and Thy holy Resurrection we glorify. – Hymn of the Exaltation of the Cross

September 21 - Sunday after the Elevation of the Holy Cross
Mark 8:34-9:1

Following the Crucified: Mark 8:34-9:1, especially vs. 34: “When He had called the people to Himself, with His disciples also, He said to them, ‘Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.’” After the Divine Liturgy, the priest exits the royal doors and blesses the members of the congregation as they file forward to kiss his hand. Often, the priest extends a brass or wooden blessing cross for the faithful to kiss. As worshipers, we reverently commit ourselves to the Lord Jesus, asking for Him bless us to come after Him – to take up our cross, deny ourselves, and follow Christ.

In this exchange, the priest serves as a living icon of Christ. Iconically, it is our Lord who extends the cross and blesses us. Let us then commit ourselves to accept the conditions for following that He sets forth in the present reading.

The foremost question we must resolve is one of desire (vss. 34-35). When we kiss the cross that Christ extends by the hand of His priest, we declare that our foremost desire is to follow Him. But let us ask ourselves if this truly our heart’s desire. Our criteria for determining whether or not this is so can be found in the three conditions that the Lord stipulates in these verses: self-denial, taking up our cross, and following the Lord.

Our first decision is to deny our self (vs. 34). What, exactly, constitutes the *self* that the Lord asks us to deny? At first He speaks in terms of our *life* (vs. 35), and then a little later in terms of our *soul* (vss. 36-37).

The word being translated – *psyche* – is the same in both places, however. Elsewhere in the New Testament, *psyche* is also rendered as “self,” according to some translations (Lk 12:19 NAB). We may thus conclude that “self-denial” entails surrendering control of our entire inward and outward life to God.

At an inward level, Christ is refers to surrendering the soul: our rational faculties, emotions, will, and decision-making capacity. “Not as I will, but as You will” (Mt 26:39). Outwardly, *psyche* may also refer to our physical existence (Lk 12:20). We understand that the Lord does not limit our surrender to the sphere of our religious activity, or to matters of personal taste and preference, or even to obedience to the basic commandments of God. His meaning is clear: if we truly desire to come after Jesus Christ (Mk 8:34), then we are to hand over control of our entire life – inward and outward, without qualification – to His guidance, come what may.

It is no accident that our Lord next mentions “taking up one’s cross” (vs. 34). Self-denial for the sake of Christ is a mindset in which we strive to respond to His directives, rather than to our own desires. It involves a certain kind of death, both psychic and behavioral.

The cost of this self-denial is a constant crucifixion of our desire for earthly gain, esteem, personal profit, independence, and pleasure. Such an attitude runs entirely counter to the self-realization fostered by our contemporary culture.

Indeed, Saint Paul describes the bewilderment associated with taking up the cross: “For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do” (Rom 7:15). How often do we willingly give up control over our lives? The soul fights to the death, yet our surrender is worth the loss (Mk 8:35; Phil 3:8).

Lastly comes the concept of following, which is the Lord Jesus’ way of calling us to life-long denial. We die to self one step at a time, with Christ leading us. If we refuse His lead, we rely on our own strength instead and inevitably fail. However, if we seek and apply His will to every decision before us, relying solely on His strength, we “will not taste death till [we] see the kingdom of God present with power” (Mk 9:1).

Keep us ever as warriors invincible, and make us all victors even unto the end. – Chrismation Prayer

September 22 - Monday of the Eighteenth Week after Pentecost
Luke 3:19-22

The Lord's Baptism: Luke 3:19-22, especially vs. 21: *"When all the people were baptized, it came to pass that Jesus also was baptized. . . ."* The verses of the Orthodox baptismal service are closely connected with the Lord Jesus' baptism: "For Thou, O our God, hath revealed Thyself upon earth, and dwelt among men. Thou didst hallow the streams of Jordan, sending down upon them from heaven Thy Holy Spirit."

According to Saint Luke, Jesus is baptized during the time of Saint John the Forerunner's ministry, "when all the people were baptized" (vs. 21). Christ received baptism in water, just as each of us is brought to the font. Altogether, Saint Luke's account connects the Lord's baptism with ours in five ways: presentation, challenge, prayer, the Holy Spirit, and the affirmation of sonship.

