

December 1 – Monday of the Twenty-eighth Week after Pentecost
Luke 19:37-44

To Weep and To Laugh: Luke 19:37-44, especially vss. 37, 41: *“Then, as He was now drawing near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it. . . .”* What a contrast between the reaction of the Lord Jesus and that of His disciples! They rejoice with overflowing praise, for they are entering the holy city of Jerusalem with One whom they believe to be the Messiah. And yet Jesus weeps. How far do the ways of the infinite God lie beyond us, even when we receive the privilege of walking in close company with Him!

In his gospel, Saint Luke guides us ever deeper into the mystery of Christ (Eph 3:4), illuminating the ways of God as revealed by Light Himself. The evangelist starts with the Lord Jesus’ birth in the flesh “of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary” (Nicene Creed). He moves through the days of Christ’s earthly ministry, drawing steadily closer to the moment when the Savior knows the time has come to be received up – the moment when He must “steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem” (Lk 9:51). From that point forward Saint Luke focuses on the Lord Jesus’ predictions of His Passion, the mounting opposition against Him, and His solemn warnings concerning the cost of discipleship.

In this brief transition passage, Saint Luke initiates his account of the last days of the Lord Jesus’ Judean ministry. It is the season immediately prior to Christ’s arrest – the penultimate days in which God still shares the course of daily human life before embracing “that Passion which was for the salvation of the whole world, to free the inhabitants of the earth from the tyranny of the enemy, and abolish death, and destroy the sin of the world” (Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Luke*, Homily 130, p. 514). In Solomon’s words, it is both “a time to weep and a time to laugh” (Ecc 3:4).

By now the disciples have seen Jesus heal incurable diseases, overcome demons, feed crowds, and subdue natural forces. Quite naturally they “began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice” (vs. 37) as they witness His coming into Jerusalem. Having observed His “mighty works” (vs. 37) first hand, they possess clear, tangible evidence that Jesus is the long-awaited “King who comes on the name of the Lord” (vs. 38) and will, in the popular view of the day, inaugurate God’s kingdom.

God’s people had endured many difficulties since the days of King David, with bad years far outnumbering the good. Now, with the nation’s social, political, and economic life under Roman control, the nation cries out for God to empower a new leader who can usher in genuine freedom and independence. The people are in constant expectation: “O my Strength, I will keep watch for Thee, for Thou, O God, art my helper” (Ps 58:9). All eyes naturally focus on Jesus, for He possesses divine power and abundant spiritual resources. In Him there is reason for joy and praise and a time of laughter.

Ironically, as the Lord draws near the city, He “wept over it” (Lk 19:41). He sees beyond the surface issues of politics and economics, penetrating into matters of heart and soul “that make for your peace” (vs. 42). He sees how sin blinds people, keeping truth “hidden from your eyes” (vs. 42).

He understands that the Romans and the Herods are only symptoms of a deeper problem: the people’s “foolish hearts were darkened” (Rom 1:21). God’s people refuse to repent and cleanse their hearts, even though their city is about to be destroyed (Lk 19:43-44). In their wrath, they will crucify Him. They will fight the Romans and lose. Soon, it will be a time to weep.

O Thou who are inapprehensible, who of Thine own compassion didst bear all things, saving all from the curse, O long-suffering Lord, glory to Thee. – Vespers for Great and Holy Friday

December 2– Tuesday of the Twenty-eighth Week after Pentecost
Luke 19:45-48

Cleanse Thy Church: Luke 19:45-48, especially vs. 46: “*It is written, ‘My house is a house of prayer,’ but you have made it a den of thieves.*” The Apostle Paul reminds us that we, who are the Church, are also “the temple of the living God. As God has said: ‘I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My People’” (2 Cor 6:16; Lv 26:12; Ez 37:27).

The admonition contained in this portion of Saint Luke’s gospel is directed at our own church communities, for the identical judgment will be levied against us if we defame God’s temple. History affirms the potential for such tragedy. Often, in order to advance the material prosperity of the institutional Church, Christian communities reject the primary task of God’s people – to be a *house of prayer*.

The drive for material success can subtly, at times even blatantly, reduce Christ to an inconvenience that needs reinterpretation. “The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people [who] sought to destroy [Jesus]” (Lk 19:47) clearly know that the God we meet through prayer can, and will, disrupt our worldly goals.

Since God has *chosen* us as *precious* “living stones . . . being built up a spiritual house” (1 Pt 2:4-5), it is incumbent on us to protect the holy communities and jurisdictions of God’s Church. Let us never allow some aspect of church life – be it a committee, a parish, a diocese, or whatever – to be tragically turned into a materialistic program or an institution with earthly, measurable goals. Prayerful reflection on this portion of Luke’s gospel reveals how the Lord Jesus would preserve us from such a pitfall.

First, we are to purify our hearts so that our worship services truly are love feasts of the Kingdom of God. Only thus do we avoid becoming part of that *den of thieves* (Lk 19:46). Saint John Chrysostom advises us to “love . . . then let us plant in our own souls, that we may stand with all the saints. For they all pleased God by their love for their neighbor” (Homily 4 on First Thessalonians, *NPNF First Series*, vol. 13, p. 342).

If we allow Christ’s love to transform us, our Eucharistic gatherings will see us “standing in the presence of Christ, and like Moses before God . . . covered with His glory” (Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, p. 30). Then we will joyfully exclaim, “Christ is among us: He is and He shall ever be!” Let there never be a secret thought in our hearts that would shut out or effectively destroy the words of the Lord (cf. vs. 47).

The second way to keep the thieves of materialism from turning the living Temple of God into a profitable program or a successful earthly institution is “for all the people [to be] very attentive to hear [Christ our God]” (vs. 48). It is no accident that we are often called to “be attentive” during the Divine Liturgy. According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa, the human mind, “as long as its current spreads itself in all directions over the pleasures of the sense, has no power that is worth the naming of making its way toward the Real Good; but once call it back and collect it upon itself, so that it may begin to move without scattering and wandering toward the activity which is congenital and natural to it, it will find no obstacle in mounting to higher things, and in grasping realities” (“On Virginity” 7, *NPNF Second Series*, vol. 5, p. 352).

Finally, lest we fall into delusion as a den for thieves, let us pray that Christ our God will come and *drive out* (vs. 45) every inclination to embrace the world’s offers of quick success and growth through promotional programs. Rather, let us sing: “Come let us worship and fall down before Christ. O Son of God, who art risen from the dead, save us who sing unto Thee!” (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom).

O Lord, cleanse us by Thy cords of light and truth, driving out all base loves and making the glories of the blameless life and a worship in spirit and in truth to shine forth in us. – Based on Saint Cyril of Alexandria’s Homily 132 on Luke

December 3 – Wednesday of the Twenty-eighth Week after Pentecost
Luke 20:1-8

Rights vs. Repentance: Luke 20:1-8, especially vss. 5-6: “*And they reasoned among themselves, saying, ‘If we say, “From heaven,” He will say, “Why then did you not believe him?” But if we say, “From men,” all the people will stone us, for they are persuaded that John was a prophet.’*” The Evangelist Mark concisely records two imperatives given to us by the Lord Jesus: “Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:15). This call arouses the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders, who ask: “By what authority are You doing these things? Or who is he who gave You this authority?” (Lk 20:2).

These leaders know very well that *they* are the authorities, for they belong to the ruling council (Nm 11:16-17). Now, they see a Galilean peasant speaking on God’s behalf in the Temple (Lk 19:47), apparently on His own authority.

The Lord does not attempt to convince these leaders of His divine anointing as Messiah, which would provide grounds for an authority beyond question. Rather, He returns to His basic message of repentance and obedience to the Gospel by posing a question to His interrogators: “The baptism of John – was it from heaven or from men?” (vs. 20:4).

Saint John called all men to repent, then to confirm their repentance by the cleansing of baptism. The Lord Jesus’ question – was John’s authority from God, from himself, or from some other human authority? – can only be answered within the heart, for the response will reveal either our openness or our resistance to repentance.

Christ seeks to open the hearts of His interrogators (and all of us) to the repentance preached by Saint John and Himself. God’s appointed leaders have the opportunity to acknowledge the Baptist as a prophet and heed his call to repent, but they balk at even this elementary step toward salvation. Because they will not repent, neither can they hear Christ’s gospel nor believe in Him.

