

# ***Saint Nicholas Serbian Orthodox Church***

971 St. Clair Rd, Johnstown, PA 15905

Rev. Presbyter Dragan Vukovic

**(814) 244-4063**

## **The Fourth Sunday of Great Lent**

**(04.03.2022)**

### **Mark 9:17-31**

And one of the multitude answered and said, Master, I have brought unto thee my son, which hath a dumb spirit; And wheresoever he taketh him, he teareth him: and he foameth, and gnasheth with his teeth, and pineth away: and I spake to thy disciples that they should cast him out; and they could not. He answereth him, and saith, O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you? bring him unto me. And they brought him unto him: and when he saw him, straightway the spirit tare him; and he fell on the ground, and wallowed foaming. And he asked his father, How long is it ago since this came unto him? And he said, Of a child. And oftentimes it hath cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him: but if thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us. Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth. And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief. When Jesus saw that the people came running together, he rebuked the foul spirit, saying unto him, Thou dumb and deaf spirit, I charge thee, come out of him, and enter no more into him. And the spirit cried, and rent him sore, and came out of him: and he was as one dead; insomuch that many said, He is dead. But Jesus took him by the hand, and lifted him up; and he arose. And when he was come into the house, his disciples asked him privately, Why could not we cast him out? And he said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting. And they departed thence, and passed through Galilee; and he would not that any man should know it. For he taught his disciples, and said unto them, The Son of man is delivered into the hands of men, and they shall kill him; and after that he is killed, he shall rise the third day. **(KJV)**

## *St. John Climacus* *Matthew 4:25-5:12*

And there followed Him great multitudes of people from Galilee, and from Decapolis, and from Jerusalem, and from Judaea, and from beyond Jordan. And seeing the multitudes, He went up into a mountain: and when He was set, his disciples came unto Him: And He opened His mouth, and taught them, saying, Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you. (KJV)

God's Holy Church desires for believers to grow in Jesus Christ during Great Lent. The journey to Pascha is intended to foster repentance and renewal in Christ.. The Church provides services focusing on sin and the value of repentance.

The Fourth Sunday is dedicated to St. John Climacus. St. John is also known as St. John of the Ladder, The book, The Ladder of Divine Ascent describes steps for growth in Jesus Christ.

Believers are challenged throughout life with confronting personal sin and seeking growth in Jesus Christ. The Heavenly Kingdom and Eternal Life are the intended goals of believers.

Today's Gospel of St. Mark proclaims Jesus' teaching on the value of strong belief. Jesus said to the father with the tormented son: "If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth." (Mk. 9:23)

The believer's relationship with Jesus Christ determines the extent of personal belief. The contents of the heart, mind and soul reveal and serve as proof of the depth of belief.

Personal belief requires the necessary help of the Lord Jesus Christ for miracles to occur. The father in St. Mark's Gospel professed his belief and asked for Jesus to help him with his unbelief. (Mk/ 9:24)

Jesus healed the child. Jesus taught His disciples that prayer and fasting are required for healing to occur. The Church encourages believers to increase prayer and fasting to bring about personal renewal in Jesus Christ.

The journey to Pascha is moving with certainty toward conclusion. If personal growth is to occur, believers need to fully honor Great Lent in daily life. The remaining time of Great Lent is to be used wisely.

Participating in Great Lent is completely voluntary. Believers valuing their identity and life in Jesus Christ will make a serious effort to honor the fasting, prayer and almsgiving expectations of Great Lent.

Praying more, fasting seriously in thought, word and deed and being charitable are essential in the Lenten journey. Prayer, fasting and almsgiving bring joy throughout the journey to Pascha.

Being serious about the journey to Pascha will increase the joy on the Feast of Feasts, Pascha. Each day of Great Lent is an opportunity to invest in the Kingdom of God.

Great Lent is a time for repentance and embracing the Lord Jesus Christ with the heart, mind and soul. The joy in Christ exceeds all joys. Jesus' death on the Cross and Resurrection are definitive reasons to fast, pray and be charitable.

Personal examination and personal honesty with the self and with God are beneficial during Great Lent. A believer's conscience will tell him or her the depth of love for Christ and the degree of personal sin.

Confession and communion offer the opportunities for renewal in Christ and unity with Christ. The journey in life begun at Holy Baptism toward the Heavenly Kingdom and Eternal Life is renewed through confession and communion.

