



Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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May 21, 2017

Sixth Sunday of Pascha

The Blind Man

Sts. Constantine and Helen, Equals-to-the-Apostles (337)

Christ is Risen! Indeed He is Risen!

- ✠ Tuesday, May 23, 6:30pm - Inquirer's Class
- ✠ Wednesday, May 24, 6:30pm - Great Vespers - Feast of the Ascension
- ✠ Thursday, May 25, 10:00am - Divine Liturgy - Feast of the Ascension



The Death and Resurrection of Christ - Fr. Stephen Freeman

I believe that the death and resurrection of Christ are utterly universal in their reality. They are not isolated events, significant only within the Christian belief system. I believe they are the singular moments within space and time (and outside space and time) that reveal the truth of all things, of all people, and of the heart and nature of the God who created all things and sustains them. I believe this is true whether I or anyone else believes it. The death and resurrection of Christ are the most fundamental and foundational facts of reality.

I believe that Christians make a serious mistake when we begin to speak first about God rather than first about Christ and His death on the Cross and resurrection from the dead. It is a mistake because it presumes we know something about God that is somehow "prior" to those events. We do not, or, if we think we do, we are mistaken. The death and resurrection of Christ are the alpha and the omega of God's self-revelation to the world. Nothing in all of creation is extraneous or irrelevant to those events.

† There are many Orthodox Christians whose faith, self-identification, is based or supported by things other than an authentic personal relationship with Jesus Christ, known intimately as savior. Someone who knows Christ and the sweetness of His love, and lives trusting in Him cannot, I think, turn from Him. Those who love Christ, based on personal relationship, are not interested in other paths, save perhaps to hope that those on those paths may yet come to know Him.

All kinds of facts, arguments, demonstrations, proofs could be brought to bear, overwhelmingly heaped up, to win me away from Christ, but because I know and am known by Him, it would not matter. I wouldn't budge, I hope. But if I did not know Christ, but was just going along with Orthodoxy for various reasons, and I encountered something that touched the needy, even unconsciously needy parts of me, I could be swept away. It is an uncomfortable thought that perhaps for many of the faithful, especially our young ones who are in many ways so vulnerable and tender, there is no personal, intimate, relationship with Christ to ground them. Have we - parents, pastors - failed them?

- A Priest of the Church

Pearls of the Holy Fathers (16)

An elder said: 'He who is honored and praised more than he deserves suffers great harm thereby; whereas one who is not honored by men at all will be glorified above.' **Sayings of the Fathers**

Wondrous are Thy works, O Lord! Wondrous art Thou Thyself, sitting on the throne of Thy glory in Christian temples. O Lord, most righteous Judge, most merciful and Almighty Savior! Glory to Thine invincible goodness, glory to Thine immeasurable power, King of all the ages!

St. John of Kronstadt

Pray to be among the few, for the good is rare; wherefore, few, also, are they who enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.

St. Basil the Great

What is the sign that a man has attained to purity of heart, and when does a man know that his heart has entered into purity? When he sees all men as good and none appears to him to be unclean and defiled, then in very truth his heart is pure.

St. Isaac the Syrian

To love is easy and sweet. Oh! if we could only see the heart of a man who bears the evangelic yoke of Christ, you would see in it a paradise of joy and gladness, you would see there the Kingdom of God, even though on the surface he was worried and surrounded by grief and tribulations, as a rose is surrounded by thorns. There can be nothing but comfort and true joy in a heart in which reigns the Kingdom of God.

St. Tikhon of Zadonsk

Our soul cannot yield spiritual fruit unless our heart is dead to the world. **St. Isaac the Syrian**

According to the teaching of the Fathers, any impression which, touching the heart, fills it with a great agitation, must come from the region of the passions. Therefore impulses which spring from the heart should not be followed at once, but only after careful examination and fervent prayer. God preserve us from a blind heart! It is well known that passions do blind the heart and screen the shining sun of the mind that we should all strive to gaze at.