The baptismal service begins with candidate being presented to the Church by his sponsor(s). During this reception, the candidate remains passive. The priest lays a hand upon him and prays for him to find refuge in God's name and for his growth in faith, hope, and love.

The exorcism that follows seeks to "prove him and search him, and root out of him every operation of the devil." The priest breathes on the candidate's mouth, brow, and chest "to expel from him every evil and impure spirit which hideth and maketh its lair in his heart."

Christ, of course, presents Himself directly to the Forerunner for baptism. Although He is not exorcised, He goes forth immediately afterwards to battle Satan. After the exorcism, the priest challenges the candidate to renounce Satan "and all his works and all his service and all his pride," and commands him to spit on the devil.

He then asks the candidate if he has united himself to Christ and believes in Him as King and God. He requires the candidate to confirm his faith by reciting the Nicene Creed. When he charges him to bow down before the Lord, the candidate responds.

The Forerunner similarly challenges the people gathered at the Jordan River, "preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (vs. 3). He calls on them to "bear fruits worthy of repentance" (vs. 8). These exhortations are bold enough to incur the anger of Herod Antipas, for he rebukes the tetrarch "for all the evils which Herod had done" (vs. 19).

Eventually, Herod arrests Saint John for publicly criticizing him (vs. 20). The Lord Jesus affirms John's public challenges by being baptized by him in the Jordan (vs. 21).

Baptism calls for intense prayer at each stage of the rite: first during the presentation, exorcism, and examination of the candidate, then during the anointings that follow, and finally during the actual immersion and chrismation of the candidate. Note the evangelist's mention of the fact that when Jesus "was baptized . . . He prayed" (vs. 21). The Lord continually sustains His relationship with the Father.

During the mystery of baptism, the Church prays for the candidate to be filled with the Holy Spirit. These prayers are offered at the conclusion of the examination, before the anointing of the water, and most especially during the administering of "the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit" in chrismation. Likewise, "the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove" upon the Lord (vs. 22), empowering Him for the ministry to follow.

The baptismal candidate is reminded that he is now "no more a child of the body, but a child of [God's] kingdom" – a child of the light, an heir of the heavenly kingdom. At the Jordan, following His baptism, the Lord hears the Father's words, "You are My beloved Son" (vs. 22).

O Thou who didst receive baptism in the Jordan for our salvation, Christ our God, have mercy upon us and save us, forasmuch as Thou art good and loveth mankind. – Baptismal Prayer

September 23 - Tuesday of the Eighteenth Week after Pentecost
Luke 3:23-4:1

A Proclamation: Luke 3:23-4:1, especially vs. 4:1: *“Then Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. . . .”* This passage contains a version of the Lord Jesus’ genealogy. Of these verses, Saint John Chrysostom notes “how many difficulties [are] raised one after the other. First, why the genealogy of Joseph is traced, who was not the father of Christ . . . while the forefathers of Mary, who bare Him, are not known, for the Virgin’s genealogy is not traced.”

When the golden-mouthed orator compares the ancestral lists offered by Luke and Matthew, he further wonders “why Luke has made mention of other names, and not only not all of them the same, but also many more of them, while Matthew has both fewer and different ones, though he too has ended with Joseph, as does Luke” (“First Homily on Saint Matthew’s Gospel,” *NPNF* First Series, vol. 10, p. 6).

Let us bear in mind that the Gospels are proclamations, first and foremost, of the good news concerning our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ. Saint John Chrysostom affirms this purpose, advising us: “Hearing these things, arise, and surmise nothing low: but even because of this thing most of all should you marvel, that being Son of the unoriginate God, and His true Son, He suffered Himself also to be called Son of David, so He might make thee Son of God” (p. 7).

What good news do we find in this portion of Saint Luke’s Gospel? First, we learn the Lord’s age, confirming Him to be a young man in His prime (vs. 23). Others who came to prominence before Jesus were also thirty years old when they emerged onto the public stage: Jacob’s son Joseph was thirty when he became the administrator of the Egyptian Pharaoh (Gn 41:41-46), as was King David when his reign began (2 Kgs 5:4) and the Prophet Ezekiel when he received his first vision (Ezk 1:1).

