

THE SUNDAY AFTER THE NATIVITY



Icon of the Circumcision and Saint Basil the Great -- January 1st



December 28, 2014

TONE 4

SUNDAY AFTER NATIVITY

DAVID, JOSEPH, AND JAMES; THE HOLY TWENTY THOUSAND MARTYRS BURNED IN NICOMEDIA

SCHEDULE OF SERVICES FOR THE WEEK OF DECEMBER 29 – JANUARY 4

THURSDAY, JANUARY 1 – *THE CIRCUMCISION OF OUR LORD, GOD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST;
OUR HOLY FATHER BASIL THE GREAT, ARCHBISHOP OF CAESAREA IN CAPPADOCIA*

9:30 AM – Divine Liturgy For all parishioners

FRIDAY, JANUARY 2

9:30 AM – Parastas + Rostyslava Bohachevsky (2007);
Req: Maria Odezynskyj

SATURDAY, JANUARY 3

9:00 AM – DIVINE LITURGY (NOTE TIME) HEALTH OF IRENA KANYK; REQ: ALEXANDRA TOOMA

6:00 PM – Great Vespers

SUNDAY, JANUARY 4 – *SUNDAY BEFORE THEOPHANY*

8:45 AM – Divine Praises

9:30 AM – Divine Liturgy For All Parishioners

*If you are reading the bulletin during the Liturgy (including the homily),
please **stop** and be attentive – будьмо уважні!*

Liturgical Calendars for 2015 are available in the church hall. Special thanks to Goodbody Mortuary for once again sponsoring our calendars.

Haven't seen someone in a while?

Give them a call. See how they are doing. Let them know that you not only miss them but also care enough to see if everything is okay. A kind word can go a long way.

Greeting Cards

Christmas Cards and various other greeting cards are for sale in the Church Hall. Please see Mary Kitt to purchase.

Let's go Caroling!

Between December 25 and February 2 let's visit our parishioners, shut-ins, and nursing homes. If you are interested in participating or you would like to be visited or you know of someone who would like to be visited, please contact Fr. James or Olena.

Warm Welcome!

We warmly welcome all of our visitors!
It's good to have you with us!

WHY SIN IS NOT A MORAL PROBLEM

Fr. Stephen Freeman

<http://blogs.ancientfaith.com/glory2godforallthings/2014/12/08/sin-not-moral-problem/>

Many readers have never before heard that there is no such thing as moral progress – so I am not surprised that I have been asked to write in more depth on the topic. I will start by focusing on the question of sin itself. If we rightly understand the nature of sin and its true character, the notion of moral progress will be seen more clearly. I will begin by clarifying the difference between the notion of morality and the theological understanding of sin. They are two very different worlds.

Morality (as I use the word) is a broad term that generally describes the adherence (or lack of adherence) to a set of standards or norms for behavior. In that understanding, everybody practices some form of morality. An atheist may not believe in God, but will still have an internalized sense of right or wrong as well as a set of expectations for himself and others. There has never been a universally agreed set of moral standards. Different people, different cultures have a variety of moral understandings and ways of discussing what it means to be “moral.”

I have observed and written that most people will not progress morally. This is to say that we do not generally get better at observing whatever standards and practices we consider to be morally correct. On the whole, we are about as morally correct as we ever will be.

This differs fundamentally with what is called “sin” in theological terms. The failure to adhere to certain moral standards may have certain aspects of “sin” beneath it, but

moral failings are not the same thing as sin. In the same manner, moral correctness is not at all the same thing as “righteousness.” A person could have been morally correct throughout the whole of their lifetime (theoretically) and still be mired in sin. Understanding sin will make this clear.

“Sin” is a word that is used frequently in a wrong manner. Popularly it is used either to denote moral infractions (breaking the rules), or, religiously, breaking God’s rules. Thus when someone asks, “Is it a sin to do x,y, z?” what they mean is, “Is it against God’s rules to do x,y, z?” But this is incorrect. Properly, sin is something quite distinct from the breaking of rules – St. Paul speaks of it in quite a different manner:

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. (Rom 7:18-20)

“Sin that dwells in me?” Obviously “breaking the rules” is not a meaning that fits this use in any possible way. Sin has a completely different meaning. We can take its meaning again from St. Paul:

For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now having been set free from sin, and having

become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 6:20-23)

Here sin is something to which we can be in bondage, and whose end is death. So what is sin?

Sin is a word that describes a state of being – or, more properly, a state or process of non-being. It is a movement away from our proper existence – God’s gift to His creation. God alone has True Being – He alone is self-existing. Everything else that exists is contingent – it is utterly dependent at every moment upon God for its existence. When God created us, according to the Fathers, He gave us existence. As we grow in communion with Him we move towards well-being. His final gift for us, and that union towards which we properly move, is eternal being.

But there is an opposite to this life of grace. This is a movement towards non-existence, a movement away from God and a rejection of well-being. It is this movement that is called “sin.” We can be in bondage to it, like a leaf trapped in an eddy of water. Sin is not anything itself (for non-being has no existence). But it is described in Scripture by words such as “death” and “corruption.” Corruption or “rot” (*φθορά*) is an excellent word for describing sin. For it is the gradual dissolution (a dynamic movement or process) of a formerly living thing – its gradual decay into dust.