Christ's love is present and manifested in the Church. Believers are healed when being open to Jesus Christ. This Fourth Sunday of Great Lent is the ideal moment to repent and completely embrace Jesus Christ.

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***The Fourth Sunday of Great Lent. St. John Climacus. St James the Confessor, Bishop of Catana. March 21/April 3, 2022. Hidden Valley, Pennsylvania. Father Rodney Torbic***

## **GOSPEL ON THE POWERLESSNESS OF UNBELIEF AND THE POWER OF FAITH Fourth Sunday of Great Lent**

*This profound homily on today's Gospel reading by the great Serbian saint, [Nikolai \(Velimirovich\)](#), seems to speak directly to us in these confusing times of temptation.*

From the beginning of the world and time, all peoples on the earth have believed that there is the spiritual world, and that there are invisible spirits. But many peoples have been deceived in that they have ascribed greater powers to the [evil spirits](#) than to the good ones, and with time proclaimed the evil spirits the evil spirits as gods, built them temples, made sacrifices and prayers to them, and relied on them for everything. With time, whole nations completely left off believing in good spirits, leaving only belief in evil spirits, or cruel gods, as they called them. Thus this world resembled an arena of people and evil spirits. The evil spirits increasingly tormented people and blinded them, so that people would completely wipe from their memories the concept of the One, Good God and the great power that God gave to good spirits over the evil ones. Even in our own day, all peoples on earth believe in spirits. And this belief is essentially correct. Those who reject the spiritual world reject it because they see only with their bodily eyes—and don't see it. But the spiritual world would not be spiritual if it could be seen with bodily eyes. Every person whose mind has not been blinded, or whose heart has not become stony from sin, can feel with all their being, every day and every hour, that people are not alone on this earth with no company other than irrational nature, stones, grasses, animals, and other components of nature, its elements and manifestations; but rather that our souls continually have contact with the invisible world, with certain invisible beings. Just the same, wrong are those nations and people who denigrate the good spirits and call the evil ones gods and worship them.

When our Lord Jesus Christ came to earth, almost all the nations believed in the power of evil and the weakness of goodness. And truly, evil spirits had so taken over the world that even Christ Himself called them the rulers of the princes of this world. And the Jewish elders even ascribed all of Christ's divine acts to the demons and their power.

Our Lord Jesus Christ came into the world in order to break and uproot people's faithless belief in evil, and sow in their souls faith in goodness, in the omnipotence of goodness, in the invincibility and infinity of goodness. Christ did not destroy the ancient and ubiquitous belief in spirits, but confirmed it. He only revealed the spiritual world as it is, and not as people, at the devil's slander, imagined it to be. The one good, all-wise, and omnipotent God is master over the spiritual and physical, visible and invisible worlds. The good spirits are the [angels](#), and we can hardly count their multitudes. The good spirits, or angels, are incomparably more powerful and the

evil spirits. Evil spirits do not in fact have the power to do anything that the Most High God does not allow them to do. But the number of evil spirits is very great. In just one demon-possessed man in Gadara, whom the Lord healed, was a whole legion—that is, several thousand evil spirits. These evil spirits deceived in those times people and whole nations, just as today they deceive many sinners, whispering in their ears that they are omnipotent, that they are the only gods and there is no other god besides them, and that supposedly good spirits do not exist. But as soon as our Lord Jesus Christ would appear anywhere they would run from Him in terror. They recognized in Him the Upholder of all things and Judge, Who can expose them, and cast them out of this world and down into the abyss of hell. They had let their hair down in the world at God’s allowance; they had swooped down upon the human race like flies to carcasses, and behaved themselves as if this world were supplied to them for all eternity as a nest and dinner table. Then suddenly before them appeared the Bearer of goodness, our Lord Jesus Christ, and they started trembling with fear and crying out: *Hast Thou come to torment us before the time?* No one fears torments more than those who torment others. The evil spirits had tormented mankind for several thousand years, and found great pleasure in mankind’s tortures. But at the sight of Christ, their supreme tormentor, they quaked and were ready, if they had to leave the people, to go into swine or any other creature, if only they would not be exiled from this world. But Christ did not intend to completely cast them out of the world. This world is a world of mixed powers. This world is a field of battle on which people must consciously and voluntarily choose: either to follow Christ the Conqueror, or the unclean and conquered demons. Christ came as the Lover of Mankind, in order to show the supremacy of the power of good over the power of evil and to confirm in people faith in the good—and only in the good.