St. Macarios of Optina

God is at all times nearer to us than any man, nearer than garments, than air or light. . . I live through him in body and soul, I breathe through Him, I think, reason, purpose, talk, venture and act through Him. . . We must condition ourselves in such a way that nothing can displace Him in our thoughts and hearts, nothing, no obstacle of any sort, can obstruct His presence. . . But, when I sin, or when I have a predilection for something, then I am far away from Him, not in distance but in my heart. . . then I am left without His grace.

St. John of Kronstadt

One of the brethren asked Abba Poemen, saying, "Father, what shall I do in the matter of my sins?" The elder said unto him, "Whosoever wishes to blot out his offences can do so by weeping, and he who wishes to acquire good works can do so by means of weeping; for weeping is the path which the Scriptures have taught us, and the Fathers have also wept continually, and there is no other path except that of tears."

Paradise of the Fathers

When we wish to build a house we do not put on the roof before building the foundations, for to build a house this way is impossible; first lay the foundations, then build the house and only then put on the roof. So also must we do in relation to spiritual things; first lay the foundations, that is, start to guard the heart and cleanse it from passions; then build the spiritual house, that is, repulse the insurrection against us, raised by evil spirits through the outer senses, and learn to cut off such attacks as quickly as possible; and only then should we put on the roof, that is, complete renunciation of everything in order to give ourselves up entirely to God.

St. Symeon the New Theologian

All sin is due to sensual pleasure, all forgiveness to hardship and distress. **St. Thalassios of Libya**

HE DIED THAT WE MAY

LIVE... *By Inok Vsevolod (Filipiev), from "Orthodox America," June 1996, reprinted in Orthodox Heritage, June 2016, Vol. 14, Issue 06.*

We must admit that many of us, contemporary Christians, fear death and cling to this temporal life almost like the unbelievers.

The whirlwind of life, like falling leaves, spins around the people of this age in a frenzied dance. Vanity—this is the most accurate definition of all that occupies our minds and hearts; it is what moves us to sorrow and to rejoice. So pass the years and decades of our life. Sooner or later, however, there comes for each person the hour of awakening, the hour of realization that he is mortal. And this seemingly obvious truth strikes us in the depths of our souls, like a terrifying revelation.

This awakening comes in different ways, but most frequently it finds us when we are ill. Lying in bed, we suddenly realize that we are not eternal, that we are, in fact, going to die, possibly very soon. Then the sickness leaves us and again we become absorbed by new concerns, and we forget about death. But sickness and adversities are those messengers sent to us by the Lord, who call to our hearts: People, come to your senses! Do not imagine that you are mortal gods. Take a good, hard look at yourselves, and you will see that death and decay reign over your bodies. See, your hair is getting gray, your skin is withering, and all this is irreversible. Think well. Are you prepared for death? What awaits you there in eternity, after the last clump of earth is thrown into your grave and a new life begins for you?

Only a few blessed souls, even before the coming of an illness or other dread messenger of death, come to realize, with God's help, all the vanity of this earthly life. Multitudes of holy fathers and mothers who in every age filled the deserts and monasteries, were motivated precisely by this soul-saving awareness. And we too are capable of the same realization. We have but to listen carefully to the voice of our conscience, when we are alone with ourselves, when we have no reason to be hypocritical or double-faced.

Here before us lies the path of the God-pleasers, who came to realize that however

beautiful, however marvelous this temporal world is, there will come a time when it will no longer exist. The beauties of nature, which today delight our eyes, will disappear; the mountains, the flowers, the sun, the stars—all will disappear. The beauty of youth will wither, the canvasses of the old masters will fade, the books of renowned authors will decay. All will pass away. God will remain, but will we be with Him? According to our deeds, according to our sins we must conclude that it is not our lot to enjoy His eternal presence. But He alone is truly Existing, Who always is. And if our lot is not with Him, then what good to us is eternity? For it will be for us an eternity without God.

