

Notes from the Sermon of Sunday, January 29, 2023:

***“The Sunday of Zacchaeus: On Restlessness, Rest and Peace”***

**Scriptures:** <https://www.oca.org/readings/daily/2023/01/29/2>

**1 Timothy 4:9-15**

**Luke 19:1-10**

The Funeral Service for an Orthodox priest is similar to that of a lay person in that they are both patterned after the Holy Friday Evening Service which considers the death of Jesus. But there are also some differences: there are additional readings from Scripture, there is the singing of Psalm 23 – “The Lord is My Shepherd” and also special verses added to the hymn known as the “Kontakion.” The English composer and Orthodox Christian, John Tavener, wrote a special setting of this hymn entitled, “**Funeral Ikos.**” There is one particularly beautiful section which comes towards the end:

With ecstasy are we inflamed if we but hear that there is light eternal yonder;  
That there is Paradise, wherein every soul of Righteous Ones rejoice.  
Let us all, also, enter into Christ, that we may cry aloud thus unto God:  
Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia.

Here is Tavener’s “**Funeral Ikos**” as sung by the choir of King’s College, Cambridge:



1) **REST:** But for many priests there is one other short hymn in this Service which is their favorite. It is called the “**Exapostilarion**”:

**Now I am at rest.**  
**Now I have found peace.**  
I have escaped corruption.  
I have passed from death to life.  
Glory to You, O Lord.

No doubt, we are all looking for “rest” and “peace,” and the Service itself asks that God would “grant rest to those who are fallen asleep,” but do these just represent a reprieve from the hassles and drama, the exhausting moments of life or can they mean something more?

The Anglican priest and poet, **George Herbert** (1593-1633), wrote the following poem which offers us some insight:

### *The Pulley*

When God at first made man,  
Having a glass of blessings standing by,  
“Let us,” said he, “pour on him all we can.  
Let the world’s riches, which dispersèd lie,  
Contract into a span.”

So strength first made a way;  
Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honour, pleasure.  
When almost all was out, God made a stay,  
Perceiving that, alone of all his treasure,  
Rest in the bottom lay.

“For if I should,” said he,  
“Bestow this jewel also on my creature,  
He would adore my gifts instead of me,  
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature;  
So both should losers be.

“Yet let him keep the rest,  
But keep them with repining restlessness;  
Let him be rich and weary, that at least,  
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness  
May toss him to my breast.”

For Herbert, in God’s act of creation He endows humans with every gift, but that of “rest” so that humans would not “adore my gifts instead of me.” Restlessness, as a result, is embedded within us from the beginning. The Orthodox nun, Sister Thekla, considered Herbert’s conclusion in this way:

“God gave the gifts but He withheld the one gift which would make them so satisfying that there would be no more need for effort. **It was not only the sense of rest, of peace, in itself, which God would not give to Man, but the sense of rest, of achievement, in all the other gifts.** If God withheld rest, then it would for ever be missing from everything. Strength would never be experienced as fully strong, beauty would always be just out of reach, wisdom unattainable, honor passing, pleasure unsatisfying. If act, in the giving of the blessings, God not only denied the autonomous value of any one of the blessings, but far more, he removed for ever absolute validity from any finite condition.”

No doubt, Herbert was thinking of St. Augustine’s words from *The Confessions*, “You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and **our hearts are restless** until they rest in You.”

2) *IN TODAY’S GOSPEL*, we heard the story of Christ’s encounter with **Zacchaeus** – the rich tax collector who in wanting to see Jesus climbed up a sycamore tree. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann in his book, *Great Lent*, entitled his reflection on this story, “**The Desire**,” recognizing in Zacchaeus a dissatisfaction, a restlessness that moved

beyond just the continued acquisition of material to a change in the way he looked at his life and what he really wanted. Zacchaeus desired to see Jesus, who said to him, “Zacchaeus, make haste and come down [from the tree], for today I must stay at your house.” Jesus as well desired to be part of his life.

The prayer for the Blessing of Homes includes these words to us: “O God our Savior... who condescended to enter under the roof of Zacchaeus, bringing salvation to him and to all his house, also keep safe from harm those who dwell here,” reminds us of this mutual longing that we would have for Christ and He for us.

3) **THE FEAST OF ST. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH – THE GOD-BEARER:** Today, January 29, we celebrate one of the feasts of St. Ignatius who died in 107;

Here is a description of today’s feast: <https://www.oca.org/saints/lives/2023/01/29/100335-translation-of-the-relics-of-the-hieromartyr-ignatius-the-godbea>

and his main feast is on, December 20: <https://www.oca.org/saints/lives/2023/12/20/103594-hieromartyr-ignatius-the-god-bearer-bishop-of-antioch>).

Among many things he was known for introducing antiphonal singing into early Christian worship – the practice of having two choirs sing in separate and combined ways.

In 2017, when January 29 last came on a Sunday, we introduced as part of a Youth Sermon a little liturgical bell that was given, as is the Orthodox practice, a name – **Ignatius**. The bell is on the lower part of our iconostas.



I also shared the following part of one of St. Ignatius’s letters:

“You should form yourselves into a choir, so that in perfect harmony and taking your pitch from God, you may sing in unison and with one voice to the Father through Jesus Christ.”

4) **CONCLUSION:** The mutual longing, the desire, that Christ and Zacchaeus had for one another and that Christ has for us and that we are meant to experience for Him will someday – we hope – bring us the rest and peace that only He can provide.

This mutual longing – the search for rest and peace – are expressed in our liturgical life, prayers, and hymnography in which we, with others, “take our pitch from God” and offer our collective voice to the Father through Jesus Christ.