

HOLY TRINITY

ROMANIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH



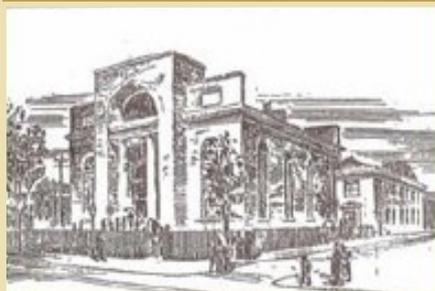
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CHURCH BULLETIN

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The 33rd Sunday after Pentecost

Gospel Reading Luke 18: 10 - 14



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The Lord said this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men— extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.'

And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Apostle Reading 2 Timothy 3: 10 - 15

Timothy, my son, you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, long-suffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra — what persecutions I endured. And out of them all the Lord delivered me. Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. But evil men and

impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.



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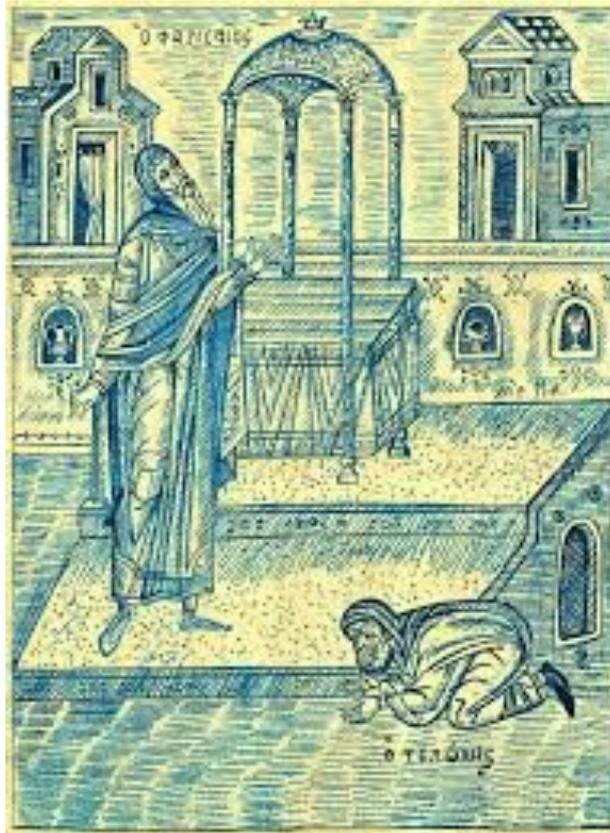
Synaxarion Sunday February 21, 2021 (Sunday of Publican and Pharisee): Holy Venerable Timothy of Symbola; Saint Eustathius, Archbishop of Antioch

On the Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee

The heart longs for Truth. There is no other route to freedom. But often the Truth is too much to swallow. We resist especially if it challenges tightly held systems of beliefs that support our view of ourselves and the world. Thomas Merton writes that, "Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false Self. We are not very good at recognizing illusions, least of all the ones we cherish about ourselves." The point of much of the Lord's teaching was to break the illusory shells of his listeners, to allow the pure light of the Truth that lay within them to break free. "You," Jesus says, "are the light of the world."

So, Jesus told stories. He loved to tell parables. They have the power to disarm the listener. They begin with words like, "Once upon a time," or "the kingdom of heaven is like this" and all of sudden defenses drop and people start paying attention. That gave the Lord the chance to sneak some reality in through the back door in a way that his listeners did not expect. The fact that parables do not come with ready-made explanations is also deliberate. The author of the Mahabharata says that if you listen closely to a story your life will never be the same. They are meant to make us think, to wonder, to explore.

For two weeks we have heard Gospel stories of things that actually happened – not parables. Jesus did eat in the house of Zaccheus to draw out of him the pure gold of the kingdom. The Lord tested the Canaanite Woman to draw out of her the amazing faith that stifled the sexism and prejudice of his apostles and healed her daughter. We do not get from these stories dogmas, belief systems, or instructions for moral living. What we get is two examples of what happens when people wake up and recognize God. What happens is faith, for faith is not about dogmas, beliefs, or moral standards; it is about recognition and encounter.