Unbelievers are often panic-stricken at the thought of leaving this temporal life. They want to live forever, although they know that they are destined to die. These foolish people do not understand that their awful tragedy lies precisely in the fact that after death their souls (and, at the General Resurrection, their bodies also) will receive that eternal existence without God, towards which they have been striving. And can one compare even the most dreadful torments and illnesses of this present life with those hellish torments that sinners will experience for all eternity?

True Christians, by contrast, do not fear the death of their mortal bodies. In the Symbol of Faith they confess, *I believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.* For them, the death of the flesh is a passage to that place *where there is neither sickness nor sorrow, nor sighing but life everlasting.* The only thing they fear is that they have not prepared themselves for eternal life by sincere repentance and good deeds.

Let us ask ourselves: We who call ourselves Christians today, what do we hope for? Do we keep in mind the life of the age to come, at least when we recite the Creed? Or are we captivated by the sparkle and the tawdry brilliance of Satan's carnival whirling around us with its mad fascination? That fallen angel has forever been trying to divert people from the soul-saving inclination to prepare for the coming passage into eternal life.

It is instructive in this regard to recall the story of Saint Iosaph of India. His father, the prince Abenner, desiring to guard his son from any exposure to Christianity, had a palace especially constructed for him, where he was constantly

entertained by courtiers; he was deliberately kept from hearing anything about illness, old age or death. No sick or elderly people were allowed to visit him. When, however, he chanced to see two sick people and one old man, he came to understand the transitory nature of this temporal life, and he fell into despair. He was delivered from this state when the Lord sent to him His servant, the monk Barlaam, who revealed to Iosaph the truth of Christianity. (Saints Barlaam, Iosaph and Abenner are all commemorated on the same day, November 19.)

Nowadays, the devil is setting new snares. We are surrounded by a sea of diversions, by unheard-of discoveries in science and technology, by ultra—modern medicine, and all this is designed to divert us from the one thing needful. And we, unfortunate and deceived little people, puffing ourselves up as though we were gods, try to catch eternity in our toy nets. We try to stay the passage of time, clinging onto it with cameras and video cameras, and then we look greedily at these shiny little images which have captured irretrievably lost moments of life.

Meanwhile, our God Jesus Christ stands invisibly over this frenzied world of ours, and waits: When will we repent, when will we come to our senses? He is merciful and long-suffering, suffering for us, even unto death, and today He again suffers, gazing into the soul of each of us.

Have we no shame before His all-pure gaze?

We who call ourselves Christian have reason to be ashamed. A spiritual self-examination inevitably reveals that even if we maintain an outward semblance of piety, inwardly we are, alas, far from Christ. Where, for example, is the joy of the anticipation of meeting the Lord and His Saints beyond the grave, a joy which was common to all the early Christians? Nowadays this joy is known only to a few chosen righteous ones; to the majority it is unknown. We must admit that many of us, contemporary Christians, fear death and cling to this temporal life almost like the unbelievers. The holy Fathers say that to be a Christian means to be daily crucified with Christ, to mortify our fallen nature. Daily! But we do not want to die with Christ even once in our life. Self-conceit, intellectual pride, vainglory—these are the “blind guides” of our souls. They whisper to each of us, “You are such a good

Christian, so decent; you are doing such important work. You can't possibly die now.” And we believe this lie, forgetting about death.

If tonight any one of us should be unexpectedly hauled off to our deaths by execution (as this often happened in the years of persecution in Russia or the days of early Christianity), many would doubtless murmur to themselves: “Why me? I am still young, I can still serve the Church.” The primordial fear of death, which possesses our whole being, would not allow us to recall that martyrdom and confession is the highest and most noble form of service to God and the Church. We have only to realize this or, better yet, to believe in this, and the murmuring will cease, and a divine consolation will settle in our souls, a joy shared by the inhabitants of the world above.

