

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.

Notes from the Sermon on Sunday, February 5, 2023:

***“On Meeting the Lord, the Publican and the Pharisee, and the Problem with Our Thoughts”***

**Scriptures:**

Luke 2:22-40

Luke 18:10-14

Before each Divine Liturgy as the priest enters the altar, he offers the following “Entrance Prayer”:

“Have mercy on us, O Lord, have mercy on us, for laying aside all excuse, we sinners offer to You, as to our Master, this supplication: have mercy on us.”

Today in the two stories from the Gospel of St. Luke just read, we heard about the intersection of two events that took place as the main characters entered the Temple.

**1) The Feast of the Meeting of the Lord:**



First, we continue to celebrate the Great Feast of the Meeting of the Lord during which the requirements of the Jewish law for a 40 day old child and his mother are fulfilled in the Temple (See the composite reading for Vespers of the Feast - Exodus 12, 13; Numbers 8; Leviticus 12 – <https://www.oca.org/readings/daily/2023/02/02/1>).

But as the name of the Feast implies, “the Meeting of the Lord,” also speaks of the encounter with Christ that takes place with Simeon and Anna who have been prepared by the Holy Spirit to meet Him. This Feast marks the end of the season of God’s illumination and revelation in Christ that takes place over his Nativity, Epiphany, and this Meeting.

## 2) The Publican and the Pharisee:



In the second Gospel Jesus shares a story, a parable about two men who enter the Temple to pray. A traditional Orthodox definition of prayer is to “stand before God” and we hear how both the publican/the tax collector and the pharisee though not speaking to one another are featured as standing in the Temple offering their thoughts and prayers before God, in a sense, meeting the Lord again in this place.

The Pharisee only speaks about his accomplishments, even comparing himself to the publican, who himself can only offer the words, “God, be merciful to me a sinner.”

3) **Thoughts:** In his book, “*Our Thoughts Determine our Lives,*” the Elder Thaddeus warns that our good and bad thoughts can become reality and they can both influence our own actions, and even have an influence on others. The "role of Christians in the world is to filter the atmosphere and expand the atmosphere of the Kingdom of God."

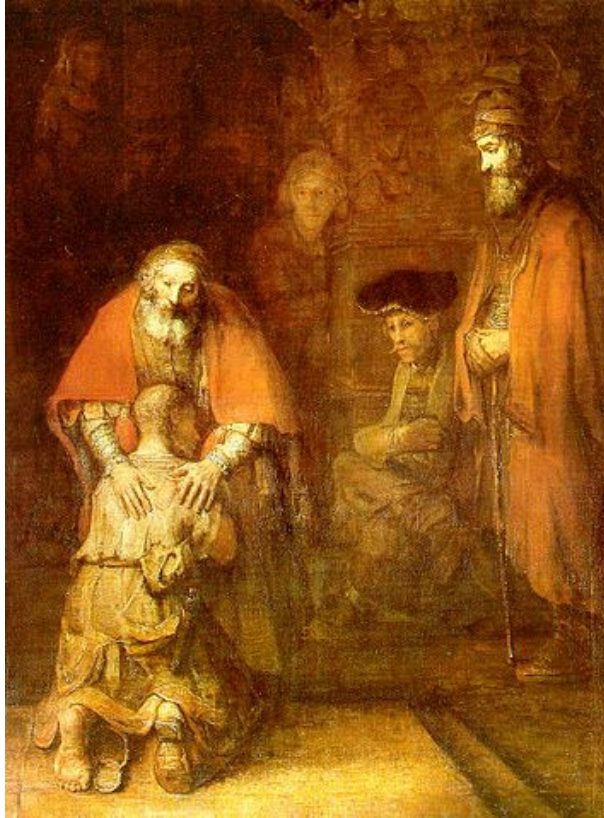
**Conclusion:** This can become possible – returning again to the priestly entrance prayer – by confronting our thoughts, beginning with our own actions to “lay aside all excuse,” and entreating God for His mercy. In our spiritual Tradition, this includes the incorporation of the Jesus Prayer: “O Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner” (or various shorter forms of it).

In this way, we can prepare ourselves for the opportunity that Great Lent and Pascha provide for an authentic meeting with the Lord.