Jesus draws out of Zaccheus and the Woman the beauty that is within their souls, the beauty of the image. His love pierced their hearts and the kingdom of heaven flowed out. He helps them (and those around them) see themselves as they truly are. He helps uncover in each of them the "still, small point, untouched by illusion, inaccessible to the fantasies of the mind, the point of absolute poverty which is the glory of God" (Merton) that resides in every human being. But not just that.

The encounter with God is always a mutual exchange. Zaccheus, the Woman, and Jesus look at each other and enter into communion. He with them and they with him. He looks at them and sees himself.

They look at him and see themselves. They draw out of him power and compassion. There is between them a spark of recognition. They mirror one another. They recognize each other and faith is born. Not belief, but recognition. Here we learn something about faith. Belief is always about something; faith is always in something or, better yet, in Someone.

Today the reading starts, "The Lord spoke this parable." He wants us to listen, to let go for a few moments and fall under the power of story-telling, so he weaves a parable. Remember that parables are like our dreams. Every character in our dreams is us and every character in a parable is us. Every one.

We are like the Pharisee sometimes. Trapped in illusions of grandeur sometimes. Too busy judging to be of any good to anyone. Keeping the poor slob that people our lives at arm's length so we can be about more important things, like fasting twice a week and tithing, you know, religious stuff that makes us feel so godlike and often turns us into devils. Hopelessly lost in egoic fantasies with our noses so high in the air we can't smell that strange, unpleasant odor we haven't yet realized comes from our own rotting souls. Staring into a mirror made

by our own hands we recognize no one but ourselves, we have faith in nothing but ourselves. And what we see is mere illusion.

We are also sometimes like the Publican. It is inevitable because the divine true self within cannot forever endure the charade we try to pull off and we become depressed, confused, sick at heart; and in the dark somewhere, behind a pillar in some temple, we confess, "I am not who I say I am." Then that mirror made by Ego breaks and we see behind it another mirror. The mirror of the soul and there in that mirror is a face, our true face and also the face of God who was there with us all the time and, in fact, is us. The mystic is like a sponge. The sponge looks into itself and sees the ocean. The sponge looks outside itself and sees the ocean. "In him we live and move and have our being." He is the vine and we are the branches, but the branch doesn't see itself as separate from the vine. It sees itself as all vine. And that is what it is! Apart from the vine the branch dies. The mystical union between vine and branch and sponge and ocean is the primary truth of existence.

Faith is born when the False Self shatters, when defenses come falling down like the walls of Jericho, and we recognize the pure gold of the Image of God inside of us. We recognize Him, we recognize ourselves and we see at last that when Jesus said, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," he was not joking. It is and always has been "at hand" in the very fiber that makes up the fabric of who we really are.

The holy fool Nasrudin once went into a bank to draw some money from his account. The clerk asked him, "Do you have any identification?" Nasrudin pulled out a mirror, held it up before his face and said to the clerk, "Yep, that's me." Only those who have the divine gift of self-knowledge can say that with a straight face. Everyone has it, but not everyone is aware of it.

Faith dawns when we let go of what is false in us and that, my friends, is the whole point of the Great Fast we are about to begin. What we are asked to give up is everything that is false; first about ourselves, then about our neighbors, and then about God. Then it happens. We become all light.

Fr. Antony Hughes



HOLY TRINITY'S Liturgical Schedule from February 21 to February 28, 2021

Sunday February 21 (33rd Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee):

9:00 am - Matins

10:00 am - Holy Liturgy

11:30 am - Sunday School

12:00 pm - Coffee hour

Tuesday February 23:

11:00 am - Burial Service:

Gianina Liliana Agratini-Pasc

Wednesday February 24 (no fasting)

Friday February 26 (no fasting)

Sunday February 28 (34th Sunday after Pente- cost, Sunday of the Prodi- gal Son):