Instead, the authorities create a false polarization between rights and repentance. Woe to us if we become so preoccupied with rights and self-esteem that we are not open to God’s call to “repent and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:15)! The call to repent is the call to life, for it comes from Life Himself. There is no conflict in calling others to repent so long as the appeal originates with God, who speaks through John and dwells incarnate in the Lord Jesus.

The reasoning of the authorities exposes their uncertainty concerning John (Lk 20:5-6) and their unwillingness to believe that he spoke for God. If they cannot acknowledge John’s call as valid, how can they answer Jesus?

Each of us, however, must answer the Lord’s question. Saint Peter of Damascus exhorts us to respond affirmatively, for “it is always possible to make a new start by means of repentance. ‘You fell,’ it is written, ‘now arise’ (see Prv 24:16). And if you fall again, then rise again, without despairing at all of your salvation, no matter what happens” (*Philokalia* vol. 3, p. 170). As long as we breathe air in this life we have the chance to renew our baptism into Christ through repentance, for our tears become the new cleansing waters.

Repentance remains an urgent concern for us, for without repentance no one can be saved. Do not delay, insists Saint Peter. “Repentance is the first healing medicine. The heart has to repent and come to its natural condition. If a life of sin has led it to an unnatural state, a life of repentance will bring it back to its right state, will give it life” (Vlachos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 177).

The Orthodox Christian life is aptly described as one of repentance. “To ascend spiritually, it is necessary first of all to free oneself from the weight of sin,” says Saint John of San Francisco. “It is taken from us through repentance, provided that we banish from ourselves all enmity and forgive” (Perekrestov, *Man of God*, p. 129).

Pardon and forgive our transgressions, O merciful Savior, and grant that we may complete the remaining time of our life in peace and repentance. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

December 4 – Great Martyr Barbara & Saint John of Damascus
Mark 5:24-34

Touching the Lord: Mark 5:24-34, especially vs. 27: “*When she heard about Jesus, she came behind Him in the crowd and touched His garment.*” We may be tempted to believe that this woman enjoys an advantage that we do not. “When she heard about Jesus,” she actually came up behind Him to touch His clothing. Is it possible that we, who know that Christ has ascended into heaven, can enjoy the same opportunity as this woman? Come, let us examine our situation.

We live in a culture that trusts primarily in what can be touched, measured, and weighed. Most people today would agree that we have no chance of being healed by touching the Lord’s garment, for He is not physically present among us.

Nevertheless, Orthodox Christians affirm that we, too, may take hold of Christ’s robe, just as those who lived while “the Lord Jesus went in and out among us” (Acts 1:21). Like the woman in today’s Gospel, however, we must place all our trust in this simple action. We must be willing to touch the “garments” of the Lord Jesus through the means He provides for us, and readily admit that we need His unique therapy.

The Church Fathers, like the Evangelist Mark, call our attention first to the woman’s fervent faith. “This woman had great faith,” asserts Blessed Theophylact, “for she thought she could receive benefit even from His garment. And so indeed she received healing” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Mark*, p. 46).

Her actions reveal a complete reliance on God, who cannot be seen with our mortal eyes, and yet who appears as a man she can see and touch. She sees God with her physical eyes, for He makes Himself available physically by walking in human flesh. At the same time, she sees the Lord with the eyes of her heart. It is this inner sight that encourages her to risk physical touching.

Faith increases the likelihood of our sensing the presence of God, given certain conditions. According to Saint Maximos the Confessor, “When the Word of God becomes bright and shining in us, and His face is dazzling as the sun, then also will His clothes be radiant, that is, the clear and distinct words of the Holy Scripture of the Gospels now no longer veiled” (*Selected Writings*, p. 50).

How do the declarations of the Gospels and their witness encourage us to reach out and touch the Lord? According to Theophylact, “he who touches Jesus is the one who does not crowd against Jesus, and who does not surround with turmoil the Word within himself . . . [for] those in tumult and turmoil do not touch Christ; they only throng Him” (p. 47).

Faith comes as the Lord reveals Himself within us. Then we dare to reach out and touch Him, for we believe that He will heal us, forgive us, and restore our true nature through His eternal therapy!

Our compassionate Lord understands that we need the tangible. He became incarnate to awaken us to the possibility of His physical presence in many tangible forms. After withdrawing His body to heaven, He sends the Holy Spirit into our hearts and into certain media we touch for healing: the baptismal waters, the oil of chrismation and holy unction, the icons, the words of Scripture, His very Body and Blood in the sacrament of holy communion.

All of these are quite tangible. They are the radiant clothes St. Maximos describes, always there for us to reach out, touch, and embrace. Who says we cannot touch Him?

Although we may approach Christ secretly via the means He offers us, He eventually calls upon us to confess Him openly. He may well require us, like the woman in the Gospel, to admit that we reached out, touched, and were healed. Such things happen!

As the earth is full of Thy mercy, O Master, do Thou heal me who touch Thy holy things. –
Service of Holy Unction

December 5 – Friday of the Twenty-eighth Week after Pentecost
Luke 20:19–26

War and Peace: Luke 20:19-26, especially vss. 19-20: *“And the chief priests and the scribes that very hour sought to lay hands on Him. . . . So they watched Him, and sent spies who pretended to be righteous, that they might seize on His words, in order to deliver Him to the power and the authority of the governor.”* Our great God and Savior Jesus Christ took on human flesh in order to free the inhabitants of the earth from mankind’s ancient enemy, abolish death, and destroy sin. Yet, ironically, His incarnation ignited a violent spiritual war. Let us reflect on that wondrous time when our Lord, the God of Peace, waged war against our spiritual enemy and, through His Cross and Passion, established peace for us.

Who is the enemy in today’s lesson? At first glance it appears to be the chief priests, the scribes, and their spies (vss. 19-20). While the Lord is still in Galilee the scribes and Pharisees “begin to assail Him vehemently,” cross-examining Him and “lying in wait for Him, and seeking to catch Him in something He might say, that they might accuse Him” (vs. 11:53-54). By the time the Lord arrives in Jerusalem, these men are His open opponents. Christ prophesies, “The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed” (vs. 9:22).

Opposition to Christ’s message appears very early in the Gospel (Mk 3:2, 6) and continues throughout His ministry. Now, opportunity presents itself to His opponents at last. One of the Lord’s disciples, Judas Iscariot, goes “his way and conferred with the chief priests and captains, how he might betray Him to them,” even as they “sought how they might kill Him” (Lk 22:4, 2).

All of these men may be considered His visible enemies, but let us consider the true enemy who lurks behind the scenes. As the chief priests are plotting, “Satan entered Judas, surnamed Iscariot” (vs. 3). This verse changes our perspective on the war for eternal life and points to the underlying reality. Yes, the spies, captains, scribes, Pharisees, chief priests, and a traitor from Christ’s inner circle merge to form a cadre of opposition. However, they are mere enlistees – pawns of the real enemy, Satan.

In fact, the Lord prays for these very men from the Cross, saying, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (vs. 23:34). Surely He is not praying for the demons! Saint Nikolai of Zicha explains that these men “were not only doing their own will but the will of another. ‘Many dogs’ (Ps 21:16) were gathered to destroy Christ the Lord. When the devil failed to overcome the Lord on the Mount of Temptation with his false promises (Lk 4:1-13), he applied his wiles and strength to destroying the Lord through men by a dishonorable death on the Cross.” However, Saint Nikolai refuses to apply the term *many dogs* to the men involved, for “David would not have called God’s people, the crown of His creation, dogs, but he called the demons dogs” (*Prologue From Ochrid* vol. 4, p. 47).

Satan and his minions are the true enemies of Christ our God – and our true enemies as well. These powers set out to kill the Life-giver, but the Lord defeats them by the Cross. Through Christ all men, at all times and everywhere, can become victors in God’s war to free the inhabitants of the earth from the tyranny of the enemy. Let us never cease to pray for the men and women who are being used by Satan to oppose the Gospel of peace on earth, for “God has called us to peace” (1 Cor 7:15).

May the God of peace crush Satan under your feet quickly. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen. – Romans 16:20

December 6 – Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker
Luke 6:17-23

Jesus Is Here: Luke 6:17-23, especially vss. 17-19: *“A great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem, and from the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon . . . came to hear Him and be healed of their diseases, as well as those who were tormented with unclean spirits. And they were healed. . . . Power went out from Him and healed them all.”* What affliction, disease, or unclean spirit is debilitating you at present? If you answer “none,” beware. It is perilous to imagine that we are doing well, free of demonic influences and in spiritual health. If we think so, we are captive to delusion and still remain far from true health, life, and peace.

