



Prophet Elias News

**News in the time of self – isolation for the Orthodox Church
of the Holy Prophet Elias in Devon
21st February 2021**



Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee – Luke 18: 9-14

The Gospel lesson pictures a man who is always pleased with himself and who thinks that he complies with all the requirements of religion. He is self-assured and proud of himself. In reality, however, he has falsified the meaning of religion. He has reduced it to external observations and he measures his piety by the amount of money he contributes to the temple. As for the Publican, he humbles himself and his humility justifies him before God.

If there is a moral quality almost completely disregarded and even denied today, it is indeed humility. The culture in which we live constantly instils in us the sense of pride, of self-glorification, and of self-righteousness. It is built on the assumption that man can achieve anything by himself and it even pictures God as the One who all the time “gives credit” for man’s achievements and good deeds. Humility – be it individual or corporate, ethnic or national – is viewed as a sign of weakness, as something unbecoming a real man. Even our churches – are they not imbued with that same spirit of the Pharisee? Do we not want our every contribution, every “good deed”, all that we do “for the Church” to be acknowledged, praised, publicized?

But what is humility? The answer to this question may seem a paradoxical one for it is rooted in a strange affirmation: *God Himself is humble!* Yet to anyone who knows God, who contemplates Him in His creation and in His saving acts, it is evident that humility is truly a divine quality, the very content and the radiance of that *glory* which, as we sing during the Divine Liturgy, fills heaven and earth. In our human mentality we tend to oppose “glory” and “humility” – the latter being for us the indication of a flaw or deficiency. For us it is our ignorance or incompetence that makes or ought to make us feel humble. It is almost impossible to “put across” to the modern man, fed on publicity, self-affirmation, and endless self-praise, that all that which is genuinely perfect, beautiful, and good is at the same time naturally humble; for precisely because of its perfection, it does not need “publicity”, external glory, or “showing off” of any kind. God is humble *because* He is perfect; His humility *is* His glory and the source of all true beauty, perfection and goodness, and everyone who approaches God and *knows* Him immediately partakes of the Divine humility and is beautified by it. This is true of Mary, the Mother of Christ, whose humility made her the joy of all creation and the greatest revelation of beauty on earth, true of all the Saints, and true of every human being during the rare moments of his contacts with God.

How does one become humble? Humility is learned by contemplating Christ, the One in whom God has revealed once and for all His glory as humility and His humility as glory. “Today,” Christ said on the night of His ultimate self-humiliation, “the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in Him.” Humility is learned by contemplating Christ who said “Learn from Me for I am meek and humble in heart.” Finally, it is learned by measuring everything by Him, by referring everything to Him. For without Christ, true humility is impossible, while with the Pharisee, even religion becomes pride in human achievements, another form of pharisaic self-glorification.

From Alexander Schmemmann – Great Lent: Journey to Pascha Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press 1990

The sacrifice for God is a contrite spirit: a contrite and humbled heart God will not despise.

Psalm 50: 17 (Archimandrite Lazarus’ translation)

Humility and Gratitude

We are told that pride has despoiled [the Pharisee], has taken away from him the fruits of his good works, the fruit of his outward faithfulness to the law of God - that only humility could have given him and his action full meaning, that only humility could have made his actions into life, into the waters of life gushing into eternity. But then, the question stands before us: how can we learn *anything* about humility if that is the *absolute* condition to be not like the barren fig tree, but fruitful, to be a rich harvest, from whom people can be fed.

I do not know that we can move from pride into humility in a single step unless something so tragic happens to us that we discover ourselves completely bereft of everything that supported our sinful, destructive, barren condition. But there is one thing which we can do: however much we think that we are possessed of gifts of all sorts of heart and mind, of body and soul, however fruitful our action may be, we can remember the words of Saint Paul: 'O, man! What have you got which was not *given* you?!'

We were called into being out of naught, without our participation: our very existence is a gift! We were given life which we could not create, could not call out of ourselves. We have been given the knowledge of the existence of God, and indeed, a deeper, more intimate knowledge of God - all that is gift! And then, all that we are is a gift of God: our body, our heart, our mind, our soul - what power have we got over them when God no longer sustains them? The greatest intelligence can of a sudden be swallowed into darkness by a stroke; there are moments when we are confronted with a need that requires all our sympathy, all our love - and we discover that our hearts are of stone and of ice. We want to do good - and we cannot; and Saint Paul knew it already when he said: The good which I love, I don't do, and the wrong which I hate I do continuously. And our body depends on so many things!