9:00 am - Matins

10:00 am - Holy Liturgy

11:30 pm - Sunday School

12:00 pm - Coffee hour



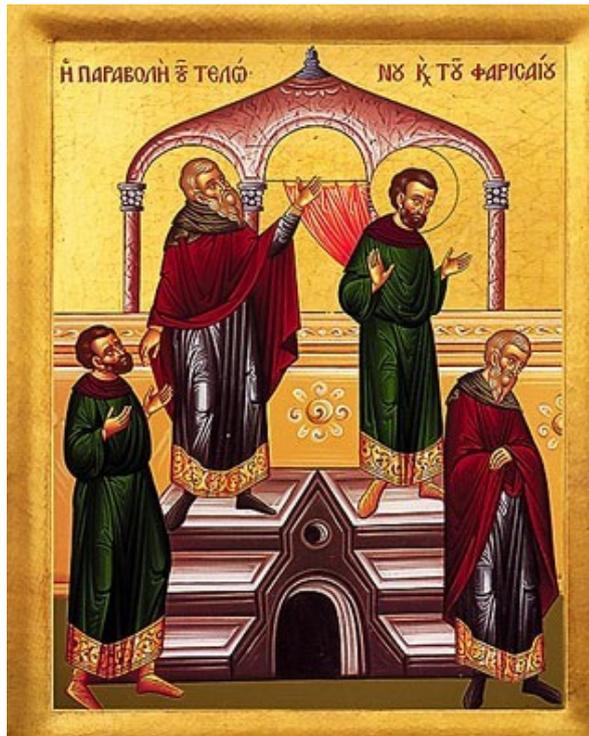
Cultivating Humility

There are some problems that have to be identified clearly and addressed plainly because they are so important, so foundational to our life in Christ. There are some temptations so subtle, persistent, and dangerous that we must always be on full alert against them because they have the power to destroy our souls. Today we call ourselves to that kind of vigilance against pride, which often leads us to wander far from the path of the Kingdom without even knowing it.

In the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, we encounter a man whom we would probably admire based on how he lived his life. He was just in his dealings with others, did not commit adultery, fasted, and gave alms. He appeared to be the model of righteousness. But he had one fatal flaw that destroyed him spiritually. That, of course, was pride as shown in his self-righteous judgment of other people, especially the publican or tax collector who was also in the Temple that day.

Like Zacchaeus, this tax collector was a traitor to his own people by collecting taxes from his fellow Jews to pay for the Roman army of occupation. He made his living by collecting more than was required and then living off the difference. He was crooked and a collaborator with his nation's enemies. There was nothing admirable about the outward appearance of his life. Who would not be tempted to look down upon such a person? But this fellow had one tremendous virtue that healed him spiritually. That, of course, was his humility as shown when he would not even lift his eyes up to heaven, but simply prayed from his heart as he beat his breast, saying "God, be merciful to me a sinner." The Lord explained the key difference between these two men in this way: "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted." The Pharisee sent himself down by the weight of his own pride, while the miserable tax collector was raised up by the Lord due to his humility.

Today we begin the three-week period of preparation for Great Lent, which begins this year on March 15. Lent



prepares us to follow our Lord to His cross and empty tomb. It is a penitential season that provides tremendous opportunities for the healing of our souls. But if we retain the spirit of the Pharisee, the disciplines of Lent will not bring us any closer to Christ; indeed, they will have the opposite effect. For it is possible to attend services and pray at home in a self-congratulatory way such that, like the Pharisee, we are really worshiping ourselves and not God. That is called idolatry. It is possible to corrupt prayer and church attendance as ways to build ourselves up and put others down when we fall into the self-righteous

judgment of others. It is possible to destroy the spiritual benefit of fasting, giving to the poor, and every other spiritual discipline through pride. We will do ourselves more harm than good by approaching them in that way. Spiritual disciplines are not ways of showing God how good we are or making us feel better about ourselves; instead, they help to open the eyes of our souls to the truth that each of us is personally the chief of sinners and totally dependent upon our Lord's mercy and grace.

This is an important lesson not only as we prepare for Lent, but for every day of our lives. We face temptations all the time to put ourselves in the place of the angels and to view others as demons. We may do that in relation to particular people who have harmed us or whom we do not particularly like, perhaps for good reason. It may have to do with people or groups we do not know personally, but who inspire hatred and fear in us for whatever reason. Without denying that harms have been done or that there are risks in the world as we know it, we must never allow our hearts and souls to be consumed by self-righteous judgment as though it were perfectly fine for us to celebrate how great we are in contrast to how rotten others are. If we have ever fantasized about how some deserve condemnation and we deserve an award for good behavior, we have become the Pharisee.