If we suppose that things are going well because we have enough of this world’s goods, then we have forgotten that every prop which holds up our life can be removed in a moment. In reality, we are poor.

If we believe that “doing well” means coping with what life brings, we have forgotten that a single accident, breakdown, or personal loss can render us helpless. We are not in control.

Perhaps, at the very least, we have our health. However, we can be stricken down in the next hour. Our health is something fragile and impermanent.

Finally, if we believe that temptations and dark powers do not influence us, then we are in the most pitiable state of all, for the unclean spirits already possess our hearts and minds. We are deceived!

Let us join the “great multitude” as Jesus comes “down . . . and stood on a level place with a crowd of His disciples” (vs. 17). He is available: let us “hear Him and be healed” (vs. 17). If we accept our poverty we are blessed, for the kingdom of God is ours (vs. 20). Let us freely admit that hunger, ill health, and temptations are ever near. In this fallen world, the devil walks “about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Pt 5:8).

We do not despair, however, for “the King eternal, immortal, invisible . . . who alone is wise” (1 Ti 1:17) is speaking to us. He offers us healing and freedom from demonic torment. Let us come to Him and cry out!

Every illusion that we are “doing well” comes straight from hell, carried to us by the soothing whispers of Satan himself. Instead, let us hunger for truth and be fed, weep for our sins and find forgiveness (Lk 6:21). Standing with Christ, we are never afraid of being ridiculed, reviled, or excluded (vs. 22).

This world operates on a very limited dimension of reality. Meanwhile, change occurs all around us, giving and then taking away. Perhaps we are so fascinated with everything this life offers that we forget about the kingdom of God. However, there is still hope. Christ stands before us, offering us the dimension of eternity.

Never mind what is past; let it go. God’s reign cuts across the grain of our deceptive and disrupted existence. At this very moment, the unchanging Lord Jesus is here. We weep because we fail to perceive His presence. We accept our poverty and hunger for Him, so that we can be fed from His table. We rejoice today and leap for joy, for our reward may still be great in heaven. Only the false delusion of well-being blocks our way and sends us astray.

According to Archimandrite Ioannikios, “As long as we do not want our mind [nous] to be imprisoned by vain and cunning thoughts, let us give it the ‘loftier thought’ of unceasing prayer. Let this become its ‘good change,’ its pleasure, its delight, its nourishment – the sweeter-than-honey name of Jesus” (*Themes From the Philokalia* # 1, p. 46).

O Jesus my Savior, grant me to hunger after Thee, the One who feeds the whole world.

December 7 - Twenty-eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 18:35-43

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

December 8 – Monday of the Twenty-ninth Week after Pentecost
Luke 20:27-44

Denying Resurrection: Saint Luke 20:27-44, especially vs. 27: “Then some of the Sadducees, who deny that there is a resurrection, came to Him. . . .” An unusual double negative appears in this passage in the original Greek. Saint Luke uses the word *antilegontes* to indicate “those who deny” – literally, “those who speak against” – and then adds a second negative “there is no resurrection.” This double negative, which is largely lost in translation, underscores the strict opposition of the Sadducees to belief in resurrection. Many other Jews did believe in a resurrection at the end of time (see Jn 11:23-24) and thus some of the scribes hasten to say, “Teacher, You have spoken well” (Lk 20:39).

In our day, the Sadducees find their equivalent in the pundits who reject any reality except the tangible world. Both the Sadducees and modern materialists deny resurrection. They drink deeply from an objectivist wellspring. Saint Cyril of Alexandria aptly characterizes such secularists when he describes the Sadducees as persons who “attach great importance to their wretched fancies” and “imagine themselves possessed of such knowledge as no man can gainsay” (Homily 136, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, p. 540). Thus, when the Lord challenges the fanciful tale of the woman married to seven brothers (vss. 29-32), He is exposing the faulty assumptions of all who deny resurrection in every age.

First, the Lord addresses the materialistic bias of those who deny resurrection. Those who reject the spiritual dimension of existence think solely in terms of the physical realm and cannot imagine any condition or state beyond what can be measured and tested objectively. The Lord Jesus begins His correction of this fallacy by pointing out that although “the sons of this age marry and are given in marriage” (vs. 34), those in the age to come do not marry, “nor can they die anymore” (vs. 36). Saint Theophylact explains: “Here, there is marriage because there is death. . . . There, where death has been abolished, what need is there of marriage?” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Luke*, p. 266).

Second, the Lord Jesus shows that every materialist, from Sadducees to down to the contemporary secularists, consistently excludes God. Western societies prefer the separation of Church and state, allowing little or no public mention of God. Note how the Lord speaks about “those who are counted worthy to attain that age” (vs. 35): they are “sons of God” (vs. 36). Our Lord acts supremely as the One who counts men worthy of that age, for by Him “the dead are raised” (vs. 37). Yet in their challenge (vss. 28-33) the Sadducees never even once mention God.

Of course once we thrust God out of the picture, every event and problem must be calculated in terms of tangible objects and relationships. The Mosaic Law serves as the Sadducees’ objective measure for everything. They reason that there is no resurrection because Moses does not mention it in the Law. (Moses’ teaching provides the framework for the problem of the seven brothers in verse 28; see Dt 25:5-10.)

The Lord Jesus replies by referring to God’s first appearance to Moses (Lk 20:35-38). The very basis of our knowledge of the resurrection stems from the revelation in the burning bush (Ex 3:1-6). At that time, God declares Himself to be “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Lk 20:37). Christ uses this statement to argue that our God “is not the God of the dead but of the living” (vs. 38).

Today, the Church relies on recorded revelation when she declares to all: “Christ is risen!” To believe in resurrection is to affirm that there exists a realm beyond tangible measures of output – one that is known to the heart.

O how noble! O how dear! O how sweet is Thy voice, O Christ; for Thou hast verily made us a true promise, that Thou shalt be with us to the end of time, an anchor for our hopes. – Ninth Ode of the Paschal Canon

December 9 – Tuesday of the Twenty-ninth Week after Pentecost
Luke 21:12-19

To Overcome Persecution: Luke 21:12-19, especially vs. 19: “*By your patience possess your souls.*”

This portion of Saint Luke’s Gospel covers a period of the Lord’s ministry just prior to His Passion. At this time Christ seeks to prepare the Church for the persecutions that will afflict His followers (vs. 12). He foretells oppression, arrest, abuse, jail, trial, and betrayal by family and friends – even torture and death (vss. 16-17). His goal here is to help us triumph in the midst of our trials. He solemnly promises to help His faithful witnesses and martyrs – and that promise never fails.

Twenty centuries of Christian history confirm every word of these important teachings of the Lord. Even if we do not experience the raging torrents of the oppression He describes, let us realize that persecution is never the exception but rather the *norm* of discipleship. It sweeps down upon many of our brethren around the world, for the tides of intolerance and opposition to the Gospel often rise to flood stage. We would do well to pay attention to the Lord, learning how to *possess our souls* even in the more serene eddies of life through disciplined patience and practice.

How do we possess our souls by patience? Surely, first of all, we must recognize the unruly nature of the soul. Only if we are watchful can we understand the depth of the struggle required to change the soul’s nature. Saint John Climacus compares the soul to a greedy kitchen dog running from one garbage can to the next. If we make even a moderate attempt at unceasing prayer, we discover at once that we are indeed *dull of hearing*, babes who need milk rather than solid spiritual food, “unskilled in the word of righteousness,” and too often dabbling in vain discussions of “the elementary principles” of Christian faith (see Heb 5:11-6:1).

How then do we break the tyranny of the passions? According to Saint Maximos the Confessor, such freedom comes only from the Holy Spirit. We must love and practice self-control by “first curbing passions of the soul and . . . second, those of the body” (*Philokalia* vol. 2, p. 59). Our desires must be surrendered one by one until we reach what the Fathers call *dispassion*. We steadily subdue the passions with the help of the life-giving Spirit, receiving in return the peace of soul that equips us for those seasons when we shall be asked to witness – when persecution of the faith will require a stand. The Lord gives us words and wisdom that no adversary can contradict or silence (Lk 21:13-15).

Dispassion is a blessed state that enables the Christian to face even betrayal by his own family and dearest friends. Dispassion is the impregnable redoubt from which God’s love sallies forth. That love may embrace hatred and overcome it, or it may be crowned with the victor’s wreath reserved for the Church’s blessed martyrs and honored confessors. Dispassion affords that grace from God whereby “not a hair of your head shall be lost” (vs. 18).