Let us bring to mind the Holy Royal Martyrs of Russia, especially the young and brutally murdered Crown-Prince and Grand duchesses. Life held out to them such wonderful promises. And what did they get? Golgotha and the cross of martyrdom. And with what humility and meekness they drank this bitter cup. Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was Himself crucified when He was only thirty- three years old.

What a striking contrast His path in life makes with the lot of so many false-prophets of Eastern religions. There we see venerable gurus surrounded by crowds of disciples, or, in extreme cases, a “prophet” who, at the end of his life, simply flies into the sky on a horse. In Christianity, the God-man Jesus spent three years tirelessly preaching the word of Truth, and in the end was abandoned by almost all His disciples and was crucified on the Cross. Truly, this was a stumbling block for the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. (*But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness—*I Cor 1:23).

But let us—all of us who are called by the Savior to renounce the pharisaism of the Jews and the paganism of the Greeks—take off from our souls' hardness and despondency and follow after Christ and the Saints, so that we too might confess, not only with our lips but with our hearts, the Christian Faith that makes no sense to the people “of this world”, *I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen!*

Let me Ponder on the Risen Lord Jesus!

From the Prologue of St. Nikolai of Ochrid

- ✚ In His earthly body before the Resurrection – a body subject to hunger, pain and death.
In His heavenly body after the Resurrection – a body subject to neither hunger, pain, nor death.
- ✚ How He appeared to Mary Magdalene in the garden, and Mary did not know Him at first.
How He quietly greeted Mary, and she recognized Him and rejoiced at Him, and declared her joy to the disciples.
- ✚ How He appeared to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and how they did not recognize Him.
How their hearts burned within them while He spoke with them, and how they only knew Him in the blessing and breaking of bread.
- ✚ How Simon Peter and the other disciple ran quickly to the tomb to confirm the news of the Lord's Resurrection.
How they went into the tomb one behind the other, and saw the linen clothes and the cloth.
How they both saw and believed, and both witnessed to this belief and Peter died for it.
- ✚ How Christ entered through closed doors among His disciples, and gave them peace.
How there was no material hindrance to His appearing in His glorified body where He wanted.
- ✚ How, for the sake of Thomas, the only one among the Disciples who doubted, He appeared a second time in His glorified body.
 - How Thomas put his fingers into the wounds on the Lord's pure body, and believed.
- ✚ How He appeared to the Disciples on the shore of the lake, and called to them: 'Children!'
How He again filled their nets with fish, and they knew Him, though none dare ask: 'Who art Thou?'
- ✚ How He provided for the physical feeding of His disciples, breaking and blessing the bread for the two at Emmaus.
How, on the shore of the lake, He asked the disciples: 'What have you to eat?' and, when they told Him that they had nothing, prepared bread and fish and fed them.
- ✚ How He appeared alive after His death to five hundred people at once, according to the testimony of the Apostle Paul (1 Cor. 15:6).
How He appeared to the Apostle James, again according to the testimony of the Apostle Paul (1 Cor. 15:7).
How still more of those who were living in St. Paul's time, outside the circle of the apostles, saw Him.
- ✚ How He remained on earth for forty days after His Resurrection, showing Himself to the faithful and confirming them in the Faith.
How, during these forty days, He showed plainly that He did not rise for His own sake, but for the sake of men.
- ✚ How His Resurrection brought unspeakable joy to those who loved Him.
How His Resurrection brought unspeakable bitterness to those who hated Him.

Let me Ponder...

How His last coming into the world, in power and glory, will call forth different responses from men – either joy or bitterness.

✦ How He is close to His disciples in His glorified body; close to those seeking Him (Mary Magdalene in the garden); close to those who are afraid (the disciples in the locked room); close to those who are hungry (on the shore of the lake).
How He is even now close to each of us who seeks Him, or is fearful or hungry.

✦ How He, appearing to the apostles, appears to each one of us.
How His Resurrection is proof of life immortal, and is the herald of this immortal life for the whole of the human race.
How He, by His Resurrection, justified the faith and hope of men in immortality.