And today’s Gospel reading describes one of the innumerable examples of how the man-loving Lord once again showed that good is stronger than evil, and how He strove to confirm in people faith in the good, in the omnipotence of goodness, and the victory of goodness.

And one of the multitude answered and said, *Master, I have brought unto thee my son, which hath a dumb spirit: And wheresoever he taketh him, he teareth him: and he foameth, and gnasheth with his teeth, and pineth away... And oftentimes it hath cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him: but if thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us.* This event is described in two Gospels—of Mark (chapter 9) and Luke (chapter 9). They add certain details about the boy’s illness. He is his father’s only son, and is possessed by a deaf and dumb spirit. When this evil



spirit seizes him, it throws him to the ground, and he *foameth, and gnasheth with his teeth, and pineth away*. The evil spirit aims its arrows in three directions at once: at man, at all of God’s creation, and at God Himself. What does the new moon have to do with human sickness? If it causes demonic possession and deafness in one man, then why doesn’t do the same to all people? The evil is not in the moon, but in the evil and cunning spirit hiding in deceived man—that spirit blames the moon so that man would not blame it. It also wants to achieve by this that man would decide that supposedly all of God’s creation is evil; as if nature brought evil to man and not the evil spirits that have fallen from God. That is why they attack their victims at the new moon, so that people would think, “Well, there is the source of evil—the moon!” And because God created the moon, it would follow that “the Source of this evil is God!” That is how those beasts, more cunning and fierce than all beasts, deceive people. Essentially all that God created is good; and all of God’s creation serves for man’s benefit and not his destruction. If there is something that hinders the comfort of the human body, it serves in that case the human soul, giving it strength and enriching his spirit. *Thine are the heavens, and Thine is the earth, the world and all that is therein hast thou founded* (Ps. 88:12). *For all those things hath mine hand made, and all those things have been, saith the Lord* (Is. 66:2). And since all this is from God, it would follow that all of it can only be good. A spring can only pour forth what it has, and not what it does not have. There is no evil in God; so how could evil come from God, the source of goodness—pure goodness itself? Many people out of ignorance call all suffering evil. In fact, suffering is not evil; but some sufferings are the result of evil, while others are medicine against evil. Madness and demonic frenzy are the results of evil, while evil itself is the evil spirit that acts in the mad or possessed person.



St. Nikolai (Velimirovic)

The disasters and misfortunes that befell many kings of Israel who had become *evil in the eyes of God* were the result and action of those kings' sins. The disasters and misfortunes that the Lord allows to befall righteous ones is not the result of evil but medicine, for those very righteous ones as well as for the people around them who understand that these sufferings were sent by God for the good.

Thus, the suffering that proceeds from the attacks of evil spirits on man or due to human sins is suffering from evil.

But the sufferings that God allows to befall people in order to cleanse them completely from sin, to free them from the power of the devil and bring them closer to Himself, are not from evil and not evil, but from God to people for the good. *It is good for me that Thou hadst humbled me, that I may learn Thy statutes* (Ps. 118:71). The devil is evil, and the path to the devil is sin. Outside the devil and sin, no evil exists at all.

Thus, the moon was not to blame for that boy's sufferings and torments, but rather the evil spirit itself. If in His love for mankind God did not restrain the evil spirits and did not protect people from them—either directly or through His angels—the evil spirits would in a very short time destroy the whole human race both in soul and body, like the locust destroys the crops in a field.

*I spake to thy disciples that they should cast him out; and they could not*—thus spoke the father of the sick youth to Jesus. There were three of these disciples missing at the moment: Peter, James and John. These three were with the Lord on Mount Tabor during His Transfiguration, and they came down with him from the mountain to the place where they were met by *a great multitude of people* who had gathered around the other apostles and the sick youth. Not having found Christ, the grieving father had brought his son to Christ's disciples, but they were unable to help him. They could not help him first of all because of their own lack of faith, and secondly because of the father's own lack of faith, and thirdly because of the absolute unbelief of the scribes who were present. For it is said, that there were scribes there, arguing with the disciples. That the father's faith was weak can be seen from his words addressed to Christ. He doesn't say like the leper—a man of strong faith—*Lord, if Thou wilt, Thou canst make me clean* (Matt. 8:2). And he does not say like the chief of the synagogue Jairus, who called on Christ to give his daughter life: *Come and lay Thy hand upon her, and she shall live* (Matt. 9:18). And he especially does not say like the centurion from Capernaum whose servant was sick, *Speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed* (Matt. 8:8). These are all testimonies of very strong faith. But

