



Prophet Elias News

**News in the time of self – isolation for the Orthodox Church
of the Holy Prophet Elias in Devon
10th January 2021**



Saint Maria of Paris: What Should We Understand by ‘Poor in Spirit’?

(The Gospel reading for the feastday of Saint Gregory of Nyssa (10th January) is Christ’s teaching of the Beatitudes)

For many people the promise of blessedness for the poor in spirit seems incomprehensible. What they find incomprehensible are the implications of the phrase “poverty of spirit.” Certain fanatics think it means the impoverishment of the spirit, its deliverance from all thinking; they come close to affirming the sinfulness of all intellectual life. Others, who refuse to accept such an explanation, are prepared to consider the word “spirit” little short of an interpolation into the authentic Gospel text. Let us figure out how we must understand this expression.

In the rite of monastic tonsuring, the tonsured person makes a vow of nonpossession, that is, of poverty, which can be understood in a materialist way as a renunciation of the accumulation of material riches. The strict fulfillment of this vow would lead to the blessedness of the poor, but such a narrow and materialist interpretation does not uncover the whole meaning of the phrase: “blessed are the poor in spirit.” The vow of nonpossession can and should be expanded to the spiritual domain; the person who makes it should also renounce spiritual possession, which brings him to the spiritual poverty for which blessedness is promised. But what is spiritual nonpossession?

Nonpossession in general is opposed to two vices : the vice of miserliness and the vice of greed. [But] it would be too simple to think that this concerns only material goods. Nonpossession, the absence of miserliness and greed, should concern a person’s entire inner world. We know that Christ taught us to lay down our soul for our friends. This laying down of the soul, this giving of oneself, is what makes a person poor in spirit. It is the opposite in everyday life: even with the most negative attitude toward material possession, we are used to regarding the spiritual holding back of ourselves as something positive. Whereas it is the most terrible sin, because it is not material but spiritual.

The virtue of nonpossession, spiritually understood, should make a person open to the world and to people. Life outside the Church, and in part a distorted understanding of Christianity, accustom us to hoarding our inner riches. We often hear that it is said that man should know measure in his love, should limit himself, and that this measure is his self-preservation, his spiritual well-being, his way of salvation. Christ did not know measure in His love for people. In this love He reduced His Divinity to the point of incarnation and took upon Himself the suffering of the universe. In this sense His example teaches us not measure in love but the absolute and boundless giving of ourselves, determined by the laying down of our soul for our friends. Without striving for such giving of oneself, there is no following the path of Christ.

And it is not Christ but the non-Christian ideal that speaks to us of the hoarding of inner and outer riches. We know what this ideal leads to, we know the egoism and egocentrism that reign in the world, we know how people are turned in upon themselves, upon their own well-being, their peace of mind, their various interests. And we know more. People’s care for their spiritual peace, their locking themselves away, leads before our eyes to self-poisoning, demoralization, loss of joy; they become unbearable to themselves. In a most paradoxical way, they become poor from holding on to themselves, because their eternal self-attention transforms them. The poor hold on to their rags and do not know that the only way to not only preserve them but also to make them precious is to give them with joy and love to those who need them. And why?

The rags are the corruptible riches of the kingdom of this world. By giving them away, by giving himself away entirely, with his whole inner world, laying down his soul, a man becomes poor in spirit, one of the blessed, because his is the Kingdom of Heaven, according to our Saviour’s promise, because he becomes the owner of the incorruptible and eternal riches of that Kingdom, becomes their owner at once, here on earth, acquiring the joy of unmeasured, self-giving, and sacrificial love, the lightness and freedom of nonpossession.

Extracts from ‘The Poor in Spirit’, in Mother Maria Skobtsova: Essential Writings, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003).

This Week We Celebrate

On Sunday January 10th:

Saint Gregory Bishop of Nyssa (395) and his wife the **Deaconess Theosevia** (385)

Saint Theophan the Recluse (1894)

On Tuesday 12th:

Saint Benedict Biscop (690) Founder of the Abbeys of Wearmouth and Jarrow

Holy Martyr Tatiana of Rome (218)

On Wednesday 13th:

Saint Hilary of Poitiers (368)

Saint Mungo Kentigern (612) First Bishop of Glasgow and Strathclyde

We wish **Father John** and all at the parish of **Saint Bega, Saint Mungo and Saint Herbert** in Keswick a **Happy Feast and Many Years!**

On Thursday 14th:

Saint Nina, Equal to the Apostles and Enlightener of Georgia (c339)

On Saturday 16th:

Veneration of the Precious Chains of the Holy Apostle Peter

Saint Fursey of Burgh Castle, Enlightener of East Anglia (650)

Saint Gregory of Nyssa was one of the Cappadocian Fathers, a younger brother of Saint Basil the Great. He is regarded as one of the most outstanding writers of his age, much admired for the depth and richness of his theology.