Once we understand that the true battle lies within us, then even if a time comes when we are abused and killed, nothing will be lost. Let us receive these precious truths from the passionless One. He brings “many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings” (Heb 2:10) “that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil” (vs. 14).

Christ sends each of us the Holy Spirit to help us gain this passionlessness and possess our souls. We have the resources of His kingdom. Let us begin! Christ is among us!

“Deliver me from them that persecute me, O Lord, for they are stronger than I. Bring my soul out of prison, that I may confess Thy Name.” – Psalm 141:9-10

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

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

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

We know that between AD 33 and the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 the very signs that the Lord describes in today’s reading came about. Battles took place between kingdoms within the Roman Empire (vs. 10). There were earthquakes, famines, and outbreaks of plagues (vs. 11). Eventually, Jerusalem fell under siege by the Roman legions led by Vespasian and was ultimately conquered by his son Titus (vs. 24). Later in their careers, both of these military leaders became Roman emperors.

Ironically, many Jewish pilgrims ignored Titus and his legions as they were approaching Jerusalem. They headed into the city for the Passover celebration, confident that the city would remain invincible under the hand of God. From an Orthodox Christian perspective, and as history proves, these pilgrims were foolhardy. The Lord Jesus warned them to flee when the armies came, for “Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles” (vss. 20-24). Anyone with a bit of historical knowledge must read verse 22 – “For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled” – in a sober light indeed.

Are those days completed? Is the last chapter written for Jerusalem? Let us briefly review the years from Christ’s birth to the fall of Jerusalem under Titus. In 4 BC the murderous Herod the Great died. Herod’s three surviving sons were appointed to rule over portions of his kingdom. Archelaus (Mt 2:22), to whom Jerusalem and Judea were assigned, proved so inept that the Romans removed him in AD 6. A series of Roman procurators then assumed control, one of whom was Pontius Pilate.

In AD 41 Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great, briefly ruled Judea and Jerusalem. Although he died horribly in AD 44 (see Acts 12:23), Agrippa’s reign stirred up Jewish nationalism, which was further inflamed by a series of political blunders by the Roman procurators. When the procurator Florus raided the Temple treasury in AD 66, full-scale rebellion broke out. The revolt ended, four years later, with the Temple’s utter destruction and the enslavement or dispersal of Jewish survivors.

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

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

December 11 – Thursday of the Twenty-ninth Week after Pentecost
Luke 21:28-33

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

December 12 - Saint Spyridon the Wonderworker
John 10:9-16

Credentials: John 10:9-16, especially vs. 9: *“I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.”* Candidates for office are supposed to present themselves to the voters by describing their qualifications, accomplishments, and positions on the issues. In other words, they lay out their credentials. This word has its origins in the Latin *credere*, to “believe” or “trust.” In today’s passage the Lord Jesus puts forth His credentials, so that we may safely entrust ourselves to Him.

Christ begins by validating Himself as “shepherd.” He uses this title five times (vss. 11, 12, 14, 16) in the eight verses of the present reading. By referring to Himself as a shepherd, Jesus is drawing upon the familiar terminology of the Old Testament. Thus, in three of the instances, He adds the further qualifier “good.”

In ancient Israel, the term “shepherd” could refer to a God-fearing leader like the Prophet Joshua (N. 27:15-17) or King David (2 Kgs 5:1-2), but also to a ruler who was apostate and corrupt, like King Ahab (2 Chr 18:12-16). For this reason the Lord Jesus says explicitly, “I am the *good* shepherd” (Jn 10:11).

We also find the term “shepherd” applied directly to God in the Old Testament (Ps 22:1; 27:8-9). God’s actions as shepherd are often directed toward deliverance and salvation. “Behold, the Lord is coming with strength, and His arm is with authority. Behold, His reward is with Him, and His work before Him. He will feed His flock like a shepherd and gather the lambs with His arm; and He will comfort those with young” (Is 40:10-11).

If we are familiar with such passages, we understand Christ’s claim to divinity when He says, “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep” (Jn 10:10-11).

In this same passage, the Lord Jesus makes another key point that underscores His divine nature. In speaking of the “hireling,” or false shepherd, Jesus says, “The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own” (vs. 13-14).

In speaking of the sheep as “My own,” Christ identifies them as the people of God. The bond between the shepherd and sheep may be construed as one of ownership, or as a reference to God’s covenant first with ancient Israel and now the Church, as the continuing Israel of God.

Here Christ is establishing the tie between Himself, as Good Shepherd, and the “holy nation, His own special people” whom He “called out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pt 2:9). To further reinforce this connection, He refers to God as “the Father [who] knows Me,” just as He in turn “knows the Father” (vs. 15).

This intimate knowledge is shared not only between the Persons of Trinity (the Father and the Son), but also between Christ the Shepherd and His flock. He states that He is “known by [His] own” (vs. 14), to which the faithful also attest.

Finally, the Lord Jesus introduces an historical dimension into the presentation of His credentials. He speaks of the events that will follow His Passion and Resurrection and the coming of the Church: “And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd” (vs. 16).

To this Tri-hypostatic unity – to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – are due glory, gratitude, honor, power and greatness unto the ages. Amen! – Saint Ephraim the Syrian

December 13 - Saturday of the Twenty-ninth Week after Pentecost
Luke 13:18-29

Quiet Power: Luke 13:18-29, especially vss. 20-21: “*And again He said, ‘To what shall I liken the kingdom of God? It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.’*” The forces of nature – winds, storms, mud slides, floods, earthquakes – reveal the immense strength latent in the natural world. More subtle displays of nature’s power are often overlooked, yet they are equally awesome. A tiny mushroom growing through the asphalt cracks and destroys a sidewalk; a squirrel’s nest tucked into an oak tree survives winter gales and freezing cold.

Another example is how a tiny pinch of yeast doubles the size of a batch of dough. According to *Laurel’s Kitchen*, “as the yeasties multiply, feeding on sugars in the dough, they make carbon dioxide bubbles . . . and will flourish if we but respect their simple needs.” Even Laurel’s humble “yeasties” may serve as an icon of the workings of the Holy Spirit of God, who flourishes in our shrunken hearts and enlarges them to give them life.

Yeast, as it turns out, is very sensitive to temperature, preferring a gentle warmth. In like manner the Spirit of God works most powerfully in hearts that hold a gentle warmth toward our Lord Jesus Christ. A right faith in our Lord is the essential precondition for receiving the power of the Holy Spirit. Without faith in Jesus our Lord, not even our good works will make us receptive to the leavening power of the Spirit. Our hearts will remain shriveled and cold.

On the other hand, if we seek the Lord in the Holy Gifts, reading the Holy Scriptures, calling out to Him in prayer, reverencing the holy icons, and obeying His desires instead of earthly wisdom, our hearts will become warm and grow into “a place for the Lord, a habitation for the God of Jacob” (Ps 131:5). The Lord Jesus gives us abundant opportunities to exercise our faith in Him and to obey Him, in spite of our discomfort, fears, and rationalizations. If we wish our heart to be enlarged, it must be warmed by risking trust in the Lord.

Just as yeast feeds on the sugars we knead into the dough, so the Spirit of God feeds on the sweetness of the faithful who watch and pray with Christ-loving hearts. Perhaps at times we fail to read the Scriptures, miss church, or find no good work to perform. Let us nevertheless watch our hearts and pray, and thus welcome the presence of the Spirit within. We strive for a genuine turning to the Lord in what the Apostles call “fervent prayer” (Jas 5:16; Rom 12:11-12).

Watching is the essential element of fervent prayer. It helps guard us against distractions, wandering minds, coldness and superficiality. Let us wake up and imitate those who are standing watch! In this way we will succeed in keeping our prayer unencumbered, for it is in prayer that we speak with the Lord Himself.

According to Saint Basil, “It is impossible to believe in the Father and the Son without the presence of the Spirit” (*On the Holy Spirit*, p. 48). When the Spirit comes to commune with us, it is time to “be still, and know that I am God” (Ps 45:10). In this way we welcome the greatest of all guests, offering Him the sweetness of our hearts and begging Him to multiply His grace in all our members.