This differs strikingly from the idea of sin as the breaking of moral rules. The breaking of a rule implies only an outward error, a merely legal or forensic infraction. Nothing

of substance is changed. But the Scriptures treat sin far more profoundly – it is itself a change in substance, a decay of our very being.

And here is where some creative re-thinking becomes necessary. The habits of our culture are to think of sin in moral terms. It is simple, takes very little effort, and agrees with what everyone around you thinks. But it is theologically incorrect. That is not to say that you can’t find such moralistic treatments within the writings of the Church – particularly from writings over the past several centuries. But the capture of the Church’s theology by moralism is a true captivity and not an expression of the Orthodox mind.

So how do we think of right and wrong, of spiritual growth, of salvation itself if sin is not a moral problem? We do not ignore our false choices and disordered passions (habits of behavior). But we see them as symptoms, as manifestations of a deeper process at work. The smell of a corpse is not the real problem and treating the smell is not at all the same thing as resurrection.

The work of Christ is the work of resurrection. Our life in Christ is not a matter of moral improvement – it is life from the dead. We are buried into His death – and it is a real death – complete with all that death means. But His death was not unto corruption. He destroyed corruption. Our Baptism into Christ’s death is a Baptism into incorruption, the healing of the fundamental break in our communion with God.

So what does that healing look like? Is it wrong to expect some kind of progress to be taking place?

My life experience (34 years as a priest) and reading of the Fathers and the Tradition suggest that such expectations are indeed misplaced. I puzzled over this for many years. I have come to think of our salvation as similar to the reality of the sacraments. What do you see in the Eucharist? Does the Bread and the Wine go through a progressive change? Do we see a transformation before our very eyes?

What seems to be true is that our salvation is largely hidden – sometimes even from ourselves. The Christian faith is “apocalyptic” in its very nature – it is a “revealing of that which is hidden.” The parables are filled with images of surprise: a treasure discovered, etc. Salvation has a way of just appearing. I often think of the liturgical drama in an Orthodox liturgy as imaging this very thing – thus the doors and the curtain and the “now you see it – now you don’t – now you really see it” flow of the service.

Finding our salvation means turning away from the appearance of things. It requires a deep and fundamental inward re-orientation of our lives. It requires the inward work of repentance. The moral life is lived on the surface – even atheists behave in a moral manner. When we turn towards Christ-in-us, we move beneath the surface. We begin to see how ephemeral and confused our actions are.

These actions are mostly the work of a false self, an ego that is broken and shamed and struggles frantically “to be better.” But the heart of the Christian spiritual life is not through this path of an improved ego, but through the path of “death to self,” in which we lose an existence that is not our true self,

and learn an existence that is ours in Christ. But what we see is often something else. For while we are finding the truth, the other still clings to its false existence – and this is primarily what we see and what others see. The hidden work of salvation remains unseen.

It is not at all unusual in the lives of the saints for the sanctity of an individual to remain hidden until their death. This was the case for St. Nectarios of Aegina. He was dismissed by many, though seen truly by a few. But at his death, miracles began to flow from him, and suddenly the stories began to surface.

And mysteriously, it seems this hidden life is often just as hidden from the saint themselves (just as our own true life is hidden from us). I think God preserves us from the burden of this knowledge for the sake of our salvation.

Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For you are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall you also appear with him in glory. (Col 3:2-4)

This is, again, the apocalyptic character of the Christian life. We are dead and our true lives are hid with Christ in God – and they will appear when He appears.

So what do we see in this life? The simple answer is clear: Christ. It is not our own improvement we search for, but Christ. Our own improvement slowly ceases to matter as we find Christ. And the more we find Him, the more clearly the false nature of the ego seems clear to us, and we can say, “I am the worst of all sinners.”

WHY A CHINESE BUDDHIST BECAME AN ORTHODOX ATHONITE MONK

by Fr. Libyos

<http://journeytoorthodoxy.com/2013/05/30/why-a-chinese-buddhist-became-an-orthodox-athonite-monk/>

On my last trip to Mount Athos I visited the Monastery of Simonopetra. It is a majestic monastery and the sky was fully blue. There I met a graceful novice monk from China. In truth, he surprised me by his presence.

An Orthodox rason on a Chinese man?

I was moved somewhat. I had never seen this before up close, only in pictures of missions. An inheritor of a great cultural tradition and for him to embrace Christianity? My friends and I got curious to ask him about this.

“Brother, how did you, a Chinese man, embrace Orthodox Christian monasticism coming from such a great cultural tradition? Were you a Buddhist?”

“Yes, of course, I was a Buddhist.”

“What won you over to Christianity?”

“Divine companionship!”

“Excuse me?”

“Yes, yes, Father, hahahahaha!”,

he laughed, since with every three words the Chinese seem to laugh at two.