And what of our relationships, of the friendship which is given us, the love which sustains us, the comradeship? Everything that we are and which we possess is a gift: what is the next move? Isn't it gratitude? Let us then turn to God saying: 'O, God! All that is a gift from You!' All that beauty, intelligence, a sensitive heart, all the circumstances of life are a gift! Indeed, *all* those circumstances, even those which frighten us are a gift because God says to us: I trust you enough to *send you* into the darkness to bring light! I send you into corruption to be the salt that stops corruption! I send you where there is no hope to bring hope, where there is no joy to bring joy, where there is no love to bring love... and one could go on, on, on, seeing that when we are sent into the darkness it is to be God's presence and God's life, and that means that He trusts us - He *trusts* us, He believes in us, He hopes for us *everything*: isn't that enough to be grateful?

But gratitude is not just a cold word of thanks; gratitude means that we wish to make Him see that all that was not given to us in vain - that He did not become man, live, die in vain. Gratitude means living a life that could give joy to God: this is a challenge of this particular parable. Let us reflect on it, and let us in an act of gratitude recognise that we have no right to be in God's own realm - and He lets us in! We have no right to commune with Him either in prayer, or in sacrament - and He calls us to commune with Him! We have no right to be His children, to be brothers and sisters of Christ, to be the dwelling place of the Spirit - and He grants it all in an act of love!

Extract from a sermon preached by Metropolitan Anthony on 4th February 1990.

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On Saturday evening at Matins we sing for the first time the lovely hymn – 'Open to Me the Gates of Repentance'

Open to me the gates of repentance, O Giver of Life,
For my spirit rises early to pray towards thy holy temple,
Bearing the temple of my body all defiled;
But in Thy compassion, purify me by the loving kindness of Thy mercy.

Lead me on the paths of salvation, O Mother of God,
For I have profaned my soul with shameful sins,
and have wasted my life in laziness.
But by your intercessions, deliver me from all impurity.

When I think of the many evil things I have done, wretch that I am,
I tremble at the fearful day of judgement.
But trusting in Thy living kindness, like David I cry to Thee:
Have mercy on me, O God, according to Thy great mercy.

This Week We Celebrate

On Sunday February 21st: **SUNDAY OF THE PUBLICAN AND THE PHARISEE**
(Beginning of the Lenten Triodion – Fast-free week)
Epistle: 2 Timothy 3: 10-15 Gospel: Luke 18: 9-14

On Tuesday 23rd: **Saint Polycarp** of Smyrna (?155)
Disciple of St John the Theologian and first documented post-New Testament martyr.

Saint Nazary, Abbot of Valaam (1809)

On Wednesday 24th: **First (4th C) and Second (452) Findings of the Honourable Head of the Holy, Glorious Prophet, Forerunner and Baptist John**

On Friday 26th: **Martyr Phteini, the Samaritan Woman (1st C)**

A Great Sadness: A Personal View on Covid and the Distribution of the Holy Gifts

My faith in the love bestowed by God will never diminish but very sadly over the last few years my faith in the love bestowed by the institution of the Church and those who should be leading her has definitely waned.

In our own small world over recent years I have seen a kind of wayward un-consultative decision taking within the hierarchy which has caused much hurt and division. My first encounter with ‘holy’ authoritarianism was at the age of 13 when the nuns at school hid behind the infallibility of the pope rather than discuss and answer my questions. I thought it was a poor excuse then and I haven’t changed my mind since. Now in this time of global pandemic I have come across some instances which in my mind show a complete disregard by some hierarchs (and often noisy claqueurs) for facts and for the well-being of those over whom they are in charge.

At the moment my greatest sadness is in regard to Communion. Some have insisted the Holy Gifts are only to be given using the one Communal spoon (a practice by the way which evolved into common use during the 11th and 12th centuries as a response to ‘misuse’ of the Gifts by the Laity). It has been stated that those who do not want to use the communal spoon do not have to come to Communion. How arrogant! How divisive! How cruel!

Arrogant because it looks as if those hierarchs are putting themselves above science and even are testing God. They state that nothing bad comes from Communion – of course it doesn’t, but I’m not talking about the Holy Gifts here, I’m talking about the spoon. Yes, it is a special tool used only for the dispensing of Communion; it is not an implement imbued with magical qualities. However hard a priest might try not to touch the recipient accidents happen; and people breathe – the virus spreads in droplets of breath. Using one spoon is in total disregard for the most basic tenets of infection control. Disregarding science is not proof of anyone’s holiness or faith in God. Science is yet another way of discovering and explaining the myriad wondrous creations of God.

Divisive because it is dividing the Laity into sub groups of the fearful, the cautious, and more. Communion is not a time to be doing anything which divides people. Just look at the word.