Yeast fails to grow without the proper elements. Neither will the Holy Spirit remain where moral purity and dedication of the will are lacking. Whenever we defile ourselves in thought, word, or deed, it is urgent that we cleanse our hearts through confession and pour ourselves out to God. If our heart seems apathetic, we can make every effort to warm and sweeten it by fasting, almsgiving, prayer, and the practice of the virtues. Let us force open our heart to the Spirit!

O Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth, come and dwell in us and save our souls. – Prayer to the Holy Spirit

December 14 - Gospel for the Twenty-ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 17:12-19

Afar Off: Luke 17:12-19, especially vs. 12: *“Then as He entered a certain village, there met Him ten men who were lepers, who stood afar off.”* Until quite recently lepers were compelled to avoid other people, since isolation was the only known way to prevent the spread of the disease. Before modern medicine lepers in the United States were usually sent to government-run leprosaria. These treatment centers were usually located in out-of-the-way, rural districts, often in the southern states because of the prevalence of leprosy in hot, moist climates. In Hawaii, the island of Molokai was reserved for lepers. When a Hawaiian contracted the disease he was immediately sent there, never again to return to the embrace of family and loved ones.

This ancient policy of isolating lepers finds its way into the prayers of the Church. One of the Orthodox pre-communion prayers includes this line: “As Thou didst not refrain from entering and eating with sinners in the house of Simon the leper [Mt 26:6], so also vouchsafe to enter the house of my humble, leprous, and sinful soul.”

We understand in the innermost depths of our being that our sins are like leprosy, creating a deadly condition of heart and soul that separates us from God. We cry out to God from a great distance, like the tax collector in the parable who beats his breast and says, “God be merciful to me a sinner!” (Lk 18:13). We realize our sins may well lead us into the torments of hades, where we, like the rich man, will see “Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom” (vs. 16:23).

Each Christian is a leper, keeping company with other lepers who stand afar off. We are quick to lift up our voices and say, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” (vs. 17:13). We know from the parable that this is the right thing to do, for Christ then says, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.’ And so it was that as they went, they were cleansed” (vs. 14).

According to Mosaic law, a leper must seek out the priests for an official declaration of healing. This official inspection and certification of cleansing enables him to return to normal society. First, however, one of them, “when he saw that he was healed, returned” to Jesus “and with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on his face at His feet, giving Him thanks” (vss. 15-16).

Like the other nine, the tenth leper has been healed of his disease. He is free to go, and yet a visit to his priests (in this case, the Samaritan priests) is far from his top priority. He discerns the presence of God in Jesus, the Jewish rabbi who is the source of all healing. And so he “fell down on his face at His feet, giving Him thanks” (vs. 16).

Who else but God can forgive our sins? He heals our manifold diseases, tramples down the gates of hades, and lifts us up into Abraham’s bosom. Saint Peter reminds us of the greatness of “the promise . . . to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:39).

In the midst of our worst troubles we find that our hearts are perplexed, our strength fails, the light of our eyes is not with us, and even our “friends and neighbors stand afar off” (see Ps 37:10-11). But let us never despair, for God is with us, ever attentive to the voice of our cries. We see Christ’s eternal message revealed through the Prophet Jeremiah: “‘I am a God who is near,’ says the Lord, ‘and not a God afar off’” (Jer 23:23).

Let us learn from the Samaritan leper and allow nothing to separate us from the living God. He is ready to heal: “When you return and groan, then you will be saved” (Is 30:15).

Swiftly let Thy compassion apprehend us, O Lord; for we are greatly impoverished. Help us, O God our Savior; deliver us and forgive us our sins for Thy name’s sake. – Royal Hours

December 15 - Monday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost
Mark 8:11-21

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

To attain a living faith in Christ as God, it is not enough to see Him remove a fever (vss. 1:30-31), forgive and heal a man (vss. 2:11-12), calm a storm (vs. 4:39), or feed a crowd (vss. 8:19-20). It is impossible, for Christ tells us: “Assuredly . . . no sign shall be given to this generation” (vs. 12).

We must meet Him in a new place that lies beyond the scope of reason, outside the confines of our darkened and hardened hearts. He takes hold of us and unites us to Him in “a supranatural relationship,” if we dare to accept Him. We reach out, but He unites. “How is it you do not understand” (vs. 8:21)? This union is God’s reasonable gift beyond reason.

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

December 16 - Tuesday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost
Mark 8:22-26

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

December 17 - Wednesday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost
Mark 8:30-34

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

December 18 - Thursday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost
Mark 9:10-16

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

December 19 - Friday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost
Mark 9:33-41

The Heights of Humility: Mark 9:33-41, especially vss. 35-36: “*And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.’ Then He took a little child and set him in the midst of them.*” In verses 8:34-38, Saint Mark sets forth the Lord Jesus’ requirement for union with Him: take up your cross and follow Him. Today’s passage reveals two key aspects of *taking up the cross* – self-denial and service to others.

According to Saint Theophylact of Ochrid, the Lord links the honor one receives from Him with the humbling of oneself: “The Lord does not forbid us to desire to become His favorites, for He wants us to desire advancement in the spiritual life. But He does not want us to grasp for honors and privileges, but rather to reach the heights by humility” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Mark*, p. 78).

Note how the Savior develops His teachings concerning humility: He begins with the required attitude. “To be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all” (vs. 9:35). Christ dramatizes this point by setting a child in the midst of the disciples (vs. 36). We know that this child indeed followed Christ’s example of humility, for Holy Tradition identifies him as Saint Ignatius of Antioch. He later became a bishop and joyfully embraced a martyr’s death in the arena.

Without question, the Lord became the “last of all and servant of all” (vs. 35). By birth He “made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant” (Phil 2:7). He entered human society as a member of the lowest class, took His first breath in a cave used to shelter livestock, fled home as a refugee, grew up unknown in a carpenter’s shop, and accepted “a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” (Mk 1:4), thus making Himself “who knew no sin to be sin for us” (2 Cor 5:21).

His associates were the outcasts of society: “Many tax collectors and sinners also sat together with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many, and they followed Him” (Mk 2:15). In the end He was executed with common criminals, “one on His right and the other on His left” (vs. 15:27).

For Gregory the Great, Christ’s humility on the Cross aids us in attaining humility: “Since it is competent for Divine Power not only to make good things out of nothing, but also to refashion them from the evils that the devil had committed, the humility of God appeared among men as a remedy against this wound inflicted by the proud devil, so that those who had fallen through imitation of their haughty enemy might rise by the example of their humbled Creator.”

As for being last of all, Saint Gregory warns: “There are many in the Church who scorn to be little ones and . . . do not cease to be great in their own sight in place of humility. . . . They claim their heavenly country – and yet they do not love it” (Manley, *Wisdom Let Us Attend*, p. 609, 565).

Archimandrite Sophrony declares: “God . . . set no limits for any of us on the spiritual plane. . . . We are called to eternal life in the Kingdom of our Father which is in heaven.” Yet, as the Lord states, “entry into the Kingdom inevitably entails suffering. Many decline the Father’s gift of love precisely because the utmost effort is required” (*On Prayer*, p. 59)

We are to bear our cross as did the Lord, whether it means abstaining from pleasure, meeting a neighbor’s need with compassion, or suffering wrongs on behalf of others. Likewise, we are to defer to those who serve the Lord with unobtrusive deeds of kindness and love, as Christ did. Let us not fear the life in Christ which is ours. If we can be as little children of our Father, we establish ourselves with the Prodigal Son, who said: “I . . . am no longer worthy to be called your son” (Lk 15:21). Let God, if He wills, raise us to the heights by humility.

O Christ God, Thou hast dwelt in a cave, and a manger did receive Thee: Glory to Thy condescension, O Thou Lover of mankind who hast revealed to us the heights of humility. – Vespers Verse for the Nativity

December 20 - Saturday of the Thirtieth Week after Pentecost
Luke 14:1-11

Vainglory: Luke 14:1-11, especially vs. 7: “*So He told a parable to those who were invited, when He noted how they chose the best places. . . .*” This sentence appears simple on the surface, but it holds a command directed to the Christian heart and mind. Our Lord takes note of *how* we choose, not merely *what* we choose. This is a sobering thought, “for man does not see as God sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord sees into the heart” (1 Kgs 16:7).

Jesus Christ *sees* the preferences of dinner guests and also *notes* them, marking how those choices are made within the guests’ hearts. In the original, the verb translated as “to note” suggests an intentional focusing, which highlights the double meaning of *note* or *mark*. Christ our God sees within us, taking into account our motives, intentions, desires, and actions – the whole picture.