the person with the greatest faith of all doesn't say anything, but simply comes to Christ and touches the hem of His garment, as did the woman with the issue of blood, and many others. The father of the sick youth does not act or speak in that way, but he turns to Christ with the words, *But if thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us.* If you can! The wretch! It means that he must have heard precious little about the power of Christ, if he could say such a thing to the Omnipotent One. His weak faith became even weaker from the powerlessness of the apostles, who couldn't help him, and as well as from, most likely, the scribe's malicious slander against Christ and His disciples. *If thou canst.* Here we have nothing more than a pale glimmer of faith peeking out, on the verge of being extinguished altogether. *He answereth him, and saith, O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you?* The Lord addresses this reproach to everyone in general, to all the unbelieving and depraved of Israel, and to all who stood before Him: to the father of the sick youth, to the disciples, and especially to the scribes. *O faithless generation!* In other words, a generation that has submitted itself to evil (that is, to the devil), firmly believing in the power of evil and slavishly serving evil; opposing goodness (that is, God), weakly believing, or not at all believing in goodness, rebelling against goodness and turning away from it! And why does the Lord add the word, *perverse*? In order to show where their unbelief was coming from: from perversity, or even more clearly, from sin. Unbelief is the result, perversity is the cause. Unbelief is friendship with the devil, and sin, or perversity, is the path by which people come to that friendship. Perversity is apostasy from God, and unbelief is the darkness, weakness, and horror into which a person who has apostatized from God falls. But just look at how attentive and cautious the Lord is in His expressions. He does not reproach anyone personally and by name, but speaks on the whole. He does not want to judge people but to bring them to consciousness and help them arise. How great is the meaning of this lesson for our time, for our generation, which is full of talk and loves to offend! If today's people would only put bit and bridle on their tongues and stop offending one another with their words, half of all the evil in the world would disappear and half of the evil spirits would be cast out from amidst the people. Hear out the great apostle James, who learned well the lessons of his Teacher, and wisely says: *For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body. Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth* (Js. 3:2–4).



What do these words of Christ mean: *How long shall I be with you? How long shall I suffer you?* Imagine a noble and enlightened man, who is forced to live amongst savages. Or imagine a great king, who has descended from his throne and settled in a gypsy camp, in order not only to roam with the gypsies and observe their life, but to teach them how to think, feel, and act like kings, amiably and magnanimously. Wouldn't any king exclaim after three days, "How long will I be with you?" Wouldn't just three days of uncouthness, stupidity, uncleanliness and stench be enough for him? But our Lord Jesus Christ, the King of kings, spoke these words after thirty-three years of life amongst people who were further from His nobility than the most uncouth man is from the most cultured and noble man, and than the filthiest bums from the greatest kings of the earth. However, He did not count time in days and years, but in deeds and wonders worked in the presence of many thousands of witnesses, and teachings poured out to many thousands of human souls and sown in them. And after all these deeds and wonders, teaching and events—enough to fill thousands of years and having enough salt to salt thousands of human generations—He suddenly sees that His disciples cannot heal a lunatic and cast even one evil spirit out of a man, although He had taught them by word and deed how to cast out legions. And he hears how a weak-faithed sinner says to Him: *If you can, have pity on us and help us.*

Having reproached all those present with their lack of faith, He commanded them to bring the sick boy to Him: *Bring him hither to me.* And Jesus *forbade the demon, and the demon left the youth, and the youth was healed in that hour.* That is how the Evangelist Matthew tells it. The other two Evangelists recall certain other details of the youth's healing itself. These are mainly three details: First, Christ asks the father how long ago this happened to his son; and second, he emphasizes faith as a condition for healing; and third, when they brought the possessed boy to Christ, as soon as the demon saw Him he went out of the boy in terrible torments and ran away. *How long ago is it that this came unto him?* the Lord asks the sick boy's father. He asks this not for Himself but for those around Him. Seeing everything clearly, He knew that the boy had been sick for a long time. The father replied, *of a child.* Let all hear and know what horrible torments the unclean spirits bring to people; and how mighty is God's intercession, without which the evil spirit would have totally destroyed both body and soul of the youth long ago; and finally, what authority to heal the Son of God has to heal those who suffer most harshly from the evil spirits. *Have pity on us,* the boy's father implores Christ. *On us,* he says, and not only on the boy. For the son's suffering is also the father's suffering, and that of the whole household, and all his relatives. If his son were healed this would remove the stone from many human souls. *Jesus said*