The evangelist also reaffirms the virgin birth of Christ (see Lk 1:26-38), noting that the Lord was raised in the household of Joseph even though He was not, “as was supposed,” his son (vs. 3:23). He traces Christ’s family lineage through His adoptive father, Joseph, all the way back to Adam (named in the list as “the son of God”). By this literary device, Saint Luke reminds us of to the mystery of the Incarnation, uniting the Lord Jesus simultaneously to the entire human race and to God (vs. 38).

Saint Luke also connects the Lord to King David and the Patriarch Abraham. In this way he identifies the Lord Jesus as the Davidic Messiah and the heir promised to Abraham (Gal 3:16). The evangelist reinforces this point by arranging the list of 77 names into eleven groups of seven each. Many significant names appear at either the beginning or end of these seven sub-sets: Jesus, Zerubbabel, Salathiel, David, Judah, Isaac, Abraham, Methuselah, Enoch, and Adam.

Ultimately, the Lord’s divine sonship is not mediated through His ancestors, whether they be adoptive or putative. If we refer back to the verses preceding this passage, we hear God declaring Jesus to be His “beloved Son” (Lk 3:22).

The Lord, of course, surpasses every man whose name is found in a genealogy. Saint Luke concludes his list by reminding us of Jesus’ Spirit-filled nature, recalling that earlier theophany when He was first revealed as the Son of God. The proclamation in the genealogy ends (vs. 4:1) as it begins (vss. 3:22)!

Let us celebrate the memory of the revered forefathers, extolling them and praising Christ who magnified them among all nations, the Lord who doeth strange wonders. – Sunday of the Holy Forefathers

September 24 - Wednesday of the Eighteenth Week after Pentecost
Luke 4:1-15

The Tempting of the Lord Jesus: *Luke 4:1-15, especially vs. 3:* “*And the devil said to Him, ‘If You are the Son of God. . . .’*” Inevitably, the pain that follows sin is greater than the pain of struggling against temptation. Likewise, the pain caused by our sinful acts exceeds the momentary pain of refusing to indulge in the pleasures of the moment. If we reflect on our own experience with sin, we may confirm these truths for ourselves. We remember the sting of shame, guilt, confusion, and anguish, and the loss of our peace, purity, and clarity. The teeth of a “roaring lion” (1 Pt 5:8) corrupt even our thoughts when we allow the enemy to feed on us. Lord have mercy!

Repeated indulgence may sear and deaden our healthy pangs of conscience (1 Tim 4:2), and yet, deep in the recesses of our hearts, the painful memories of sin remain. God in His mercy allows this after-pain of sin to encourage us not to do wrong again. Why, we may wonder, does He allow us to be tempted in the first place, since He knows our attraction to sin? Why does our loving God allow this deadly plague to trouble us?

Let us consider the temptations experienced by the Lord Jesus during his earthly life, as emerges from the obscurity of village life in Nazareth to begin the work of our salvation. First, He comes to Saint John the Forerunner seeking baptism (Lk 3:21-22). At the Jordan, a great theophany occurs: God the Holy Trinity fully reveals Himself to the world. The Father declares His love for His only-begotten Son, and the Holy Spirit confirms the truth of His word.

This message does not escape Satan’s notice, for as soon as the Father expresses love for Jesus the enemy becomes active. From the Lord’s struggles in the wilderness, we learn that the venom of the enemy is aimed directly at those who delight in God. God allows us to become the devil’s special target, we might say, in the same way in which He gave His Son to the world (Jn 3:16). The members of the Church of Christ are hated by the evil one because we are “the apple of [God’s] eye” (Zec 2:12). When temptations come, let us remember that they provide evidence of God’s love.

Experience also teaches us that we are never victims who are forced to succumb to the lure of temptation. The Prophet David knows this: “Even there shall Thy hand guide me, and Thy right hand shall hold me. . . . Thou hast holpen me from my mother’s womb” (Ps 138:9, 12). Because we are made in God’s image, we have the God-given capacity to transcend ourselves – to choose. God equips us to make choices. Our ability to make decisions underlies every temptation, but it has a greater and positive role for our gaining the growth that is in Christ.