“In Buddhism, my Father, you are very very much alone. There is no God. Your entire struggle is with yourself. You are alone with yourself, with your ego. You are totally alone in this path. Great loneliness Father. But here you have an assistant, a companion and a fellow-traveler in God. You are not alone. You have someone who loves you, who cares about you. He cares even if you don't understand Him. You speak with Him. You tell Him how you feel, what you would have hoped for – there is a

relationship. You are not alone in the difficult struggles of life and spiritual perfection.

I realized things in those days. A severe cold bound me to bed. No doctor could find anything wrong with me. The clinical picture was clear, at least the doctors couldn't see anything. The pain was unbearable and there was absolutely no pain killer that could stop it. I changed three different pain killers and still the pain was not alleviated.

At this time I got the news that the brother of my father, whose name I bear, had an advanced form of cancer in the vocal cords and larynx. He had a laryngectomy. It was the result of chronic alcohol consumption and smoking. Generally he lived a bad life, without any quality.

Then I felt something a former Buddhist and now a Christian monk on Mount Athos told me, that you need to have a God you can talk to; to perceive and to feel someone besides yourself Who hears you.

I don't know if it's wrong or right. I only know it is a deep need of man. This is evidenced by life itself. Even these Buddhists, who are from a non-theistic religion, created various deities. Even in dream language and worlds. But they have a need to refer to someone, to something, someone beyond and outside themselves, even if it's dreamy. Besides, reality and truth is something very relevant and will always remain so. It is an enigma, a mystery.

At this I remembered the words of Saint Gregory the Theologian, who had a sensitive and melancholic nature, when he said:

“When you are not well, or not feeling so, speak. Speak even if it is to the wind.”

SOVEREIGNTY

Our sovereignty and the capacity to reject the will of God

According to Saint Gregory Palamas, God has given us lordship over all the earth because of our capacity for sovereignty. With this sovereignty comes the responsibility to be good stewards of that which God has given us. Saint Gregory wrote, "There is within our soul's nature a governing and ruling faculty, and there is also that which is naturally subservient and obedient, namely, will, appetite, sense-perception, and in general everything that is sequent to the intellect and that was created by God together with the intellect."

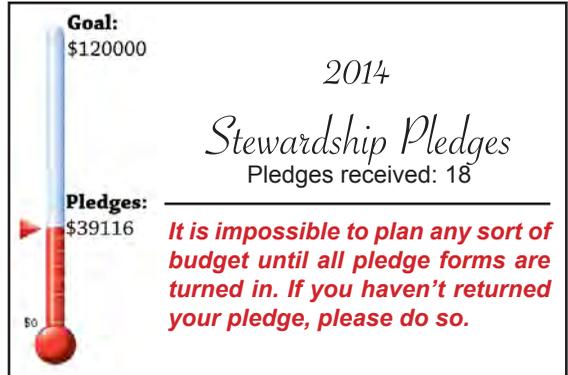
Our fallen nature has also given us the capacity to reject the will of God and to misuse our sovereignty, refusing to use our freedom in a God pleasing way. We overindulge ourselves with food and drink, overgraze our lands, destroy our rain forests, saturate our oceans and atmosphere with carbon based fuels, pave over our food producing farmlands and pump chemicals and other pollutants into our rivers and streams.

As though that were not enough, we squander our mental faculties with endless hours before our computers, TVs, and iPods. As creatures who were created to commune with God we waste our time in mindless pursuits, giving little thought to things that are spiritual and of eternal value. We battle against not only the all-ruling God but also against the ruling power inherent in our nature.

*With love in Christ,
Abbot Tryphon*

Please Note:

When you are away, please don't forget that the church still relies on your contributions. Our bills do not go on vacation. Your absence on any Sunday does not negate your obligation to support your home parish.



Parishioners That Are Home Bound

If you or a loved one cannot make it to Church, Fr. James would be more than pleased to visit at your home, in the hospital, at a nursing home, or any other place. Please schedule a visit with Fr. James.

Last Sunday's Bulletin

If you haven't yet picked up last Sunday's bulletin, it is available in the church hall, or on our website, stjohnthebaptizer.org.

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The Commemoration of the Circumcision of Our Lord Jesus Christ

On this day, the church celebrates the commemoration of the circumcision of the Lord Christ, to Whom is the glory. God had ordained the law of circumcision as a sign that His people would become a particular people over all others. This was that every male of the seed of Abraham be circumcised on the eighth day of his birth. God put every soul that did not obey this law under judgment.

As our Lord Jesus was born from the posterity of Abraham, according to the flesh, He willed to be circumcised on the eighth day, to fulfill the law of and to relieve us from the heavy burden of this commandment, as St. Paul says, "Now I say that Jesus Christ has become a servant to the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made to the fathers" (Romans 15:8). He also gave us the sign of the new covenant through baptism, as St. Paul says, "In Him you were also circum-

cised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in Baptism in which you also were raised with Him, through faith in the working of God, Who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the un-circumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses" (Colossians 2:11-13).

Therefore, He demands from us to keep the spiritual circumcision, that is to say the circumcision of the heart, so that we may live for Him in righteousness and in holiness, for He says, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God" (John 3:5). Glory be to our God forever. Amen.

Coptic source

**For more information on Eastern spirituality, visit
www.mytheosis.com**