unto him, *If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth.* According to the ever-present image of divine economy, our Lord Jesus Christ also wants immediately to work as much good as possible. It is good to return the youth his health. But why not also do another good work by strengthening his father's faith? And why not work a third good at the same time by showing His power as openly as possible, rebuking the people's unbelief and perversity, their kowtowing to evil, the evil spirits, and sin? And the fifth, the sixth, seventh, and in general all those good deeds that bring only good works after themselves? For a good deed never remains in isolation. But take another look at how the Lord wisely combines sternness and condescension. Having sharply rebuked unbelief, He speaks generally, awakening faith in all, but without humiliating anyone personally. Now, addressing the supplicant personally, he speaks not sternly with him, but caringly and condescendingly: *If thou canst believe at least a little.* This care and condescension of Christ produced the expected action. The father wept and exclaimed tearfully, *I believe, O Lord! Help Thou my unbelief.* Nothing so melts the ice of unbelief as tears. In the hour that this man wept before the Lord, he repented of his unbelief, and in the presence of God, faith rushed into him like a river in high waters. And then he pronounced the words that have remained as a thunderous teaching for all generations of men: *I believe, O Lord! Help Thou my unbelief.* These words show that without God's help, a person cannot even acquire faith. Through his own efforts a person can achieve only lack of faith; that is, faith in both goodness and evil; or in other words, doubt in both goodness and in evil. But it is a long road from weak faith to true faith. And man cannot reach the end of this road unless he is upheld by God's right hand. Help me, O God, to believe in You! Help me to not believe in evil! Help me to completely extricate myself from evil and be united with You! This is what is meant by the words, *Help Thou my unbelief.*

When the youth was still walking, *the spirit tare him, and he fell on the ground, and wallowed foaming.* This was God's final allowance to the demon, so that the people would see the whole nightmare and horror of what an evil spirit can do to a man, and that they might believe that human strength is not sufficient—not even the greatest strength in the medical world—in order to save even one human life from this nightmare and horror. And thus, by seeing the demonic power and perceiving their own complete powerless, they would come to know the greatness and divine power of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Evangelist Mark cites also the words that lead up to this, spoken by the Lord to the evil spirit: *Thou dumb and deaf spirit, I charge thee, come out of him, and enter no more into him.* I command you, says the Lord. He is the source of power and authority, and He has no need to get that from someone

else. *All things that the Father hath are mine* (Jn. 16:15), said our Lord Jesus Christ in another situation. And to this day, He confirms this by His works. “I am speaking from Myself, I command you on my own authority, I cast you out with My own power.” Let the people know that He is not one of the prophets, who did their works with God’s help, but the Son of God Whom the prophets foretold and the people awaited. We should pay particular attention to the second half of Christ’s commandment to the demon. *And enter no more into him.* The Lord not only orders it to depart, but also to never return again to the youth who had suffered so long. This means that a person can draw uncleanness to himself again, after being cleansed. The demon that was one day cast out of a person can return and enter into him again. This happens when a sinner who has repented and received God’s pardon can again return to his old sin. Then the demon returns to its old home. Therefore does the Lord not only command the unclean spirit to leave the youth, but also to never enter him again—first of all, so that His Divine gift to the youth would remain whole and perfect; and secondly, so that we would draw a lesson from this and after God’s pardon, not return to our old sin, like a dog to its vomit, and not find ourselves once more in that soul-destroying danger by opening the doors to the evil spirit and inviting it to enter into us and take power over us.

After this most glorious miracle of Christ, *they were all amazed at the mighty power of God*, as the Evangelist Luke writes. O, if only this amazement would remain in people’s souls, steadfast and indelible! If only it would not quickly burst like a bubble on the water! But God does not sow in vain. If a seed is lost as it falls by the wayside, or on a rocky place, or among thorns, it is not lost on good soil, but brings forth fruit a hundredfold.