The freedom to choose is the quintessential capacity for love. By making us in His image, God extends our ability to enter into loving relationships with Him and with other free beings. When we are tempted, we recall this ineffable truth of our human nature. Choice is always ours – and through choice we find the opportunity to return God’s love, even when we sin.

God in Christ empowers us to return His love through obedience. He extends the gift of Holy Scripture to us as a weapon against temptation. Note how the Lord Himself uses the written word of God to defeat Satan (Lk 4:4, 8, 12)!

Like every member of the fallen race of Adam, we were “in bondage under the elements of the world” (Gal 4:3). Now, however, we are adopted sons, able to stand fast “in the liberty by which Christ has made us free” (vs. 5:1). Let us remember the precision and power of God’s living word, using it to address and defeat temptation when it arises!

O good One, lighten with Thy divine light those who come to Thee early and eagerly that they may know Thee, O Word of God, who callest us from the darkness of iniquities.

September 25 – Thursday of the Eighteenth Week after Pentecost
Luke 4:16-22

Salvation Announced: Luke 4:16-22, especially vss. 18-19: “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me / Because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; / He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, / To proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, / To set at liberty those who are oppressed; / To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.*” In today’s Gospel passage, Saint Luke describes Jesus’ visit to His home synagogue at Nazareth during the early days of His ministry. During the service, Jesus reads from Scripture “as His custom was” (vs. 16). The Lord uses this occasion to announce the new ministry He is undertaking.

When our Lord reads Isaiah 61:1-2, He declares its prophecy fulfilled: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, / Because He has anointed Me” (vs. 18). In other words, salvation has arrived, the year of the Lord’s favor (vs. 19). This fulfillment includes the preaching of good news to the destitute. This “good news” defines the nature of the salvation Christ brings to the world: a deliverance achieved in and through His Person, and extended to the entire world through the Church.

The salvation that He proclaims is good news to the poor. He is talking to the “poor in spirit,” to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs (Mt 5:3). Impoverished spiritually, disenfranchised from grace, they have nothing before God (see Ps 87:1). They know their need of divine grace, for their souls are devoid of God.

The Lord proclaims that these spiritually empty people are true vessels ready to be filled with the Spirit. They stand in contrast to those who remain self-satisfied and full of themselves. God enriches the destitute in heart with untold treasures, while those who love this world and its passing goods are likely to miss God’s greater gifts – their souls are replete with worldly treasure. Who receives the “pearl of great price” (Mt 13:46)? The good news that the Lord announces is especially for the poor (Lk 4:18).

Salvation is likewise God’s gift to the brokenhearted (see Mt 5:4): those who weep and mourn for their sins, crying out, “Lord, have mercy on me a sinner.” Such people know they have failed God (Ps 50:5). To all who repent, Christ promises that He will wipe away every tear. He will cleanse impurity and whatever else separates us from God.

The Lord Jesus comes “to give those who mourn in Zion glory instead of ashes, the oil of gladness to those who mourn; the garment of glory instead of a spirit of indifference. They shall be called generations of righteousness, the planting of the Lord for glory” (Is 61:3). Our Salvation speaks to the brokenhearted!

Salvation is the proclamation of liberty to every captive of sin and death. He who speaks is the author of life, who has already trampled down death by death. The grave does not hold Him; He frees all who are in the tombs. Who among us is not bound to death – to its finality and cruelty? The One whom death cannot hold sets us free!

Salvation is the restoration of sight. He who speaks is the Light of the world. He also is the Way, and we are groping to find our way to Him. The eye that the Lord Jesus heals is the sightless eye of our hearts and souls. He restores us by opening the eyes of our spirits. To all who know that they are in darkness, He gives the uncreated light of eternity.

