

The Reading is from the Holy Gospel According to St. Matthew (5:14-19; Titus 3:8-15)

+ In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit +

Christ said, “You are the light of the world.” What is this light? This light is nothing less than our experience of God.¹ It is the grace of God that we have acquired. And we have to share that experience with others. We have to let our Light, which is simply the light and grace of Christ that we share in, we must let this light shine before men, because we are here to baptize. But how? How do we let this light shine? What does that even mean?

We let our light shine by our good works. But didn’t Christ say “not to do your charitable deed before men, to be seen by them,” and when we pray not to be like the hypocrites who love to be seen praying? And again, “do not to let the right hand know what the left one is doing?” What does it mean then for other to see our good works? First, hypocrites do their good works to look good; to impress others, and hear from others how wonderfully pious they are. They seek praise from men. But good works, performed faithfully, are only for the purpose of pleasing God. Secondly, it is not so much the outward display of our good works that draw men to God, rather it is the inward effect of those works on our hearts-hearts that we bring before others in our daily lives. Those good works, even those done in secret, and perhaps especially those done in secret, transfigure our hearts with the Divine Light of God, and it is that which draws men. They create a spiritual disposition that is pleasing to God, and which are like sweet smelling incense in the nostrils of the people we meet.

And perhaps the greatest good work we do in secret is prayer. We let our light shine by prayer. Prayer: dialogue with God; a calling upon His Name, especially in the midst of suffering and pain. This is the path of salvation. Not because we want to be free from pain and suffering,

but because it is precisely in those moments when our hearts are broken, when our lives have been humbled down to the ground, it is there we meet Christ.ⁱⁱ And it is joy. “The bones which Thou hast broken shall rejoice.”

You see, ‘it was through the point of His voluntary suffering, the Cross, that joy has come into all the world. And if that is the case, and it is, then even *our* pain and suffering can be transformed into communion with God. St. Basil said that we must learn to “make voluntary that which is involuntary...” In other words, to take your difficulties, those troubles that come upon us in life, and transform them into a voluntary act. Accepting them as from God. But how? By prayer.’ⁱⁱⁱ

‘We must practice using every opportunity to enter into a dialogue with God. To call upon the Name of God in everything we do. Before work, before a meeting, before visiting a friend, before we open our mouths to say anything, indeed continually, to say Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.’^{iv} We say this prayer with our lips at first and then silently in our minds, until the prayer descends into our heart. In this way we develop “a stable prayerful disposition. Prayer gradually becomes” our “natural state, the soul’s garment...”^v If we take every opportunity, every moment, to develop and to pray such a prayer, then our pain- be it physical, emotional, and psychological- our pain is redeemed, and becomes a source for joy.^{vi}

Archimandrite Zacharias says, “Pain of the heart is therefore of great value in the practice of prayer, for its presence is a sign that the [Christian] is not far from the true and holy path of love for God. If God,” he says, “through suffering, showed His perfect love for us, similarly, man has the possibility, through suffering, to return to God.”^{vii} A contrite and humble heart, God will not despise.

Think about it. It is through the pain and suffering of a training regimen that one becomes a fit and successful athlete. The pain and suffering is to his benefit if his heart is in it. In like manner, it is through pain and suffering that we put prayer into our hearts and become triumphant spiritual athletes of the arena. We find ourselves far from God; fallen, and we to be raised up. And this we do by prayer, for as we pray we are met by God's grace, the Light of God, and are raised up from earth to Heaven like some dead object being raised by a lever and fulcrum, where the lever is prayer and the fulcrum is grace.

When this happens, as we pray, our disposition is changed, for we receive the light of God. And it is this disposition, effected by that divine light, which shines before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in Heaven. St. Gregory Palamas said, "just as light effortlessly attracts people's gaze, so a way of life pleasing to God,"^{viii} a life of prayer, attracts men. Attracting men. Being fishers of men. We are here to baptize people. We are here to shine before men, so that they may see our good works and glorify our Father, together with us in the Church, as the Church.

Christ "does not say this to urge [us] to show off, but to urge [us] to organize [our] lives as is pleasing to God."^{ix} We must organize our lives around God; around communion with Him; around being the Church. Just as the planets rotate around the sun, so too do we arrange our lives around the life of the Church. How silly it would be if a planet were to say to itself, "I will be part of the solar system, but I'll only rotate around the sun and take my proper place in the order of the planets when it suits me." If that were to happen such a planet would find itself adrift in space. No, we are the light of the world, because we belong to the true Sun. We are the Church fixed upon the true Light of the world.

But we don't just come to Church for our own sake and our personal salvation only, but also for the sake of everyone's salvation. When we are absent it hurts not only us, but also the rest of the Body, because in our absence we deprive others of salt. We are after all the salt of the earth, for the earth. We are not salt to flavor and preserve ourselves as individuals. We are to salt for each other and the world. And since the Eucharist reveals and manifests the Church to the whole earth, we must come together and partake, not only for our salvation or for the life of the world.

The "goal is the assimilation of believer into the Church, the Body of Christ, as effectively and conscientiously as possible, so that the process which leads to spiritual perfection (theosis) will result...The Church as a divine-human communion in Christ is the only place" where we bear fruit. The Church is "communion between God and human beings in Christ. This communion is effected through the divine mysteries, particularly the Holy Eucharist, as well as through the other gatherings of the Church Body."^x We are our brother's keeper. We are not the salt of our own lives; we are the salt of each other's lives. And not only that, but we are salt for the whole earth. Should we lose our saltiness, our flavor, then not only do we suffer, but we all lose, and the whole earth's flavor becomes diluted.

Christ has redeemed us from the spoiled rottenness of sin and death. We have been made afresh, and have been given the task of being that element, that salt, which preserves the freshness that Christ has made. St. John Chrysostom says, "For that men should be set free from the rottenness of their sins was the work of Christ; but their not returning to it again any more" was the work and effort of His disciples.^{xi} And so it is our work. It is our work to each other and to the world; to be salt and preserve each other from rottenness.

Now, if you are making dinner and you put salt into the recipe then you've added flavor and a preservative into the dish. And the thing about salt is, once you've added it to the dish, it's in there. It's not coming out. So we must be in the dish of each others' lives, by coming together and being the Church.

So our prayer does not occur in isolation. It must be born within the life of the Church. St. Cyril of Alexandria, one of the Father's behind the affirmations of the Fourth Ecumenical Council, which we remember today, said that the Church is “the holy city which has not been sanctified by observing the law- for the law made nothing perfect (Heb. 7:19) - but by becoming conformed to Christ: participating in the divine nature through communion of the Holy Spirit...’ It is in the body of Christ, according to St. Irenaeus, that we have access to the fount of the Holy Spirit. It is therefore necessary to be united to the body of Christ in order to receive the grace of the Holy Spirit.”^{xii}

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ⁱ Ibid., 218.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dr. Christopher Veniamin, Lecture delivered at the Parish Life Conference, Eastern Region, July 8, 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Archimandrite Zacharias, *The Hidden Man of the Heart: The Cultivation of the Heart in Orthodox Christian Anthropology*. Mount Thabor Publishing. Waymart, PA, 2008, p. 65.

^{vi} Veniamin.

^{vii} Archimandrite Zacharias, p. 68.

^{viii} St. Gregory Palamas, *The Homilies*. Mount Thabor Publishing, Waymart, PA. p. 71

^{ix} Palamas, 71.

^x Lewis Patsavos, *Spiritual Dimensions of the Holy Canons*. Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Mass., 2003, p. 17.

^{xi} St. John Chrysostom, “Homily XV,” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, v. 10, p.97

^{xii} Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p. 177)