When the disciples remained alone with Christ, they asked Him, *Why could not we cast him out? And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.* Thus, the cause of powerlessness is unbelief. The more faith there is the more power; the less the faith, the less power. Earlier the Lord gave His disciples *power against unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of disease* (Matt. 10:1). And they made use of that authority for a time with some benefit. But according to the measure of their weakening faith, be it from worldly fear or from pride, the power given them waned. Adam was given authority over every creature, but Adam wasted it and lost it due to his disobedience, greed, and pride. And the apostles out of their own sins lost the power and authority given them. But only faith can return this lost power. Therefore the Lord in this case

strongly emphasizes the power of faith. Faith can move mountains; there is nothing that is impossible with faith. A mustard seed is small, but it can impart its flavor to a whole vessel of food. (“For as a grain of mustard seed is very small, but strong in its effect; and planted in a small area it can put out many shoots; and once fully grown, it can shelter the birds. So also faith in a soul will very soon work great deeds. Thus, have faith in Him, that you might receive faith from Him that acts more powerfully than any human power” (St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Homilies, 5). If you will have faith even the size of a grain of mustard seed, mountains will step aside for you and move from place to place. Why didn’t the Lord Himself move mountains? Because there was no need. He only worked miracles that were needed and beneficial for people and their salvation. Even so, is moving a mountain any greater a miracle than changing water into wine, multiplying loaves of bread, casting out demons from people, healing all kinds of diseases, walking on water, or stilling storms and winds at sea with only one word? Undoubtedly, we can’t discount that Christ’s followers might even have moved mountains for a specific aim, through their great faith. But is there is a mountain higher, a cliff more weighty, or a yoke and burden more terrible for the human soul than worldly cares, worldly fears, worldly bonds and chains? Whoever has moved that mountain and cast it into the sea could truly move the greatest and weightiest mountain on earth.

*This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting.* Prayer and fasting are two pillars of faith, two living fires that scorch the evil demons. Fasting extinguishes and destroys all fleshly passions, especially fornication; prayer extinguishes and destroys the passions of the soul, heart, and mind: evil intentions and evil deeds, vengefulness, envy, hatred, anger, pride, vainglory, and so on. Fasting cleanses the body and vessel of the soul from impure content—worldly passions and lusts; prayer brings down the grace of the Holy Spirit unto the freeing and purification of the vessel, and the fullness of faith consists in the indwelling of the Spirit of God in man. The Orthodox Church has emphasized the meaning of fasting as a tried and true medicine against all the fleshly passions, and as a formidable weapon against evil spirits. All who denigrate or do not recognize fasting in fact denigrate and not recognize the clear and important rule written by our Lord Jesus Christ into the system of human salvation. Fasting strengthens and prolongs prayer, prayer and fasting strengthens faith, faith in turn moves mountains, casts out demons, and makes all the impossible possible.

Christ’s final words in today’s Gospel reading are entirely unrelated to the event described earlier. After the great miracle of the healing of the demon-possessed youth, when the people were amazed at God’s grandeur, the Lord suddenly starts

speaking to His disciples about His sufferings. *The Son of man is delivered into the hands of men, and they shall kill him; and after that he is killed, he shall rise the third day.* Why after this miracle, as also after certain other miracles, does the Lord talk with His disciples about His sufferings? So that when what must come, comes, their hearts would not be troubled. He talks to them after His great works in order that this foretelling, which directly contradicts His great deeds, accomplishments, glory, and the exaltation with which He is greeted and accompanied, would be inscribed as deeply as possible into the disciple's memories. But he says this as instruction to us and well as to the apostles, so that after any of our own great deeds we would not expect any reward from people, but would be ready for the heaviest and hardest blows and humiliations, even from those to whom we brought the greatest benefit. But incidentally, the Lord didn't only foretell His suffering, murder and death, but also His resurrection. That is, there will be a resurrection after all, with victory and eternal glory. The Lord in the presence of His disciples foretells something unbelievably external—in order to awaken in them faith in what will happen, to teach them to believe in His words. Having faith as a grain of mustard seed and less, every person in this world can readily meet any manner of suffering, assured that in the end, resurrection will come. We must count all worldly glory and all human praise as vanity. After all triumphs in the world we should be ready to go to suffering. With meekness and obedience, we should accept everything that is sent to us by our Heavenly Father. We must never trumpet our merits before people, before our city or town, before the people, before our motherland, or murmur when we are overtaken by sorrows. For even if we have brought some benefit to people around us, this was only made possible thanks to God's help. To be more precise, God worked all those good deeds through us. Therefore righteous is God, Who sends us suffering after worldly glory, humiliation after praise, poverty after riches, contempt after respect, sickness after health, loneliness and abandonment after a myriad of friends. God knows why He sends us all this. He knows that all of this is for our own good. First of all, it is so that we would learn to seek eternal treasures and not transitory ones, instead of deceiving ourselves to our very deaths with the false and transitory glamour of this age; and secondly, so that we would not receive our entire reward for all our good deeds and labors in this life, from people and the world. For then, in the other world, there will be nothing more for us to expect or receive. In a word, so that at the gates of the Kingdom of Heaven we would not hear, "Go away! You have already received your reward!" So that this would not happen to us, and so that we would not perish forever at the inevitable destruction of this world from which we received glory, praise, and honor, our Lord Jesus Christ teaches us—so that after great worldly

