

**Our 50th Anniversary Sermon Collection:
Notes from the Sermon on Sunday, August 27 2023**

***On Sunday's Gospel Lesson that Empowered our Parish:
Thinking also about St. John the Baptist and King Herod***

Scripture Readings:

Gospel: Matthew 19:16-26

Epistle: 1 Cor. 15:1-11

Several weeks ago we heard the words of **St. Tikhon of Zadonsk** on the day of his feast:

“Whenever you read the gospel, Christ himself is speaking to you. And while you read, you are praying and talking to Him.”

1) **IMPOSSIBLE AND POSSIBLE:** Over 50 years and within the Gospel lessons of approximately 5,000 Divine Liturgies, Christ has been speaking in ways that have been specific and appropriate to us as individuals and as a community. For me, no doubt the most direct way He spoke to our community came about 25 years ago in the context of our process for deciding our building process.

We had been considering several options throughout the 1980s and 90s and finally we needed to decide a path which would require selling the church in which we had been worshipping and buying different property and building a new church. On the day of the Meeting we heard today's Gospel.

Jesus's response to the young man who wanted to know what he needed to do to have eternal life – “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” - was specific to him and others have heard this message and followed it literally (see the life of St. Anthony the Great of Egypt).

But the message I believe that our community needed to hear that day came at the end of the Gospel when in response to the disciples' question to Jesus about, “Who then can be saved?” - He replied:

“With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

The Greek word for possible, “**dynatos**,” means to have the ability, to be able or to have the power to do something. It was important for us that day to be convinced that though the project might have seemed overwhelming and beyond our human limits, with God's help we had the ability, the power – as suggested by one of our community members – to “just do it.” We voted to move forward and we did it!

In Greek, the addition of a single letter, “a” (called – the “alpha privative”) expresses negation, absence, or the opposite. In this case, “**adynatos**” means – “impossible.”

2) **BAPTISM, CHRISMATION, AND GOD’S GRACE:** Yesterday the Sacraments of Baptism and Chrismation – the personal opportunities to receive the mysteries of new life and God’s grace – were offered to a young baby boy. It was said by Saints Kallistos and Ignatios, that “**the aim of the Christian life is to return to that perfect grace of the Holy and Life-giving Spirit, which was given to us from the beginning in divine baptism.**” During the Service we prayed that he would “increase the measure of grace” offered to him. In today’s Epistle, St. Paul was hopeful that God’s “**grace toward me was not in vain**” (1 Cor. 15:10).

One might say that Baptism, Chrismation, the Eucharist and all of the Sacraments God offers through the Church always assume the gift of God’s grace which empowers and makes life possible in all of its richness.

3) **WHAT TO DO WITH THE POWER:** But ability and power can build or destroy (as in the word, “dynamite”). Peter Bouteneff in his book, ***How to Be a Sinner***, describes his experience of visiting Hiroshima:

While I was living in Japan in the 1980s, I visited Hiroshima. I spent hours wandering through the memorials and exhibits that recount the events and aftermath of August 6, 1945, when the US dropped an atom bomb on the city in one of the last events in World War II. I came across a life-sized replica of the bomb that laid waste to the city and destroyed hundreds of thousands of lives. As I looked at that murderous piece of metal, I had a sudden, momentary vision of that bomb, in a tiny form, inside my own heart. I saw the specter as a gift from God, a fledgling insight that there is no sin that I am not capable of doing or rationalizing. There is no sin that I am not capable of committing within the recesses of my heart or potentially in reality. It is still hard for me to say, with complete commitment, that I am the foremost of all sinners. But I know how it is possible to say it and mean it”(58).

Perhaps we have also realized that we as well contain within ourselves the potential and power to cause great destruction to ourselves and others, to “go nuclear.”

3) **KING HEROD: PERPLEXED, GLAD, AND VIOLENT:** Today we also anticipate and remember the Beheading of St. John the Baptist (which will be celebrated with a Vespereal Liturgy on Monday evening). In the festal Gospel lesson from St. Mark (Mark 6:14-29) we heard how the Jewish King Herod has been told by John that it was “not lawful for you to have your brother (Philip’s) wife, Herodias.” She had a grudge against him for saying this, and wanted to kill him. But could not, “for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. **“When he heard him, he was much perplexed; and yet he heard him gladly.”**

This is such an interesting observation about Herod. As St. Tikhon explained and we as a community have discovered the words of Christ in the Gospel or the message of the saints (like St. John) can be both perplexing and yet make us glad: however, the question becomes – what do we do?

One thing led to another, but due to his pride, King Herod ended “going nuclear” and calling for the beheading of John (read the whole Gospel account to learn why this happened).

CONCLUSION: In considering our summer-long questions related to our 50th Anniversary:

Who is Jesus and What Have We to Do with Him (and Him with Us)

we can add today’s themes:

- Jesus is the one who in filling us with His grace grants us the ability, the power to do things that might humanly be impossible. In Greek, just the addition or subtraction of a single letter, “a,” transforms an impossibility into that which is possible with God (and vice versa).
- In speaking to us in every reading of the Gospel, Christ offers us words which might at times seem perplexing, but hopefully, they are messages that we receive with gladness.
- Yet, though our life – both personal and as a community – can be offered through the Sacramental gifts of Baptism, Chrismation, and the Eucharist for “increasing the measure of grace” given to us, these gifts can be received “in vain” and can lead to the use of power that corrupts and destroys.
- It all depends on how we hear and receive the message.