Notes from the Sermon on Sunday, February 12, 2023:

***The Prodigal Son: "Somehow grace has found me and I had to let him in."***

***Gospel: Luke 15:11-32***



***Rembrandt: The Prodigal Son***

In 2018, Bonnie Raitt heard about a woman who had donated her deceased son's organs. Eventually, the woman was able to meet the young man who had received her son's heart. Bonnie described that experience in the song, "***Just Like That,***" which at last week's Grammys ceremony won the **Song of the Year** award. Here are the lyrics:

***Just Like That***

by Bonnie Raitt

I watched him circle round the block  
Finally stopped at mine  
Took a while before he knocked  
Like all he had was time  
Excuse me, ma'am, maybe you can help  
The directions weren't so clear  
I'm looking for Olivia Zand

They said I might find her here

I looked real hard and asked him  
What she's got he's looking for?  
Said there's somethin' I think she'd want to know  
And I let him in the door  
It's not like me to trust so quick  
Caught me by surprise  
But somethin' about him gave me ease  
Right there in his eyes

And just like that your life can change  
If I hadn't looked away  
My boy might still be with me now  
He'd be 25 today  
No knife can carve away the stain  
No drink can drown regret  
**They say Jesus brings you peace and grace**  
**Well he ain't found me yet**

He sat down and took a deeper breath  
Then looked right in my face  
I heard about the son you lost  
How you left without a trace  
I've spent years just trying to find you  
So I could finally let you know  
It was your son's heart that saved me  
And a life you gave us both

And just like that your life can change  
Look what the angels send  
I lay my head upon his chest  
And I was with my boy again  
**I spent so long in darkness**  
**Never thought the night would end**  
**But somehow grace has found me**  
**And I had to let him in.**

**1)** Though this song is different from the parable of the Prodigal Son that was read today, there are some similar threads:

a) Both stories include parents (a father and a mother) whose sons appear as either lost or dead and at the end of the story they are found and are alive – in some form.

b) Events seem to happen: **“Just Like That”** – the loss of both boys and the awareness of something that leads to change or transformation occurs suddenly, though after a long and no doubt complicated period of time both for the mother and the prodigal son – the

prodigal son “comes to his senses” after being in a far off country and the mother discovers God’s grace after “so long in darkness.” See the two places it is used in Bonnie’s song.

c) The image of the **heart** as the place of transformation is emphasized in both stories:

I lay my head upon his chest  
And I was with my boy again

The father perhaps heard his son’s heart as well when upon his return he

ran and fell upon his son’s neck and kissed him fervently (Luke 15:20)

d) Both stories express the theme that “**somehow grace has found**” the characters and **they “had to let him in.”**

e) Being “**found**” by God’s grace and “**letting him in**” are essential themes in Great Lent.

2) The opening chapter of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann’s **Great Lent** provides us with similar vocabulary for understanding how this can happen:

a) Great Lent is meant to be received with **joy** and understood as an **announcement** or **invitation**:

**“Let us receive with joy, O faithful, the divinely inspired announcement of Lent.”**

b) Great Lent has to do with “**repentance**” - the changing or transformation of one’s mind and heart.

Fr. Schmemmann calls it a “**school of repentance.**”

c. Great Lent has to do with the proclamation of new life and is called the “**Lenten Spring**” in which emerge the “**flowers**” of repentance (look at the blossoms on the Lenten roses in our biblical garden).

d. Great Lent is a “**journey**” or “**pilgrimage**” to Pascha which invites us “home” – to the reawakening of the deeper places within our **heart**.

**CONCLUSION:** We can tie all of these threads together in this passage by **St. Theophan the Recluse**:

Congratulations on your safe return! Your own home is paradise, after an absence. Everyone feels alike about this. Exactly the same feeling comes to us, when after, distraction, we return to attention and to inner life. When we are in the heart, we are at home; when we are not in the heart, we are homeless. And it is about this above all that we must take trouble.





Notes from the Sermon on Sunday, February 19, 2023:

*The Sunday of the Last Judgment:  
Jesus = Anyone in Need*



*The Lenten Rose in my yard*

Before the start of every Divine Liturgy, after the preparation of the bread and wine for Holy Communion, the priest begins a censuring of the entire church – starting with a four-fold prayer as he censes around the four corners of the altar:

In the tomb with the body  
and in hell with the soul;  
in paradise with the thief  
and on the throne with the Father and the Spirit  
were You, O Boundless Christ,  
filling all things.