glory, praise, and honor, we would be prepared to take up our cross. To Him be eternal glory and praise, with the Father and the Holy Spirit—the Trinity One in Essence and Undivided, now and ever, throughout all times, and unto the ages of ages. *Amen.*

*The Prologue from Ochrid*  
*St Nikolai of Zhicha*  
(04.07.2022)

## **1. THE ANNUNCIATION**

When the All-holy Virgin had completed the fourteenth year after her birth and was entering her fifteenth year, after having spent eleven years of living and serving in the Temple of Jerusalem, the priests informed her that, according to the Law, she could not remain in the Temple but was required to be betrothed and enter into marriage. To the great surprise of the priests, the All-holy Virgin answered that she had dedicated her life to God and that she desired to remain a virgin until death, not wanting to enter into marriage with anyone! Then according to God's providence and inspiration, Zacharias, the high priest and father of the Forerunner, in agreement with the other priests, gathered twelve unmarried men from the tribe of David, so that they might entrust the Virgin Mary to one of them to preserve her virginity and care for her. She was entrusted to Joseph of Nazareth, who was her kinsman. In the house of Joseph, the All-holy Virgin continued to live as she did in the Temple of Solomon, occupying her time in the reading of sacred Scripture, in prayer, in godly thoughts, in fasting, and in handiwork. She rarely went anywhere outside the house and was uninterested in worldly matters and events. She spoke very little to anyone, if at all, and never without special need. She most often associated with Joseph's two daughters. When the fullness of time had come, as prophesied by Daniel the Prophet, and when God was pleased to fulfill His promise to the banished Adam and to the prophets, the great Archangel Gabriel appeared in the chamber of the All-holy Virgin. This occurred, as some Church writers have related, precisely at the same moment that she held open the book of the Prophet Isaiah and was contemplating his great prophecy: *Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and bear a son!* (Isaiah 7:14). Gabriel appeared in all of his angelic brightness and saluted her: *Rejoice, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee!* (Luke 1:28), and the rest, as it is written in the Gospel of the blessed Luke. With this angelic annunciation and the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Virgin,



the salvation of mankind and the restoration of all creation began. The history of the New Testament was opened by the words of the Archangel Gabriel: *Rejoice, thou that art highly favored*. This shows that the New Testament signified joy to mankind and to all created things. Therefore the Annunciation is considered not only a great feast but also a joyful feast.

## **2. THE HOLY FEMALE MARTYRS PELAGIA, THEODOSIA AND DULA**

These three holy women suffered for the Lord. After imprisonment and torture both Pelagia and Theodosia were beheaded. St. Dula, who was a servant girl, suffered alone in the city of Nicomedia. These three white roses, watered by the blood of the martyrs, were transplanted by God into His heavenly garden.

### **HYMN OF PRAISE**

#### **THE MOST-HOLY MOTHER OF GOD**

(The Theotokos)

OH, WHAT WONDERFUL NEWS: REJOICE, ALL-PURE ONE,  
FOR US THOU GAVEST BIRTH TO CHRIST!

OH, JOYFUL NEWS: REJOICE, O VIRGIN,  
RADIANT DOVE!

REJOICE, O MARY, REJOICE, THOU WHO ART FULL OF GRACE,  
THOU WHO ART THE GOLDEN GATE!