✦ How He, by His Resurrection, destroyed for the faithful the fear of death.
How His Resurrection is the beginning of new days of light in the history of the human race.

How His Resurrection is my peace and my strength, and the resurrection of my soul while I am still in the body.

✦ How His Resurrection drives far from us all confusion, sorrow and distress. How His Resurrection brings serenity, courage and good-will to the soul of man.

✦ How His Resurrection stimulates us and strengthens us for every good work, both physical and spiritual. How His Resurrection illumines every good work of ours with the light of hope in the living God, who numbers our labors, measures them, and keeps them for the Day of Judgement.

✦ How His Resurrection is a great light, driving away the darkness of our doubt, ignorance, and despair concerning life after death.
How His Resurrection is a great light, which reveals the path by which we must walk in this life to attain to the life to come.

✦ How He commanded that repentance be preached in His name, and the forgiveness of sins.
How He commanded the disciples to wait upon the Father's promise of the power from on high of the Holy Spirit

On Pascha eve, when the procession, having processed round the church, steps in front of the closed doors, the minds of the faithful pass through an incalculably brief but spiritually significant moment as it were of perplexed, questioning silence: 'Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre?' (Mark 16:3) Will the sepulchre be empty because Christ has risen? When the doors open at the sign of the cross and we enter the brilliantly illuminated church to the singing of the triumphant Pascha hymn, our hearts overflow with joy because Christ is risen from the dead, and the Pascha miracle takes place in our souls. For we 'see Christ's resurrection,' cleansing our senses, we behold 'Christ shining with Light' and 'approaching like a Bridegroom He comes forth from the tomb'. We lose consciousness of time and place, transcend the confines of ourselves and enter the timeless sabbath of 'rest to the people of God' (Heb. 4:9-10).

-Fr. Sergius Bulgakov, Paris

A Resurrection and a Repentance

~ Victoria, Internet commentator

Last year, I went to a retreat given by the Abbott of Saint Tikhon's Monastery (Father Sergius). During the retreat he relayed the following story. It is one that I have pondered often in the past year since hearing it – it is extremely uplifting, at least it was to me. The retreat was the morning after the shootings in Paris.

The story is about the conversion of a Muslim ISIS terrorist, who was found dead on the eastern border of Syria by two monks. These monks were far from their monastery and came upon this dead terrorist. This dead man had the blood of many innocent Christians on his hands (and soul). These monks, in the truest most beautiful Christian witness decided this man needed a burial. They carried – the literally dead weight of this man – 26 kilometers – back their monastery for burial. That's a long walk.

I am struck by the similarity to the Parable of the Good Samaritan and I can only surmise that the burial would have included prayer for this man's soul. At some point before or during his burial, he came back to life!

His testimony is that in death, his soul stood before the gates of hell. God told him that he failed miserably as a human soul and that he would be banned from Heaven if he chose to die, but that if he chose to live, he would be given a chance for repentance.

In the time he was dead, the terrorist had to relive the deaths of all those he brutally murdered through their eyes. He says it will haunt him for the rest of his life. Ultimately, he very quickly converted to Christianity and is living out his repentance in that monastery. His soul stood before the Light and he came to his senses, and realized all he been taught as a Muslim was false.

I cannot help but also contrast this to the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. I am struck that this Muslim terrorist was allowed to come back to the world, perhaps so that beyond his repentance he might give a testimony to other ISIS fighters for their conversion. Because everything they are taught is wrong.

We know that the rich man in the parable however was not able to send a testimony to his brothers because since they already had Moses and the Prophets, why would they be convinced by someone rising from the dead?

To me this bears out what our priest said, that we simply do not know the fate of those living outside of the Church, but that ours is a God of mercy Who searches the hearts and examines the minds of men. Certainly there may be some who are not saved (within and outside of life in the Church) and yet there is always hope for mercy!