In my sorrow I cried unto Thee, O Lord, the God of my salvation, and Thou hast heard me, O Christ, Creator who didst separate the light from primeval darkness that Thy works might praise Thee in the light: guide Thou our feet in the light. – Feast of the Transfiguration

September 26 - Friday of the Eighteenth Week after Pentecost
Luke 4:22-30

Pious Resistance: Luke 4:22-30, especially vs. 23: *“You will surely say this proverb to Me, ‘Physician, heal Yourself! Whatever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in Your country.’”* When the Lord Jesus visits his hometown of Nazareth (vss. 4:16-30), He proclaims a salvation that requires our total repentance: a profound admission of personal failure, a sustained inward cleansing, and a conviction that God alone can deliver us eternally. The salvation of our Lord is a gift wondrous beyond words, but it comes at a high cost.

We should not be surprised, then, that the Lord’s neighbors seem guarded, even angry, when they hear Jesus’ message. Nazareth appears to be a pious community; its residents attend services at the synagogue regularly. Their resistance to the Lord Jesus’ message deserves our close attention lest we, too, use piety as an excuse to resist life-saving change. Indeed, this passage contains a solemn warning, for the people of Nazareth even try to murder the Lord.

Let us take note that all the people – at least in the beginning – “bore witness to Him, and marveled at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth” (vs. 22). The vivid poetic imagery of Isaiah’s prophecy soothes the casual listener with the beauty of God’s promised blessings. If we read them in detachment, such words might seem to provide us with false comfort and confidence.

After the reading, the people of Nazareth wait to see how Jesus will interpret the prophet’s words. He immediately declares Isaiah’s message to be fulfilled by Him, through the ministry He is conducting throughout Galilee (vs. 14). This claim elicits the first sign of resistance, as they ask each other, “Is this not Joseph’s son?” (vs. 22). Familiarity often clouds our spiritual awareness. It leads to false expectations and assumptions that block the hearing of those closest to us.

The pious people in Nazareth are His neighbors and friends – the Lord’s own extended family. They know Him as Jesus, Joseph’s boy, but fail to recognize Him as God Incarnate. The prophetic words cease to seem mellifluous when Jesus applies them to Himself!

Similarly, the familiar words and music of the Divine Liturgy sound beautiful to the ear, vivid and moving. And yet we must watch for signs of resistance within ourselves to these God-given words, for they demand rigorous action on the part of those who would heed their message.

The Lord Jesus “knew what was in man” (Jn 2:25). He realizes the people of Nazareth expect to see the miracles reported from Capernaum, but He also knows that prophets never receive a warm reception from those who know them intimately (Lk 4:23-24).

Likewise, we find it difficult to admit our spiritual poverty, receive illumination, or seek healing from an acquaintance known to us from childhood. The implicit demand, plainly set forth in the message of the Lord Jesus, requires our full surrender and humility. We may find it easier to push away this demand and trust instead in our own piety.

Let us take care never to use our religious devotion as a way to hide from God! Confronted with the Gospel’s demands, we may gradually shift from faith in God to faith in mere devotional practices. In the two examples cited by our Lord – Elijah (vss. 25-26) and Elisha (vs. 27) – the Lord exposes the fallacy of relying on our association with God’s people as a guarantee of salvation, for the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian are both Gentiles.

The Lord wishes to tear us away from the comfort of a nominal relationship with Him. Salvation from Christ is a great mercy, but it requires our complete submission.

Thou art the Christ who came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. – Pre-communion Prayer

September 27 – Saturday of the Eighteenth Week after Pentecost
Luke 4:31-36

Anticipating the Lord's Ministry: Luke 4:31-36, especially vs. 32: *"And they were astonished at His teaching. . . ."* In the Gospels we find strong reactions to Christ and His teachings. Take a few examples from Saint Luke: some people are "filled with wrath" (vs. 28), "fear" (vs. 5:26), or "rage" (vs. 6:11), while others are amazed, "tried to keep Him from leaving them" (vs. 4:42), and even "forsook all and followed Him" (vs. 5:11).

Following a Sunday Church service, a reporter asked Calvin Coolidge, "How was the service this morning, Mister President?" The laconic Cal replied, "The usual." "Would you share with us the sermon topic?" "Sin." "What did the preacher say about it, sir?" "He was against it."

By contrast, the people in Saint Luke's account are astonished and amazed when they encounter the Lord Jesus. They are left talking "among themselves" (vs. 36). What about our own reaction to the Lord's teaching? When we attend the Divine Liturgy, do we expect "the usual," like President Coolidge, or do we anticipate being amazed and talking eagerly after the service with our friends?