The factors laid bare before His gaze include our process of decision-making, the motivations that prompt us, and the hidden wrestling with our urges, both noble and corrupt. Other people may guess at what is taking place within us, but the Lord knows; He misses nothing, inwardly or outwardly.

Vainglory drives the dinner guests seated with the Lord Jesus at the Sabbath meal in today’s Gospel account. Saint John Climacus describes this complex, insidious passion as follows: “The sun shines on all alike, and vainglory beams on all activities. For instance, I am vainglorious when I fast; and when I relax the fast in order to be unnoticed, I am again vainglorious over my prudence. When well-dressed I am quite overcome by vainglory, and when I put on poor clothes I am vainglorious again. When I talk I am defeated, and when I am silent I am again defeated by it. However I throw this prickly pear, a spike stands upright” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 22.5, p. 133).

The Lord, with access to our hidden inner life, knows full well how subject we are to vainglory. How then shall we make “a good defense before the dread Judgment Seat of Christ”? The parable in today’s Gospel offers a prescription for healing from the Lord. The good news is that, by joining ourselves to Him, we may overcome vainglory.

First, we must deliberately face the demon of vainglory and call it by name. When this fiend suggests that “the best place” is ours (vs. 8), let us heed Saint John Climacus: “Do not take any notice of him . . . for it is difficult to drive away a dog from a butcher’s counter” (*Ladder* 22.19, p. 134). That we should give up the *best place* (vs. 8) in favor of the “lowest place” (v. 10) is not a casual suggestion offered by the Lord Jesus. Rather, He is graciously showing us that we have the freedom to choose, thereby keeping the “dog” away from the counter. We are blessed by the Lord with the gift of choice.

If we think we have done well by choosing a lower seat, let us rebuke this thought as demonic. We need only confront the thought with our debt to Christ to understand that there is no merit in making the right choice. In Christ we find compassion and kindness flowing to us from the God who wishes us to “be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:17).

If perhaps we are ashamed of taking the *lowest* place, let us give thanks to God. He is providing us with an exercise in blessed humility. The word *humility* – from “humus” (earth, dirt) – reminds us from whence we came. It is part of our nature as God fashioned us. By His grace, however, we “are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:26). Having tasted “the glory that is above,” we are filled with a light that enables us freely to “despise all earthly glory” (*Ladder* 22.9, p. 35). Humiliation is the Lord’s gift for freeing us from vainglory.

O Christ, All Glorious, Thou hast assumed humiliation and exalted the human race with illumination and immortality: Enlighten Thou me in all humility and save me from vainglory. – Fifth Sunday of Lent

December 21 - Thirtieth Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 18:18-27

To Inherit Life: Luke 18:18-27, especially vs. 18: *“Now a certain ruler asked Him, saying, ‘Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’”* The man who puts this question to the Lord Jesus is requesting specific guidelines to aid him in attaining his goal. This ruler addresses the Lord Jesus modestly, calling Him “Good Teacher.” He uses the subjunctive – a humble, tentative form of the verb – when asking whether he *might inherit*. He does not presume on God; he understands that one receives eternal life only if God deems one worthy. Furthermore, he understands that God has expectations of him that he must fulfill, if he is to entertain even the hope of everlasting life.

The longing to inherit eternal life burns in the heart of every true believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. When a catechumen is received into the Church, we pray that he or she may “fulfill those things which are well pleasing” to God, for these very things assure us of finding life. Our goal is to be inscribed in God’s “Book of Life” – to become the “heirs of eternal good things.”

In this passage from Saint Mark’s Gospel, the Lord graciously shows us, step by step, what we must do to attain to eternal life. If we truly desire eternity, we will obey the commandments of God. The Lord Jesus reminds the young ruler of this truth. He treats obedience as a given, as if to say to him, “I assume, naturally, that you are keeping the divine commandments, which contain God’s laws for all mankind.”

Note that, of the six commandments that concern our relationships with others, the Lord Jesus refers to only five (vs. 20). He omits the final commandment, “You shall not covet” (Dt 5:21). As it turns out, this commandment is the very one the ruler finds problematic.

Because he is blind to his inordinate attachment to material goods, the man is able say with confidence, “All these things I have kept from my youth” (Lk 18:21). He understands the requirement that we obey the divine commandments – to a point. But when the Lord personalizes the tenth commandment with the proposition that he sell all his worldly goods, “distribute to the poor, and . . . come, follow Me” (vs. 22), the man suddenly sees the central moral failure in himself.

The revelation that material wealth controls his earthly life and prevents him from attaining eternal life comes to this ruler as a rude shock. In that moment of revelation we find another key guiding us toward eternal life. When God discloses our attachments, our inordinate loves, and the idolatrous bondages in our lives, He is urging us to *sell all* – to do whatever is necessary to rid ourselves of anything holding us back from life in Him.

Eternity boils down to choices: do we place discipleship ahead of all other affections, or not? For this reason self-examination is critical for us as Orthodox Christians. We must ask ourselves, “Have I done my duty to those to whom duty is owed? Have I failed to forgive? Have I indulged in impure thoughts or actions? Have I wished to acquire what is not mine? Have I been careless with truth?”

There are many ways in which we hold back and avoid pleasing the Lord. He calls us to break the power that all other attachments hold over us and to follow Him (see vs. 22). Once we grasp the depths of the Lord’s demands, we ask, “Who then can be saved?” (vs. 26).

Our Savior reveals the third and essential key for inheriting eternal life: to admit that salvation – the inheritance of eternal life – is “impossible with men” (vs. 27). And yet, by God’s grace, salvation is possible for us. We inherit eternal life when we obey the Lord Jesus Christ and receive His help in letting go of whatever separates us from Him.

Make us all victors, even unto the end, O Lord, through Thy crown incorruptible, for Thine it is to show mercy and to save us, and unto Thee do we ascribe glory! – Chrismation Prayer

December 22 - Monday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost
Mark 9:42-10:1

Trial, Temptation, and Sacrifice: Mark 9:42-10:1, especially vs. 49: *“For everyone will be seasoned with fire, and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt.”* In today’s Gospel reading the Lord Jesus confronts his disciples with the demanding side of life in Christ. The admonitions in these verses thus provide us with a manual of great value for fighting the good fight.

Attaining eternal life demands an uncompromising purity and faithfulness. God sets these virtues as a precondition for delivering us from hell whose “fire is not quenched” (vss. 44, 46, 48). Painful choices confront us, sooner or later, if we pursue this way. Events will force us to decide whether “the sufferings of this present life are . . . worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us” (Rom 8:18).

We encounter the same demands in this reading as those faced by the three holy youths before the fiery furnace (Dan 3:16-18). Further, the Lord Jesus uses language identical to that of the Apostle Peter when he refers to “fiery trials” (1 Pt 1:7; 4:12). Saint Peter asks if we will stand with Christ, no matter what the cost. Do we wish to be healed of sin despite the pain of the treatment? Will we trust that God is true to His word? Will we be faithful in our own words and deeds?

These verses make it clear that we do a disservice to the faithful and to nonbelievers alike if we suggest that the Christian life is free of trial, temptation, and sacrifice. The good news is that the Lord is “faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it” (1 Cor 10:13).

In the face of the demands our Lord makes, we must establish boundaries with the world. Since trials and temptations are certain, it is urgent that we make preparations for facing them. Setting boundaries helps us deflect the assaults against our faith that threaten our integrity. Boundaries in the depths of the heart can fend off temptations.

Alcoholics, for example, keep liquor out of the house. The sexually tempted keep a covenant with their eyes and guard their thoughts (Job 31:1). According to Blessed Theophylact of Ochrid, “The Lord exhorts those to whom offense is given to guard themselves against those who are always ready to offend and to tempt. Whether it be your foot, hand, or eye, which cause you to fall, which means, even if it is one of your closest friends or relatives, in close relationship to you either by kinship or by necessity who causes you to fall, cut him off, that is, reject that friendship or kinship to him” (*Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Mark*, p. 80).

How does one prepare for the inevitable pain and fire that we encounter? When we set a boundary around our life, we find help in making many day-to-day choices. The technique is simple: we think about our pitfalls ahead of time. In this way we manage to pass by the doorways leading to those situations that spell certain defeat.

Of course, the enemy still finds ways of slipping past our defenses and pressing his fiery trials upon us! The Lord warns us that “everyone will be seasoned with fire” as He predicts the trials we face in this life (Mk 9:49). However, if we practice small, undramatic acts of faithfulness we are much more likely to survive when the tests by fire sweep in.