Thank God, then, that we have seasons of intensified spiritual struggle, such as Great Lent. For there is nothing like them to help us see the true state of our souls a bit more clearly. Periods of intensified prayer make us aware of how far we are from being fully present to God in the services of the Church or in our daily lives. Try to focus on prayer and you will likely be distracted by thoughts that seem almost impossible to control. Something similar happens when we try to fast. The call to abstain from the richest and most satisfying foods often reveals a fixation on how we simply cannot live without meat, cheese, and other rich food. And even when we change what we eat to lighter fare, the temptation to stuff ourselves remains. The reminder to give generously to the poor makes us fear that we will become impoverished if we help, even in small ways, those who are truly in need. We so easily justify extravagances for ourselves while others starve or lack basic necessities. In other words, the spiritual disciplines of Lent call us to humility precisely because they reveal our spiritual weakness and brokenness. They show us our pride because we are obsessed with putting our desires before God's will, and we can always find someone to look down upon in order to feel better about ourselves. When we struggle with these and other spiritual disciplines, they help us to gain just a bit of the spiritual clarity of that blessed tax collector who knew his own corruption so well that the prayer of his heart was simply "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

The hard truth is that we will never grow in Christ unless we intentionally take steps that help us grow in humility, that help us embrace the truth about where we stand before the Lord. To see that truth does not mean having ideas about ourselves or about God. Instead, it means gaining the spiritual health to become more fully the unique persons He created us to be in His image and likeness. Of course, we are called to holiness, but true holiness is incompatible with thinking that we are holy. True holiness means becoming like Christ, Whose humility knows no bounds, not even the Cross and the tomb. And since He calls us to become perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect, we are always in need of His mercy and grace as we press on toward an infinite goal that we may never say that we have fully met or mastered.

The key difference between the two men in today's gospel reading is that the Pharisee was so spiritually blind that he thought he actually had done all that God required. He even prayed to himself. He apparently thought that he needed no forgiveness and was justified

in worshiping himself and condemning others. His was a very watered-down religion, ultimately a form of idolatry that was focused on the glories of his own life. The tax collector was the complete opposite, focused only on his own need for God's mercy as the chief of sinners. As we begin to make our plans for intensified prayer, spiritual reading, fasting, almsgiving, forgiveness, and repentance this Lent, we should focus on turning away from every form of self-justification and every form of condemnation of others. We should embrace the spirituality of the Jesus Prayer as much as possible: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." We should look for opportunities in our daily lives to put the needs of others before our own, to live for others and not simply for ourselves. And when we struggle and fail to accomplish what we set out to do, we should kneel in humility like the publican with no excuses, no passing of the blame, and no judgment of anyone else for any reason. We should learn to see ourselves as the chief of sinners with nothing to present to the Lord except a plea for mercy and a humble resolve turn away from our sins and to turn toward Him in how we live our lives each day.

Our inflamed passions will tempt us to give up quickly when prayer, fasting, almsgiving and other disciplines are difficult. If we make progress in any discipline, we will likely be tempted to focus on that and fall into pride. We should be prepared for strange thoughts and odd desires to attempt to distract us. We should be ready for a struggle, but it is precisely through the battle that we may acquire the humility that will open our souls to the healing power of the Lord Who lowered Himself to the cross, the tomb, and Hades in order to rise in glory and conquer all forms of corruption. And if we want to share in the glory of His resurrection, then we must also lower ourselves by crucifying our passions, by dying to sin, and doing all that we can to destroy the corruptions of pride in our souls. In other words, we must kill the Pharisee within us even as we cultivate the spiritual clarity of the tax collector if we want to follow Christ to His crucifixion and behold the brilliant light of the empty tomb. The only way to do that is by being in the place of that humble publican who knew that he was the chief of sinners. May we all follow his blessed example during our Lenten journey this year.

Fr. Philip LeMasters