O BURNING BUSH, UNCONSUMED,  
THE DAWN OF NEW SPLENDOR!

GABRIEL COMPOSES THE WORDS, AND HE HIMSELF REJOICES;  
THE ANNUNCIATION HE PROCLAIMS!

PROCLAIMS THE ANNUNCIATION: ALL OF HEAVEN LISTENS;  
THY SOUL TREMBLES!

THE TEMPLE DIDST THOU SERVE, THOU DIDST CONSECRATE THYSELF TO GOD,  
THOU BECAMEST A TEMPLE!

REJOICE, O ALL-PURE ONE, HEAVENLY BRIDE,  
THOU ART THE ROYAL THRONE!

REJOICE, O MEEK ONE: TO THE HUMBLE ONE WILT THOU GIVE BIRTH,  
AND REGENERATE THE WORLD!

REJOICE, O OBEDIENT ONE: GOD HEARD THEE  
AND CROWNED THEE WITH GLORY!

REJOICE, O TEARFUL ONE: BY TEARS SOFTENED,  
LUMINOUS IN THE SPIRIT!

REJOICE, O POOR ONE, BUT THE WEALTHIEST ONE  
AND BRIGHTER THAN THE SUN!

ENTREAT JOY FOR US FROM CHRIST THY SON,  
O VIRGIN, ALL-PURE ONE!

## REFLECTION

Abba Athanasius was once asked: "How is it that the Son is equal to the Father?" He answered: "Just as there are two eyes but one sight." The response is admirable. To this we can add: just as there are two ears but one hearing. Similarly for all three Divine Hypostases: just as there are three candles but there is one and the same light.

## CONTEMPLATION

Contemplate the All-holy Virgin Mary:

1. How she served God for eleven years in the Temple in humility, obedience and devotion;
2. How she served God in her chamber in Nazareth, in humility, obedience and devotion;
3. How in humility, obedience and devotion she received the Divine Annunciation from the Archangel Gabriel.

## HOMILY

### **on the omnipotent Word of God**

"For with God nothing will be impossible God" (Luke 1:37).

*Then God said, Let there be light, and there was light* (Genesis 1:3). Until God spoke, there was no light. Nor was there anyone who could know what light was until God spoke and light came into being. In the same manner, when God spoke, water and the dry land, the firmament of the heavens, vegetation, animals and finally man came into existence. Until God spoke, none of this existed, and except for God no one could know that all of this could exist. By the power of His Word, God created all that is created on earth and in the heavens. Whatever God wanted to exist and called into being, that had to be and could not but have been, for the Word of God is irresistible and creative. The creation of the world is a great miracle accomplished by the Word of God. Having created all things, God again, by His Word, established the order of creation and the manner of behavior and relationship of creatures one with another. This order and manner which God established is a great miracle accomplished by God's Word.

There exists an order and manner among created things that is visible and comprehensible for us people; and there also exists an order and manner that is invisible and incomprehensible. According to that invisible and incomprehensible

order and manner, which is a mystery hidden in the Holy Trinity, there have occurred and are occurring those manifestations that people call miracles. One such manifestation is the conception of the Lord Jesus Christ in the womb of the All-holy Virgin Mary, who had not known man. This appears like an interruption in the visible and comprehensible order and manner, but it is never an interruption for the invisible and incomprehensible order and manner. This birth is truly a great miracle; perhaps the greatest miracle that was ever revealed to us mortals. The entire created world is a miracle, and all the visible and comprehensible order and manner is a miracle, and altogether these miracles came about by the Word of God. Therefore, much in the same way, the Lord was conceived in the Virgin's womb. All were brought about by the power and Word of God. That is why the wonderful Gabriel replied to the question of the All-pure one (a question asked by all generations: *How shall this be?* [Luke 1:34]): *For with God nothing shall be impossible* (Luke 1:37).

O Lord God, our Creator, Immortal and Ever-existing Miracle-worker, enlighten our minds that we no longer doubt, but believe; and direct our tongues not to question Thee, but to praise Thee.

**To Thee be glory and praise forever. Amen.**

## *Services this Week*

- ❖ **Thursday, April 07<sup>th</sup> – The Annunciation of the Most Holy Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary – Divine Liturgy 09: 30 AM**
- ❖ **5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent (St Mary of Egipt) (Sunday, April 10<sup>th</sup>) – 10:00 AM Divine Liturgy**