The Lord and His prophets and apostles lived in a culture that often used salt to ratify everyday agreements. Salt symbolizes fidelity and constancy. When the Lord Jesus announces that “every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt,” He tells us that genuine trials cannot be successfully met without fidelity and constancy. The way to be ready for fire is to train ourselves in the practice of stability. The Holy Spirit offers this gift to the earnest, struggling Christian. Our Lord identifies the salt of faithfulness as a means to “peace with one another” (vs. 50).

O Lord . . . lead me in the right path because of mine enemies. – Psalm 26:13

December 23 - Tuesday of the Thirty-First Week after Pentecost
Mark 10:2-12

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

December 24 - Forefeast of the Nativity of Christ

Luke 2:1-20

He Who Is Born: Luke 2:1-20, especially vs. 11: *“For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”* These familiar words draw us to the mystery of the holy nativity in the flesh of God the Word. The Virgin comes to the cave. Christ is born so that He might dwell among us as a man. The true “Light of Light,” who gives light to everyone in the world, enters our darkness. Angels hasten and shepherds wonder. A star leads the Magi to worship Him, and we sing, “Glory to Thy condescension, O Thou only Lover of mankind.”

God has taken on our flesh, and we in turn are endowed with life. The ineffable marvel of the cave with its humble manger compels us to consider the nature of Christ, our Savior and Lord. Come, let us meditate on the sacred names of the One who is now born.

The angel of the Lord first reveals Jesus as “Savior.” Ordinarily, we reserve this term for someone who saves us from danger, destruction, or death. By “saving,” we mean actions that preserve us physically, such as rescue from flood, fire, or mortal wounds. However, being saved in this present life has its limits. Like Lazarus, we will eventually die, for reprieve is only temporary. Universal death is merely forestalled by earthly saviors, for they too are mortal.

The birth of Christ the Savior, however, illumines our greatest salvation. God assumes human flesh and shows other saving acts to be nothing but antitypes. Jesus, as Savior, “took me. . . [and] received me out of many waters. He will deliver me from mine enemies which are mighty” (Ps 17:16-17). He is the prototype of all saviors, for “in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming” (1 Cor 15:22-23).

We learn with the shepherds that the Child born in Bethlehem is also “Christ.” The angel uses the official title *Ha’mashiah*, or “Anointed One.” The Greek equivalent is *Christos*, which also means “Anointed One.”

While this term was infrequently applied to the high priest in ancient times, it was more commonly used as a synonym for the kings of Judah of David’s lineage. At the time of the Lord’s birth, the title was reserved for a future king whose mission was to save his people from destructive slavery – a great King sent from God.

What were the expectations of this Christ who was to come? At the time of Jesus’ birth, the Jews understood that God demonstrated his might on behalf of His people through a succession of great leaders: Abraham, Moses, David. They believed that when the Messiah came, a new age would be ushered in.

“‘For just as the new heaven and the new earth which I make shall remain before Me,’ says the Lord, ‘so shall your seed and your name remain. It shall come to pass . . . all flesh shall worship before Me in Jerusalem’” (Is 66:22-23).

God promised that the Child would appear: “But as for Me, I was established as king by Him, upon Zion His holy mountain, proclaiming the commandment of the Lord. The Lord said unto Me, Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee. Ask of Me, and I will give Thee the nations for Thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for Thy possession” (Ps 2:6-8).

The angel also calls the Child Lord (*Kyrios*). Many earthly rulers have been called lord, but among God’s people the title referred to God Himself. The Lord holds the life and destiny of men in His hand.

When Jesus is called Lord, He is recognized as God, “for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God’” (Rom 14:10-11).

May the grace of our Lord, God and, Savior Jesus Christ be with us all. Amen.

December 25 – Nativity of Christ
Matthew 2:1-12

What to Give the Christ Child: Matthew 2:1-12, especially vss. 10, 11: “When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him, gold, frankincense and myrrh.” May great joy fill our hearts as we behold the infant God-man with His mother. Like the wise men, let us fall down before Him. Christ is born! Let us glorify Him and present Him with our gift.

“They who worshiped the stars did learn from them to worship” the Sun of Justice, as we sing in the festal hymn. Now this same great joy is ours, for we know the Son of God born from the Virgin Mary. As we follow the star with the Magi from the East, let us consider what worthy gift we may present to our Lord.

Writing about the Incarnation, Saint Athanasios notes that God not only made mankind “out of nothing, but had also graciously bestowed on them His own life by the grace of the Word. Then, turning from eternal things to things corruptible by counsel of the devil, they had become the cause of their own corruption in death” (*On the Incarnation*, p. 30).

In other words, God gave us life, while we gave ourselves death. We exchanged “the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom 1:25).

Our race’s first “gift” to God was to turn away from Him. We forgot about Him, the Life-giver. As soon as we fell under the sway of nature and death, ignorance became wisdom and wisdom folly. The men of the East believed the stars to be the most powerful bodies in created nature and worshiped them as gods. Some they regarded as benign deities, while others were evil gods with flaming eyes who looked to destroy life.

God’s own gift to us is His natal star, which leads the wisest men of the East to seek the Christ. He brings them to the incarnate God, away from the confusion of astrology. By a star, He teaches them to worship the Sun of Justice and ends the dark night of idolatry.

“Now that the divine epiphany of the Word of God has taken place,” concludes Saint Athanasios, “the darkness of idols prevails no more, and all parts of the world in every direction are enlightened” (p. 94).

When the wise men reach Bethlehem, God grants joy and ecstasy to their eyes. “They saw the young Child with Mary His mother” (Mt 2:11). They see God in the tangible form of a child, whom also we worship with our own feeble intelligence.

According to Saint Athanasios, “The incorporeal and incorruptible and immaterial Word of God entered our world. . . . in a new way, stooping to our level in His love and self-revealing to us.” Our God assumed a “body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death. . . . This He did out of sheer love for us, so that in His death all might die, and the law of death thereby be abolished” (p. 33-34).

“And when they had opened their treasures, these men presented gifts to Him” (vs. 11). yes, gifts. These gifts – gold, incense, and myrrh – express that which lasts: “After a thousand years, gold still shines, incense burns and myrrh keeps its fragrance” (Saint Nikolai of Zicha, *Homilies*, p. 47).

What worthy gift can we offer? “For if Thou hadst desired sacrifice, I had given it. . . . A sacrifice unto God is a broken spirit; a heart that is broken and humbled God will not despise” (Ps 50:16-17). Our repentance pleases the Christ Child, who continually invites us to repent. Behold the young Child! Come, let us worship and fall down and offer Him our gifts.

Let Thy mercy come also upon me, O Lord, even Thy salvation, O Jesus! – Psalm 118:41

December 26 - Friday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost
Mark 10:23-32

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

December 27 – Saturday of the Thirty-first Week after Pentecost
Luke 16:10-15

Fidelity: Luke 16:10-15, especially vs. 13: *“No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”* Christ our God presents us with the stark contrast between fidelity and infidelity, dedication and neglect, or even betrayal. He places the whole of our life “in the sight of God” (vs. 15), raising the issue of our ultimate trustworthiness as God’s servants. How shall we find “a good defense before the fearful judgment seat of Christ,” as we pray during the Divine Liturgy?

The Lord Jesus makes it clear that we are to manage faithfully even the smallest details and responsibilities in this life (vs. 10), for all is subject to His constant and ultimate scrutiny. He examines our fidelity in the ordinary and temporal matters of life as well as our care for the “true riches” of His Kingdom (vs. 11). God judges both our stewardship of the things in His creation and our care for that which, in the words of Saint Cyril of Alexandria, “we may receive . . . which is our own, even that holy and admirable beauty which God forms in the souls of men, fashioning them like unto Himself, according to what we originally were” (*Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, p. 444). We are only stewards of our inner life, never the masters.

The Lord Jesus’ first standard of fidelity is straightforward: “He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much” (vs. 10). We may expect God to evaluate us rigorously, more so even than the Pharisees and scribes. They scrupulously comply with the details of the Mosaic Law, for He notes how careful they are to “tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs” (Lk 11:42). Yet He tells His disciples that “unless [our] righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, [we] will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:20).