Saint Hilary of Poitiers was known as ‘the Athanasios of the West’ for his lifelong opposition to Arianism. He greatly influenced Saint Martin of Tours.



Saint Fursey was, after Saint Colombanus (23rd November – see earlier issue), the most influential of the extraordinary generation of Irish monks who evangelised Saxon England and Continental Europe in the late 6th and early 7th centuries. A disciple of Saint Brendan the Voyager, in about 630 he set up a monastery at Burgh Castle, near Yarmouth, which he led for some ten years before moving into Gaul, where he established another monastery at Lagny, near Paris. St Bede described him as ‘renowned for his words and works, outstanding in goodness’. Saint Fursey’s written accounts of his visions of Hell and Heaven are thought by some to have inspired Dante’s *La Divina Commedia*.

Only Wonder Understands

Concepts create idols; only wonder understands anything. People kill one another over idols. Wonder makes us fall to our knees.

Saint Gregory of Nyssa

Greetings from Saint James’

Nigel Ridgway, the Churchwarden of Saint James’ Church (where we use the Hall for coffee) rang to wish us all a Happy New Year from Father Henry and all the congregation.

Cancellation – Sunday 10th January

It was only after much discussion and with great reluctance that the Parish Advisory Council decided to cancel the planned service at Saint Stephen's on 10th. It was felt that during the present alarming surge in pandemic infection we could not guarantee covid security for the occasion, however carefully we made our preparations. This guarantee is a requirement under the present lockdown regulations for churches to be open for public services.

We should not feel too hard done by. Across the country, millions of people are having to do without the things that nourish their spiritual wellbeing, whether visiting the theatre or the library, or singing with their local choral society, or hiking in a group, or spending time with their grandchildren. Orthodoxy provides us with rich resources to fall back on in difficult times: we have our icon corners, our prayer books, the gospels, and the company of all the saints. Most of us have texts of the services of the Great Feasts, or can access them online; if we read them quietly at home, we often discover riches that we have not noticed before. Many of us have found previously unknown communities who live-stream services for us to join in. Let us be thankful for what we have.

Martin Olsson

Here we go again - but Christ is in our midst

Just when we thought we could start some sort of regular service pattern, here we are back in lockdown. Who'd have thought it!

For the sake of us all and everyone we may come into contact with, we obviously need to adhere to the regulations, and to the spirit of the regulations, and therefore we are going to have to forego our services. Which is very sad – I do so miss seeing everyone.

However, we have been extraordinarily lucky in the fifty plus years of this parish in that we've had a pretty full liturgical life. (This was brought home to me many years ago when I was attending Clergy-Laity Meetings in the Ennismore Gardens cathedral – there were communities who thought themselves lucky to have a visiting priest every two or three months and in the intervening time they did what they could together. And of course there are many communities now, and in the past, who are not able to worship together for all sorts of (mostly unpleasant) reasons.)

I believe we in this parish should look to those past years of wonderful services, Fr John's and Fr Peter's teachings and the feast days we celebrated together to sustain us in this time of fallowness. In fact, we are not without. God is with us all the time, not just in church. Soon on our daily walks we will see bulbs beginning to poke their noses out of the earth, we can watch birds from our kitchen/sitting room windows, a friend will phone or send us a message via social media. All examples of the wonder and magnificence of God's creation. Sometimes on a grey, wet day when we are alone it is hard to be positive. But! Wherever we are Christ is in our midst and will give us His blessing – we just have to ask Him for it.

Celia Olsson

More from the Exeter Book

Another of the great Anglo Saxon poems in the Exeter Book is *Deor's Lament*. The poet tells of a series of misfortunes various people have suffered, ending with his own:

When a man sits in despair, deprived of joy, with gloomy thoughts in his heart; it seems to him that there is no end to his suffering. Then he should remember that the wise Lord follows different courses throughout the earth; to many he grants glory and certainty, yet misery to some. I will say this about myself: once I was a minstrel of the Heodeningas, my Lord's favourite. My name was Deor. For many years I had an excellent position and a gracious Lord, but now Heorrenda has inherited the land once given to me by the protector of warriors.

