

Judgment Sunday 2012

Today's Reading: Matthew 25:31-46

The Lord said: "When the Son of man comes in his glory and all the holy angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.' And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Thoughts on the Gospel

Today, the Orthodox Church observes *Meatfare Sunday*, the last day those fasting will eat meat before Pascha. Fasting is a spiritual discipline, showing we are not a slave to food, but food is a gift from God that we are thankful for. A person's fasting schedule should always be determined by their confessor, their spiritual father, because some might not be able to fast with the intensity and discipline that others do. For those that have no confessor, our priest is always available to help you on your spiritual journey.

Today's Sunday is also known as *Judgment Sunday*, in reference to the Gospel of the Last Judgment by the Lord. In the Gospel account, the Lord gives us a picture of the Judgment, the Second Coming. During His time on earth, Jesus came in humility and died for our sins on the cross. When Christ returns "to judge the living and the dead", He will return in absolute glory. The judgment will be universal – there is no "hiding" and "all things that are hidden will be revealed" (as the hymn states). Jesus will sit on His throne and judge us not as one with a hidden agenda, but as **the Righteous Judge**. The separation is between those who accepted Him and those who have not.

The righteous will hear «κληρονομήσατε», or *inherit*, the Kingdom of God. He does not say λάβετε, or *take*. Jesus uses κληρονομήσατε, or *inherit*, because these righteous have accepted the call to the Kingdom. The Kingdom is a gift. Heaven – communion with God eternally – is something that all of us *choose* to enter. God does not force Himself upon us and say, "you *must* do this". During His ministry, Jesus always used the terms "whosoever wishes to follow me" and "whoever wants to save his life". This is the boundless love of God towards us: He allows us *the choice* to be with Him or not.

Christ opens the gates of Paradise to those people who are "blessed of the Father" (οι ευλογημένοι του Πατρός) because of their **ορθοδοξία** (right belief) and **ορθοπραξία** (correct

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actions). They are the ones who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, visited those who were sick and in prison. Their faith was not just something they mentioned casually a couple of times a year – it was a *living faith* in which people worshipped Christ in Church, learned about Him and saw Him in the face of their neighbour. We know we are on the path to salvation when we see our friend, relative and even a complete stranger – here in Church, on the street, at work, at school – and remember that any good that we do to them, we do it to Christ. When we offend or mock them, we do *these things* to Christ.

The people who will be worthy of Paradise, the Lord says, will react in a way expected of people who are close to God: with **humility**. The righteous know that it is their duty as Christians to act with mercy and love to one's neighbour, so these things are second-nature.

When Jesus as the King of the Universe turns to those who are the *κατηραμένοι*, the "accursed", He tells them why they have this label: "I was hungry and you didn't feed me, thirsty and you didn't give me a drink, a stranger and you didn't invite me, naked and ill but you didn't clothe or visit me". Those who are not worthy of Paradise will know they will not enjoy Paradise but be condemned forever to the place that was prepared only for the devil and his angels, the demons. Yet, God's love is the reason they will not enter Heaven: if they were away from God during their lives, not having any relationship with Him, how do they expect to enjoy a relationship with God during eternity?

Hell is not a place with literal fire and brimstone (in fact, this belief was condemned by the Orthodox Church); rather, it is a place where there is no relationship with God or with anyone else for eternity. It's as if you go to a party with countless guests and no one comes to talk to you, everyone turns their back to you, you are alone. That loneliness is something we don't want to think about, but this Gospel reminds us that not everyone makes it to the Grand Banquet of Paradise – and it's not because they didn't get the invitation, but because they chose to not accept it.

We meet Christ every day but sometimes we just can't identify Him in the face of our neighbour. Our Church is always there to help faithful with their relationship with Christ. Worship services help us to connect with Him through prayer. Confession is a time to give our soul to Him and ask for forgiveness of sins. Programs such as the Altar Servers, Myrofores or Sunday School allow young children and teens a chance to learn about who Christ is. At St. Demetrios, we also have **Re-Catechism**, an English-language religious discussion group. This year, we're dealing with the Orthodox family and the topics of addictions, bioethics, parenting, Sainly Families and illness. It's an excellent opportunity to learn more about your faith in a language you understand. Come and join us this Tuesday (and every other Tuesday) at 7 p.m. here at the Church. I mention Re-Catechism because it's another opportunity that Christ gives us to learn about Him, to cultivate our relationship with Him, to love Him...and we should take it! Learning about Christ doesn't stop at Sunday School. It continues for the rest of our lives.

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Our **ορθοπραξία**, or “walking the walk” when it comes to faith, should continue past the food and clothing banks. It should extend to volunteering, calling up that family member or friend we haven’t talked to in a while, visiting a shelter or hospital and seeing someone you know doesn’t have anyone here. Christian love is not a humanitarian type of love, but theological in nature. The love of a Christian reflects the love of Christ: a love filled with forgiveness, acceptance and mercy for all people.

As we reflect on the Gospel reading, may we take the opportunity to see it not as a waiting Judgment of condemnation, but a moment where God will be glorified and we will be taken from death to life and from the earth to Heaven.

Discussion Questions:

For Children

1. Do you believe that you are part of the ‘righteous’ or ‘sinners’? Are you somewhere in the middle? Explain why.
2. What does “ορθοπραξία” mean for you?
3. What are three ways I am going to be better prepared for the “Righteous Judge” and be a better Christian during this Great Lent?
4. How would you respond to a friend or family member who says, “All I need to be is a ‘good person’ and not holy”?

For Youth/Young Adults

1. Do you believe it is necessary to have a spiritual father/confessor to guide you in your fasting, etc.?
2. Why is Jesus “the Righteous Judge”? Could anyone else judge us without being partial?
3. Can one be Orthodox (“believing correctly”) without exercising Orthopraxy (“acting correctly, according to the Church’s teachings) in their lives?
4. Is the whole purpose of this Gospel for us to become holy and saints, *or* for God to be glorified?