When we encounter the Lord, we should expect to be amazed; we will need to talk to others about what we experience. The same Lord Jesus who "was teaching them on the Sabbaths" (vs. 31) presides over the liturgy every Lord's Day. Let us take care not to imitate Cal Coolidge in our reaction to His presence! We are not going to find "the usual" at liturgy if we are attentive.

When the Litany of Peace is offered, we pray "for this holy house, and for those who with faith, reverence, and fear of God enter therein." Let us look to our hearts, for Christ is among us, and ever shall be! We are to fight against distraction, boredom, and the memory of worldly things. Our heart should say, "I have loved the beauty of Thy house, and the place where Thy glory dwelleth" (Ps 25:7), for unless we are present and engaged "with faith, reverence, and fear of God" the prayers of the Church are of no benefit to us.

Twice, in the English translation of today's Gospel passage, we find the expression "with authority" (Lk 4:32, 36) – *en exousia* in the original Greek. The phrase refers to our Lord Jesus' teaching. Inherent in every liturgy is this same power and authority, for the words of the liturgy reveal the same Lord and message found in the Gospels. Indeed, most liturgical phrases are drawn directly from the words of Holy Scripture. Christ is the authority for both.

Father Constantine Nasr's useful study, *The Bible in the Liturgy*, reveals how we encounter the truth of Holy Scripture in the Divine Liturgy, if we are willing to pay attention to the dialogue between the two. We find the Lord among us, with his astonishing and authoritative power, whether we are reading the Bible or attending the liturgy. We desperately need the Wisdom of God to survive this world's chatter!

Finally, let us remember that He comes among us to give us His own flesh as food, passing through all our body parts and taking hold of the reins of our hearts so that we may "in no wise be the dwelling place of sin." As of old, He "commands the unclean spirits, and they come out" (vs. 36). By His presence our souls are cleansed, our thoughts hallowed, and our "five senses enlightened as one." He heals us so that "every evil deed and every passion may flee as from fire" (post-communion prayers). On the Lord's Day, this astonishing Christ our God is present. Expect to meet the Lord!

O Lord, save Thy people and bless Thine inheritance; preserve the fullness of Thy Church; sanctify those who love the beauty of Thy house and forsake us not who hope in Thee! – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

September 28 – Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 5:1-11

Holy Fear: Luke 5:1-11, especially vs. 10: “*And Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men.’*” When Simon Peter falls down at the Lord Jesus’ knees and begs Him to depart from him (vs. 8), Christ our God, who knows the hearts of men, discerns holy fear in the Galilean fisherman. The Lord hastens to reassure Simon Peter, even as he is engulfed in dread, that he will “catch men” thereafter (vs. 10).

The word *catch*, in the original Greek, conveys the sense of “taking or capturing alive,” which is exactly what the Lord Jesus does with Simon Peter by drawing him to Himself. In a series of events spread over a span of days or weeks, the Lord Jesus prepares Simon Peter to be “caught.”

Long before the miracle at the Lake of Gennesaret, downstream along the Jordan River, Simon Peter’s brother introduces him to Jesus. Andrew suggests to him that Jesus may well be the Christ – the Messiah (Jn 1:40-42). Later, the Lord Jesus teaches for several weeks in the synagogue at Capernaum (Lk 4:31), near the town where Simon Peter and Andrew live and work. The Lord heals “a man who had a spirit of an unclean demon” (vs. 33), then goes to Simon Peter’s home and heals his mother-in-law (vss. 38-39). Other healings follow (vss. 40-41).

As word about Jesus spreads all over “the surrounding region” (vs. 4:37), the crowds want “to hear the word of God” from Him (vs. 5:1). Given the flurry of interest in the Lord and the large crowds coming to hear Jesus of Nazareth, it seems natural for Simon Peter to allow Him to use his boat as a platform for teaching.

Let us take careful note of how holy fear develops in Simon Peter. It begins as a natural, religious attraction. Jesus teaches with unusual authority about religious matters in the synagogues of Simon Peter’s neighborhood (vs. 4:36). He heals a member of Simon Peter’s own family in his home (vs. 39).