This prayer is a Trinitarian working out of several verses from Psalm 139:

Where shall I go from Your Spirit?  
Or where shall I flee from Your presence?

The point is that we cannot go anywhere to avoid God because **He fills all things, people, places, and circumstances with His Spirit and presence.**

This affirmation is even reinforced a few minutes later when the priest offers a prayer to the Holy Spirit that will truly mark the beginning of the Liturgy:

O Heavenly King,  
the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth:  
You are everywhere present and fill all things.

This is the language and the way that we begin every Divine Liturgy. But it is also the particular theme throughout this weekend's Services and is important as we anticipate today's Annual Parish Meeting.

**First**, on Saturday we celebrated our annual Memorial Divine Liturgy which included the reading of each family's list of departed loved ones. The Service and the final singing of "Memory Eternal" remind us that it is not our memory that preserves the departed but the reality that Jesus fills them with his presence and love. He stated in the Gospel of St. John that "all who are in the graves will hear His voice" (5:28) and that in the end "we shall always be with the Lord" (1 These. 4:17).

**Second**, on this the Sunday of the Last Judgment, Jesus told the Parable of Separation of the Sheep and Goats stating that the judgment is based not on the evil things one might have done but on the good deeds either done or not done to the "least of the brethren," who themselves are images of Christ.

Mother Maria of Paris reflected on the implications of this message:

The way to God lies through love of people. At the Last Judgment I shall not be asked whether I was successful in my ascetic exercises, nor how many bows and prostrations I made. Instead I shall be asked did I feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the prisoners. That is all I shall be asked. About every poor, hungry and imprisoned person the Savior says 'I': 'I was hungry and thirsty, I was sick and in prison.'

To think that **he puts an equal sign between himself and anyone in need**. . . . I always knew it, but now it has somehow penetrated to my sinews. It fills me with awe.

Jesus identifies and fills each person with His presence.

**Finally**, just as He fills the state of the departed and the least of the brethren with Himself, so Jesus enters into the working out of each person's life. We can ask: how does He do it?

Recently, while listening to the podcast, "**New Heights**," presented by the football players, Jason and Travis Kelce, the topic of the recent Super Bowl playing field was discussed. Though many people criticized the poor and slippery field as being a negative factor in the game's outcome, Jason stated that he didn't mind the field and even prefers some difficult field conditions because it forces him to learn to make adjustments and adapt to whatever is happening.

As it turns out, the Psalms also know something about sloppy conditions and slippery footing. Though no one looks for a way or path that is difficult to travel, the reality is that our lives can often be complicated and it can be hard to stand upright at times and our feet can often slip. We can become confused and uncertain. God accompanies people during this moments and responds:

He brought me forth into a broad place; He delivered me, because He delighted in me  
(Ps 18:19)

He made my feet like hinds' feet, and set me secure on the heights (Ps 18:33)

You gave me a wide place for my steps under me, and my feet did not slip (Ps 18:36)

In the Saturday evening hymnography for this Sunday, it was stated that God's "mercy and compassion are my only hope." He fills each person with His mercy and compassion enabling them to stand and to walk confidently.

**Finally**, we'll gather for our Annual Parish Meeting following today's Liturgy. We will review our church life and examine our finances and hear reports from parish organizations. We will discuss many remarkable things that have happened over this past year and anticipate the activities related to our upcoming 50th Anniversary Celebration in September. There will also be some "slippery" topics that will require us to be guided by God's Spirit and presence and we hope that His "mercy and compassion" and generosity will fill our deliberations.

**CONCLUSION:** Every Divine Liturgy – even before it begins and all the way to the end – reminds us how God, through His Spirit, and in Jesus, desires to completely fill us with His presence. His love is what provides "eternal memory" to those who are departed. He identifies with each person, community, and situation putting an "equal sign between Himself and anyone in need." He stabilizes our path and movement, allowing us to travel in the direction that would lead to Him and His Kingdom, and to share His "mercy and compassion" in caring, supporting, and encouraging others.

Jesus fills all people and situations – all things – with Himself.