Hard to Love: It's hard to love Hitler, and the ISIS terrorist, who tortures young and old in the most heinous, disgusting ways. What I try to do when I think of those committing such evil is to imagine them as my own son or daughter. If my own children grew up to be that depraved I would weep in repentance day and night.

I also often imagine such people as little babies and toddlers, when they were most innocent. My heart sinks when thinking about what must have happened both internally and externally to those poor little ones to become so disfigured by hate and perversion.

But the devil tries to squash any compassion we have for these poor, pitiful people. While it's perfectly natural to experience fear and anger at the horrifying acts of these people, the devil tries to snuff out love with raging vengeance, and blinding fear and anxiety. But Christ can give us the peace that surpasses all understanding.

~ Michelle, internet comment

Honor thy father and thy mother

"How One Must Live to Be Truly Happy..."

Editor's note: Often we expect of others that which we do not do ourselves. A good example of this is that we demand respect from our children, yet in turn are disrespectful of our own parents. Yet the Fifth Commandment- "Honor thy father and thy mother" - pertains not only to little children but to adults as well. Some useful advice concerning this matter is contained in a brochure printed in Russia in 1912, entitled "How One Must Live to Be Truly Happy." Such brochures were distributed to pilgrims visiting monasteries as "missionary leaflets." Below we offer an excerpt from the aforementioned leaflet. Let us apply these wise words to our own lives:

Do you want to live in such a way that all may be well with you on earth? Do you desire longevity and good success in all things? Then hold your tongue from evil, as you are told by the Prophet David. In God's Law it is said: **"Honor thy father and thy mother that it may be well with thee and that thy days may be long on earth."** Then dare not, my brother, utter a single unkind word to your parents. Rather console them in everything. Provide them not only with things necessary for life, but always speak to them with all kindness, with full deference. Do this and it will be pleasant for you to live; you will be filled with cheer and all anxiety will be far from you.

Thus, man, seek happiness not according to your flawed rationale; do not try to achieve it in your own way, but rather do this in the way that God has indicated, the way that the Prophets and Apostles, filled with wisdom, teach. Do not think that your happiness depends upon the acquisition of visible, temporal things or that you need to labor endlessly to achieve this. No! Your true treasure is so close to you, right there by the stove - it is your parents, or perhaps your feeble grandparent. Dare not consider them a burden, but rather as your genuine fortune. Recall who it was that worked so hard for you, and fed you when you were still small.

Who would carry you around on their arms when you did not even know how to crawl? Who tolerated stench from you and, for more than a year, cleansed and washed you from it? Who went sleepless for nights when you were ill and shed so many tears for you? Think about all this, my brother; and also, who was it that gave you this life? Who did God use as the tool with which to grant you numberless blessings? Is it not your only true and greatest benefactors on this earth - your parents, from whom you so often turn away from as something totally useless? Man! Fear God and honor your father and mother! Dare not inflict sorrow by your words. Honor them as if they were your king. These benefactors of yours have earned great mercy from you, if only because they granted you this life ...

And you, you regret that your parents have now departed from this life and that you had treated them so poorly. All is not lost. Things can be corrected. Let not a day go by without your prayer to God for them. Let not a Sunday go by without your offering a prayer in God's church for their blessed repose. And let not a week go by that you do not do some charitable deed for someone in need, in memory of your departed parents. During their life you were unkind to them, but you can bring them even greater good now. Pray for them continually and perform charitable works for them as often as possible. They needed you while they lived. Now they need your care for them all the more.

If your parents are still alive, most of all beware of not causing them any grief. If they tell you something for your edification with which you do not fully agree, be silent, and do not become angry with them. Better yet, say a prayer for them. Do this and you will be happy and long-lived not only in this life, but you will be able to inherit blessedness in the life to come as well. May the Lord grant you wisdom in this.

*Translated from a "Holy Trinity Missionary Leaflet" by Archpriest Gregory Naumenko,
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