Now, from a practical standpoint, Simon Peter perceives Jesus’ difficulties in making Himself heard by the crowd pressing around Him. He aids Him by putting “out a little from the land” so that the Lord can sit and teach the multitudes from his boat (vs. 5:3).

What began as attraction, respect, and concern turns unexpectedly into awe, plunging Simon Peter into holy fear. First comes the night of unsuccessful fishing (vs. 5). The Teacher directs Simon Peter and his companions to “launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch” (vs. 4) in the middle of the day, when the fishing is poor.

Jesus is asking this professional fisherman for a significant measure of trust – trust that runs contrary to his life experience. And yet, at the Lord’s word, he “let down the net” (vs. 5) and “caught a great number of fish” (vs. 6).

The size of the catch threatens to rupture the net, to the point that Peter and his crew call “to their partners in the other boat to come and help them” (vs. 7). Attraction leads Peter to trust Jesus, but now this turn of events throws him into a crisis both physical – as the boats “began to sink” (vs. 7) – and spiritual in nature.

Holy fear floods Simon Peter’s soul. He recognizes the gulf between himself, a sinful man, and the all-holy God. The godly teacher, Jesus, can bring about the improbable with a mere word.

“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb 10:31). Simon Peter prostrates himself in dread, but this is a saving fear. Look at the result: Simon Peter and the others “forsook all and followed” Jesus (Lk 5:11). When God breaks through the ordinary to confront us, holy fear is our natural and life-changing response.

As the fishermen toiled at their nets, O Jesus our Almighty God, Thou didst draw them and us into a holy fear: following their example, may we also fish the world by Thy grace. – Orthros verse

September 29 - Monday of the Nineteenth Week after Pentecost
Luke 4:37-44

God the Uncircumscribed: Luke 4:37-44, especially vss. 42-43: *“And the crowd sought Him and came to Him, and tried to keep Him from leaving them; but He said to them, ‘I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also. . . .’”* We often attempt to manage God, defining Him by our own logic, creating Him to suit ourselves. In response to such attempts, God consistently replies, “My counsels are not as your counsels, neither are your ways My ways. . . . But as the heaven is distant from the earth, so is My way distant from your ways, and your thoughts from My mind” (Is 55:8-9).

Jesus Christ, as God Incarnate, knows all things; He pursues His will and defines His own times and ways among men. The Lord remains unlimited and uncircumscribed, even during the time He lived and moved among us. No creature controls God, nor can we place limits upon Him, for He sets the boundaries for us.

Notice how skillfully the Lord Jesus manages His visit to Simon Peter’s home. When He is asked to heal Simon Peter’s mother-in-law, it might appear that those extending the invitation are setting the agenda and controlling Christ’s visit. But do we actually believe that He does not know beforehand that she is ill with a high fever?

If we stand back, we can see how the Lord has framed many of the givens in this situation. Having taken on human flesh (Lk 1:38; 2:7), He prepares and nurtures a relationship with Simon Peter (Jn 1:42). He establishes His reputation as a healer (Lk 4:37). Now, at the present juncture, He accepts an invitation to visit Simon Peter’s home as his guest. Although He knows that Simon Peter’s mother-in-law is ill, He waits, allowing the family to make the “request of Him concerning her” (vs. 38).

The situation is no different today. Our Lord and God, out of His great love, approaches us in many different ways, setting and maintaining the limits of these encounters. He waits for us to call out in faith, even as He prepares the stage for our response. He leaves us free to act, indulging us without being over-indulgent. “Seek God,” advises the Prophet Isaiah, “and when you find Him, call upon Him when He draws near to you” (Is 55:6).

Next, we observe our Lord Jesus controlling the demons. “And He, rebuking them, did not allow them to speak, for they knew that He was the Christ” (Lk 4:41). Why does He not permit demons to identify Him openly? He never uses the powers of evil to awaken faith, love, and hope in us; He will not violate His own purity in order to win our love.

Unlike human propagandists, the Lord Jesus wins us by attraction rather than manipulation. He amply demonstrates His love for us. Our hymnography addresses Him as the “only Lover of mankind.” God chooses His grounds and means for friendship with us. He will not brook demonic intervention, nor allow the unclean and uncommitted to use Him for very long. Nor will He endlessly tolerate men selling the Gospel for profit, as we see taking place on some radio and television broadcasts.