Here is someone who finds himself in deeply difficult circumstances, which are getting him down. He has lost his job, and with it his home. Does any of this this sound at all familiar? Well, so perhaps does the refrain he repeats after each example of misfortune:

þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg! 'That passed, so may this too.'

Blessing Our Houses

In the present situation, there is very little likelihood of a priest being available in the foreseeable future to come and bless our houses. In such circumstances, we need to take responsibility for this important ceremony ourselves. All we need is a bowl of blessed water (from last year if that is all we have – it doesn't have a 'best before' date), and something to sprinkle it with. When we process around the house, we can take a lit candle and some incense if we have them. We begin the ceremony at our icon corner, and that is where we return for the closing Troparion. Father Patrick has suggested this outline:

To begin:

Through the prayers of our holy fathers, Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy on us.

O Heavenly King.... Holy God.... x3 Glory....Both now.... O all holy Trinity....

Lord have mercy x3 Glory....Both now.... Our Father....

Then sing or read the Troparion of the Feast:

When Thou, O Lord, wast baptized in the Jordan, the worship of the Trinity was made manifest, for the voice of Father bore witness unto Thee calling Thee the beloved Son, and the Spirit in the form of a dove confirmed His word as sure and steadfast. O Christ, our God who hast appeared and enlightened the world, glory to Thee.

Then the prayer:

O God our Saviour, the True Light, Who wast baptized in the Jordan by John to renew all men by the waters of regeneration, and Who didst condescend to enter under the roof of Zacchaeus, bringing salvation to him and to all his house: As the same Lord, also keep safe from harm those who dwell here; grant us Thy blessing, purification and health of body and soul; grant all our petitions that are for our salvation and eternal life; for Thou art blessed, together with Thine eternal Father, and Thy Most-holy, Good and Life-creating Spirit, now and for ever and to the ages of ages. Amen.

Then sprinkle holy water all round the house, singing (if possible) 'When Thou, O Lord, wast baptized...' or just say it as a conclusion.

At the end: 'Through the prayers of our holy fathers...' as we began.

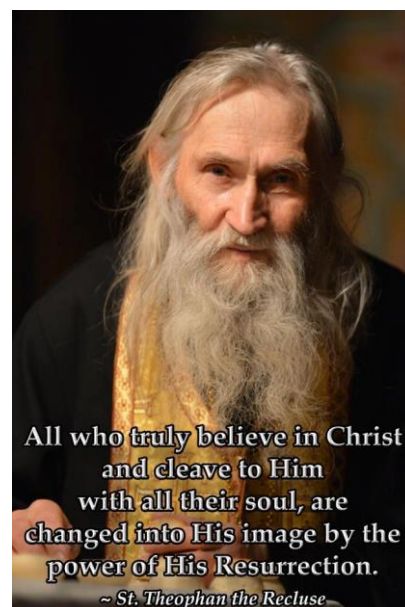
Joanna has suggested that we might do our houseblessings at the same time to help us feel more in touch with one another. That is a lovely idea – she and we mean to do ours at 3pm on Sunday (Jan 10th), and we would love to think of others doing the same. If you can take photos and send them to celia.olsson.art@gmail.com (as jpeg's please) we can include them in a future issue.

Hugh has kindly offered to bring some water from the Blessing of Water by Fr Trayan in Torquay to Saint Anne's, where he will be from 11am - 12 noon on Sunday Jan 10th. Bring your own bottle for filling.

To Care for All Things – Saint Theophan on A Life of Prayer

If we compare a man of prayer to the structure of the body we can learn the following lesson: just as – for example – a man with only one leg cannot walk, even if the rest of his body is in good health, so a man who is not active in good works cannot come next to God nor reach him in prayer. Penetrate to the heart of the apostolic teachings and you will see that they never speak of prayer alone. It is always accompanied by good works. For example, hear how the Apostle Paul summons the Christian to the spiritual struggle and arms him with all the weapons of God. The Christian must gird his loins with Truth and put on the breastplate of Righteousness. His feet must be shod with Truth – the gospel of Peace. His shield is Faith, his helmet Hope, his sword the Word of God. (Ephesians 6: 14-17) Here are your weapons!

All this I am bringing back to your memory so that none of you should think that simply because you labour in prayer, that is enough. It is not. We must be eager to care for all things – to perfect ourselves in every good work.



From *The Path of Prayer: Four Sermons on Prayer* by Saint Theophan the Recluse Praxis Institute Press 1992.