Cruel because by saying that if you feel fearful etc. you don’t have to come to Communion you are in actual fact denying those people who probably desperately need Communion and the comfort of being in Communion with God and their fellows in church. Communion is God’s supreme act of love and at the moment it seems to me many are being denied that love because of a misguided sense of authority and understanding of tradition by some who are supposed to be serving the Church by caring for all her people.

When I became Orthodox 35 years ago it was like walking into light. I encountered no authoritarianism and I felt able to hold my fellow laity, priests and of course our beloved Bishop Anthony, in high regard, respect and love (which does not equate with agreeing with every single word they said). Now I still have faith in and love for the Liturgy and my fellow followers of Christ, but I cannot say I can include all parts of the institution of the Church or every member of her clerical orders in that. And that is a great sadness to me.

Celia Olsson

It is perhaps worth noting that all canonical Orthodox bishops in the US and Canada have consistently mandated their clergy’s, parishes’, and institutions’ compliance with civil directives on Covid-19 based on the best available scientific, medical, and epidemiological information. Ed. (Source: Orthodoxy in Dialogue)

The Valaam Monastery of the Transfiguration, Lake Ladoga, Karelia

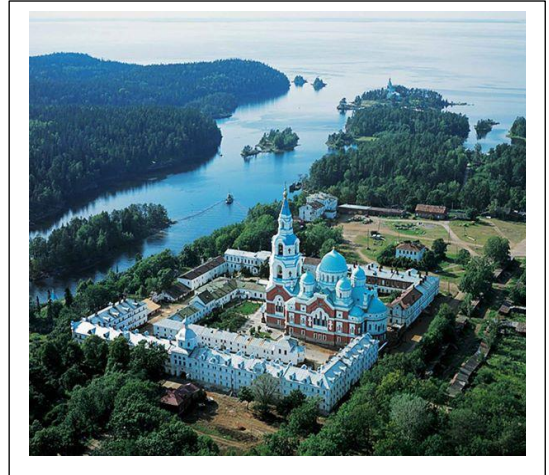
The early history of the Valaam Monastery is uncertain. There is a tradition that it was founded as early as the 11th C, but the oldest documents date back only to the 16th C. The monastery was abandoned during the Russian-Swedish wars, but resettlement began in the 18th C. The hieromonk **Nazary (Kondratiev)** (1735-1809) from the Sarov Monastery became Abbot of Valaam in 1782, and set in motion a huge programme of reconstruction, largely to his design. In 1794 he blessed six monks from Valaam, including Saint Herman and Saint Juvenaly, to travel to Alaska as missionaries.

Under Abbot Nazary's direction, the Valaam Monastery became famous as a centre of Orthodox spirituality, often referred to as 'the Athos of the North'. Saint Nazary returned to Sarov in 1803 to resume his earlier life as a hermit there until his death in 1809.

As the monastery was located in the Grand Duchy of Finland, when Finland gained its independence in 1917 Valaam became part of the Church of Finland. During the Winter War between Finland and the Soviet Union in 1940, the monks from the monastery were evacuated to Heinavesi, Finland. With the end of the war the border was moved westward so that all of Lake Ladoga was within the Soviet Union. Having lost their former home, the monks who had moved to Finland formed the New Valaam Monastery at Heinavesi.

With the loss of its monastic community and the inclusion of Lake Ladoga in the Soviet Union, the buildings of the original monastery on Valaam Island remained unused as a secular population moved on to the island. In time the island became a Soviet military base. As restrictions on the Orthodox Church in the Soviet Union eased during the 1980s, the original monastery was reactivated in 1989 and the facilities restored over the succeeding years. The monastery currently houses around 200 monks.

Source: Orthodox Wiki



Pride takes root in a man when he does not yet know himself perfectly.
Saint Nazary of Valaam

Saint Polycarp of Smyrna

As a young man, Polycarp was a disciple of Saint John the Theologian; in his old age, he made a strong impression on the young Irenaeus, who was to become Bishop of Lyons and one of the leading theologians of the Second Century. Thus he represents a significant bridge between the apostolic age and the later Church Fathers. Polycarp served as bishop of the church at Smyrna, and was recognized as one of the early combatants of Gnostic heresies that were beginning to spread throughout the Christian church.

The account of his martyrdom in the Letter from the Church at Smyrna known as *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* became widely known throughout the Roman Empire, including his famous reply when offered his life if he would acknowledge Caesar as his Lord: "For eighty-six years I have served Christ, and He never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

Sources: Britannica; Wikipedia



Noticeboard

Saturday, February 20th – Vigil for Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee: St Anne's...6pm
Sunday, February 21st – Matins and Divine Liturgy: Plymouth....9.30 Torquay....9.30

Apology

Some attentive readers will have noticed that the last issue was dated 14th January, not 14th February as it should have been. Our apologies for any confusion this may have caused. Ed.