How do we measure up to the challenge we face? With the Lord, fidelity is always a matter of the heart. We pay attention to details in life out of joy that we belong to Christ Jesus. “One who performs saving works simply from the fear of Hell follows the way of bondage, and he who does the same just in order to be rewarded with the Kingdom of Heaven follows the path of a bargainer with God. The one they call a slave, the other a hireling. But God wants us to come to Him as sons to their Father” (*Way of a Pilgrim*, p. 36). True fidelity delivers (Mt 21:28-29).

According to the Lord’s second standard for judging the fidelity of His servants, we need examine both our care for the things of this world and for the “true riches” (Lk 16:11). Until we gain steadfastness in handling the lesser things of life that God sets before us, we shall never advance to the care of what He seeks from us in eternity. First we act as sons, joyfully fulfilling what is required in this present life, and then we find a larger duty incumbent on us: “to be faithful unto God, pure in heart, merciful and kind, just and holy; for these things imprint in us the outlines of the divine likeness, and perfect us as heirs of eternal life” (Saint Cyril of Alexandria, p. 444). Now we come to the true riches promised to Christ’s good stewards.

If we evince fidelity with these *true riches*, then we have reasonable hope that God will also entrust us with what truly is “[our] own” (vs. 12). Here Christ speaks of the authentic nature given to us by God. As Saint Paul teaches, God created us “in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:10). Let us do good with fidelity to God, aiming at the divine beauty He yearns to form in us: the gifts of “love, joy, peace, longsuffering” (Gal 5:22) and so much more.

O Lord, help us labor in the mystical field, cultivating faithfully the fruits of repentance. –
Orthros for the First Sunday of Great Lent

December 28 – Sunday after the Nativity of Christ
Matthew 2:13-23

Guarding Christ: Matthew 2:13-23, especially vs.13: *“Now when [the wise men] had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, ‘Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him.’”* When God planted in Paradise, He set “the tree of life” (Gn 2:9) in the middle of the garden. After Adam’s disobedience, God imposed the divine consequences of sin: “to earth you shall return” (vs. 3:20). To prevent Adam from evading this judgment, “the Lord God sent him forth out of the garden. . . . And [He] stationed . . . the fiery sword which turns every which way to guard the way to the tree of life” (vs. 3:24-25).

Thus mankind enters into history and this existence full of sickness, death, and the slaughter of innocents. However, God the Life-giving Trinity never abandons us. According to Metropolitan John of Pergamos, “The Father and the Spirit are involved in history, but only the Son becomes history. . . . [And] if the Son dies on the cross, thus succumbing to the bondage of historical existence, it is the Spirit that raises Him from the dead. The Spirit is the ‘beyond’ history, and when He acts in history He does so in order to bring into history the last days, the *eschaton*.”

The Spirit introduces the age to come into this present existence, beginning at the moment our Lord assumes history: “And the angel answered and said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you’” (Lk 1:35). The Holy Spirit then continues to act on behalf of the Lord Jesus, as this early passage from St. Matthew shows.

Through an angel, He directs Joseph to flee to safety with the young child and His mother (Mt 2:13). Following the death of Herod the Great, the same Spirit directs Joseph when it is time to return (vss. 19-20).

We must be careful not lose sight of the Holy Spirit in this passage, for it is He who actually gives the command to flee, even though the message is delivered by an angel. According to St. Maximos the Confessor, “The Holy Spirit is not absent from any created being, especially not from one which in any way participates in intelligence.”

The holy angels, of course, are the intelligent (or so-called noetic) powers. The Spirit works through those beings who are wholly pure, including our guardian angels and the other bodiless powers (Mt 2:13, 19). We should respect them and pray for their help. Through the angels, the Spirit actively guards everyone who is united to Christ, protecting us against the evil one and his servants.

Later, we see how He makes Joseph rightly afraid of Archelaus, the murderous son of Herod the Great (vs. 22). The Spirit communicates with those mortals who have attained a measure of personal purity through prayer, men and women who are receptive to His voice. In this instance, the Holy Spirit works through the dream life of the righteous Joseph.

Understanding the Spirit’s work is crucial if we are to grow in holiness (Jn 3:6-8). This much is certain: the Spirit of God never leaves Joseph, nor will He abandon the members of Christ who are sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Let us heed His promptings as we pray for clarification and guidance. Above all, we understand that the Holy Spirit never ceases to work among the faithful to bring about our salvation, as revealed to us through the prophets (Mt 2:23; Eph 3:4-5). Our decisions and actions, especially those that aim to please God, will be woven into His plan of salvation for us and for all of mankind. Let us pray for wisdom!

Assist me, I pray Thee, and direct me with divine wisdom to do Thy will faithfully.

December 29 – Monday of the Thirty-second Week after Pentecost
Mark 10:46-52

Blind Beggars: Mark 10:46-52, especially vs. 46: *“As He went out of Jericho with His disciples and a great multitude, blind Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, sat by the road begging.”* Like Bartimaeus, we are all blind beggars. Who among us is not stationed along the road of this life in order to make a living? Each of us finds our way into what is available for coping with life’s demands. We do so to garner from the passing traffic what we need to survive. Some of us find very comfortable, productive places along the roadway, while other spots do not prove to be so ideal.

The son of Timaeus is accustomed to working his spot along the Jerusalem road, especially during festival seasons when the route is crowded with pilgrims. According to the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, Bartimaeus was blind from birth. With no social services in the harsh first century, he depends entirely on begging to earn his living.

Blindness narrows our options. Which of us can say that he sees clearly all that is coming toward him in life? We do the best we can to discern what may happen, surviving where we are, using what we have, making do with what we hear. As with Bartimaeus, there is a dimension of life we miss by living outside our hearts. This dimension contains the things of the Spirit, and most of us remain blind in that all-important realm.

Those without sight, like Bartimaeus, tune their other senses to what is occurring around them. Bartimaeus not only senses that a greater-than-usual crowd is passing, but also “heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth” (vs. 47). In fact, Jesus is the force who gathers the large crowd now moving past him. The blind man finds no shame in calling out to Jesus, for he has nothing to lose and everything to gain (vss. 47-48).

We, too, are free to assert ourselves and cry out to the Lord Jesus. He is a compassionate God. There is nothing to lose and everything to gain! We know Christ is renowned for lovingkindness, for healing, for hearing even the faint cries of the poor and needy that others ignore. By all means cry out to Him in faith and longing, for He draws near at this very moment!

Note the unfolding of the interaction between Bartimaeus and the Lord Jesus. Cries like the blind man’s are apt to cause Him to *stand still* and command us into His presence (vs. 49). We should avoid praying mindlessly, addressing Him instead out of our need for healing. (And who of Adam’s kin does not need healing from the blight of sin on his life?)

Let us also be of good cheer, knowing that “He is calling you” (vs. 49). Why not cast off our layers of personal protection? For a first-century beggar, such protection took the form of a garment or mantle that sheltered him from the weather and sun (vs. 50). For us, the covering is likely to be our pride, or the desire to look good, or some craving that leaves us begging.

When the son of Timaeus comes before Jesus, His Creator asks him, “What do you want Me to do for you?” (vs. 51). What, indeed! The answer is simple for a blind man – restore my sight! We can be just as straightforward: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of David, have mercy upon me a sinner, a blind beggar before Thee.” If Jesus will heal Bartimaeus’ physical and spiritual sight, do we imagine He will do any less for us?!

Let us come in trust to the same Lord, yearning to receive His healing for all our blindnesses. The power of the Lord is extraordinary. He is able to transform a beggar into a disciple (vs. 52); he turns a disabled man into one capable of the uphill climb to Jerusalem and the Cross. Even we, mired down in our darkness and need, can be transformed.

O Christ our God, who didst lighten the eyes of the beggar Bartimaeus, lighten Thou the eyes of our souls, and reveal us as sons of the day, that we may cry out to Thee in faith! – Sunday of the Blind Man

December 30 – Tuesday of the Thirty-second Week after Pentecost
Mark 11:11-23

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

December 31 - Wednesday of the Thirty-second Week after Pentecost
Mark 11:23-26

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

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

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

And what does the Lord require? According to his prophet, we are “to do justly, and to love mercy, and to be ready to walk with the Lord your God” (Mi 6:8). Come into our Father’s household. Learn that our *Father in heaven* created us, sustains our existence (Acts 17:28), outlines how we ought to live, act, speak, think, and feel. He provides everything we need to walk with Him.

As children we depend on our earthly fathers, respecting them and doing their bidding. Likewise, we say to our heavenly Father, “Hallowed be Your Name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:9-10).

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

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

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

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

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