In short, God cannot be controlled by us. “The crowd sought Him and came to Him, and tried to keep Him from leaving them” (vs. 42). And what happens? They do not succeed. Kindly, but firmly, stating His reasons, He departs from them to preach “in the synagogues of Galilee” (vs. 44).

It is instructive that the Lord encourages us “to call upon Him” (Is 55:6). He clearly encourages us to keep beseeching Him with our prayers and needs (Lk 18:3-8), but He refuses to be kept or controlled.

Fulfill now, O Lord, the petitions of Thy servants as may be most expedient for us, granting us in this world the knowledge of Thy truth, and in the world to come, life everlasting. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

September 30 – Tuesday of the Nineteenth Week after Pentecost
Luke 5:12-16

God the Approachable: Luke 5:12-16, especially vs. 12: “Behold, a man who was full of leprosy saw Jesus; and he fell on his face and implored Him saying, ‘Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.’” The plea of the leper in today’s Gospel awakens our own deep desire to seek God, to fall down before Him, and to ask for the blessing of cleansing. Note that the man takes three distinct steps as he approaches the Lord Jesus. First, he catches sight of Christ. Second, he falls down on his face, making a prostration before Him. Finally, bowed to the ground, the leper cries out and begs the Lord for healing.

We must first see Christ before we can approach Him. If we are to act like the man with leprosy, it requires a spiritual sight greater than our physical vision. God has revealed to us that we walk in serious moral and spiritual darkness if we do not have the light of Christ: “While they waited for light, darkness came upon them; and while they waited for the dawn, they walked in darkness. They groped around for a wall like blind men. . . . They shall fall at midday as though it were midnight” (Is 59:9-10).

Spiritual darkness descends on us if we turn away from Christ, the Light of the world, and follow instead our darkened human reasoning and the bidding of our passions (Jn 8:12; Rom 1:21). The leper not only falls down before the Lord out of genuine need, but also because of inner illumination. No doubt he was stirred by the reports circulating in Galilee concerning the Lord, and thus his inward eye is able to see more than an individual named Jesus.

In the exorcism that precedes baptism, the priest prays to God on behalf of the candidate: “Open the eyes of his understanding, that the light of Thy Gospel may shine brightly in him.” The leper perceives God Incarnate in Jesus. This “sight” impels him to beg for healing (“a man who was full of leprosy saw Jesus” – vs. 12).

We, too, are encouraged to behold the Lord so that we may approach Him. Let us pray for God’s gift of illumination that we may see the Lord, the Good News of life, and address Him with our needs.

As soon as the leper sees, he falls on his face. Once we see the Lord, such an act of prostration is natural. God designed us to worship Him. To bow before the Lord our God is right, healthy, and a genuine sign that the healing of our heart has begun. Even before we think of approaching God, He notices our disease, sin, sickness and awakens in us the desire to fall before Him. “O come, let us worship and fall down before Christ!”

In the first century, rigorous barriers were maintained between ordinary human society and those suffering from leprosy (Lv 13:45-46). Our compassionate Lord, however, “put out His hand and touched him” (Lk 5:13). God ever draws us to Himself, whether our leprosy is physical, social, moral, or spiritual. When we catch sight of Christ, He illumines the rot and uncleanness inside us, and we know that we are all lepers before our all-holy Lord.

During the Divine Liturgy, we see acts of reverence modeled for us by the clergy serving in the altar. The altar servers bow and humble themselves around the Throne and kiss the priest’s hand, because he function as a living icon of Christ among us.

Last of all, the leper cries out to God. His plea is echoed in the psalms we recite at Orthros. They encourage us to approach our compassionate God, fall down before Him, and ask Him to heal our pain.

I cried unto the Lord with my voice (Ps 3:4). O Lord, before Thee is all my desire, and my groaning is not hid from Thee (Ps. 37:9). Quickly hear me, O Lord; my spirit hath fainted away. . . . Cause me to hear Thy mercy in the morning (Ps 142:7, 9).