

BASILDON ORTHODOX COMMUNITY BULLETIN

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Sermon for the Ecclesiastical New Year

Beloved Christians. The life of an Orthodox Christian is composed of various cycles-- the great cycle of life from birth to death, punctuated by chrismation, baptism, marriage, burial; the daily liturgical cycle of prayer which include Vespers, Mattins, the Hours; the less-formal morning and evening prayers read before the icons in every home; the annual cycle of Fasts and Feasts of our Lord, His Most Holy Mother and the Saints.

The Ecclesiastical year has several aspects- at its simplest, it may be represented in the form of a calendar, bringing to the mind of believers the Gospel teachings and events of Christian history in a certain, prescribed order; it also offers an "*official channel*" for our prayers; and it is poetic, lyrical and beautiful in form. Day by day the Church looks back to its past, testifying to the sanctification of time, confirming its perennial significance. It demonstrates the interrelationship of the physical with the spiritual, of chronological and spiritual time.

The calendar is a recapitulation- the Holy Church understands that in the cycle of feasts the events commemorated are renewed, and in a real sense are actualised; moved from the past into the present. The calendar may have many aspects but it has only one object and focus- Jesus Christ. He who is present in the Church here and now. The Incarnation of the Word is an historical event, but also an abiding presence of the Lord: an event which never passes.

The Eucharist is another such event. It is "eschatological" in that the ἔσχατον (*eschaton*) - the age to come- breaks in upon this present age. It is not merely a commemoration of the Last Supper. As St John Chrysostom tells us in his *Homily on St Matthew's Gospel*, it is the last supper. There is no difference. We are taken back to the Upper Room, we participate in the same sacred supper as Christ and the Apostles. Our Lord is present in the Holy Communion.

Today is the first day of the Ecclesiastical Year. I shall concentrate on three not unrelated points raised by today's readings and commemoration-- the *Ascetic*, the *Messianic*, and the sense of the

Immediate.

It is no accident that today the Church commemorates St Symeon Stylites the elder, one of the greatest of the ascetics. The word "ascetic" has as its root the Greek word ἄσκειν, "to take care of". Symeon spent 36 years living on top of a pillar, exposed to sun and rain. He presents us with a challenge, a strong call to renunciation and repentance. In honouring St Symeon at the outset of the year the Orthodox Church takes a clear position on the ascetic life. His pillar forms both the foundation stone of the church year and the ascetic threshold over which we must pass if we are ever to begin the process of "taking care" of soul and body, of making ourself *acceptable* to God.

The three readings for Vespers for today all say something about moral and spiritual perfection, about becoming acceptable to God. The first (Isaiah 61:1-9) is the same passage which Christ reads in the synagogue, as heard in today's Gospel; it is also one of the fifteen prophetic Old Testament texts read on 'Holy Saturday'. The second (Leviticus 26:3-12, 14-17, 19-24) is a serious warning from God that the destiny of his people is dependent on whether their covenant with him is honoured or violated. The third (Wisdom of Solomon 4:7-15) is a reaction against the ancient materialist Hebrew equation of a long life with moral perfection. The Mattins Gospel for today, is also read on the eve of the 'Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee'. It serves as a warning of the precedence of inner transformation over outward form. These readings are echoed and reiterated in the readings we've just heard, together, they form a composite picture of the Messiah and His relationship to His people. The Epistle (1 Tim. 2:1-7) demands of us that we pray for our brothers and in so doing we may become acceptable to God. In the Gospel (Luke 4:16-22a), Christ declares that the messianic prophecy is fulfilled in Himself, and in so doing offers us his redemptive grace: on "This day is the prophecy fulfilled in your hearing." This declaration transcends time. It was written by Isaiah 700 years *before* Christ; it was made *by* Christ, it is made again by Christ, here, *today*.

St Ambrose of Milan, in a homily on the Gospel according to St Luke, reminds us that whereas in today's Gospel it is Christ who is pointing out that that which Isaiah wrote was said of himself, at the Baptism of the Lord (in John 1:23), it is God the Father who says of Christ the same thing: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Him". The name Christ, Χριστός, the "anointed", is a trinitarian formula. As St Irenaeos of Lyons states, it implies He who anoints (the Father), He who is anointed (the Son), and the unction itself with which He is anointed (the Holy Spirit).

Christ also speaks of the coming "acceptable year". This acceptability implies preparation and hard work. The text of Isaiah (chapter 61) from

which Christ reads, continues: "they shall build up the wastes, they shall raise up the former desolations, and they shall repair the waste cities, the desolation of many generations". It goes on to say that the hardworkers are rewarded, for "they are the seed which the Lord hath blessed". This word "acceptable", δεκτόν in Greek, is also found in a later part of the first letter to Timothy, in the text concerning the preparation and care of widows. Δεκτόν is understood by the Fathers to denote here the "favour" of God.

The words of Isaiah quoted by Christ lay emphasis on the notion of the "*acceptable*", the acceptability of our sacrifice and of our reception of grace. They remind us that we are not to go through the motions; we, "the seed which the Lord hath blessed", are explicitly warned (in Revelation 3:16) against being "lukewarm" in faith, against being like the pharisee. The liturgical life is not an end in itself, it is but a means of reaching the Kingdom of God. The liturgical year forms Christ in us. The events of the church year are made immediate to us, offering us grace. We experience this grace to the extent that we bring to it a corresponding inclination of the soul, to the degree to which we are united to Christ, prepared through prayer and fasting. Our taking part in the liturgical cycle is empty and illusory if the outward events are not matched by an inner cycle and if the events of Christ's life are not themselves mysteriously renewed in our soul. "Christ", as St John of Damaskos writes, "made us for incorruption". However, sin has continually accumulated in us over the past 12 months. But, once again, Christ invites us into the mystery of salvation. Christ's declaration of fulfilment transcends time, it also stands as a reminder that the days and years are not meaningless. Once again, and always, Christ calls us to himself.

St Cyril of Alexandria, in his sermon on today's Mattins Gospel (Luke 18:1-8), states that "The fountain of every blessing is Christ"; and that we may be saved "by constant prayer; for Christ will receive our supplications, and fulfil our petitions"

Today, we pray that, like those in the synagogue, mentioned in today's Gospel, who had their eyes "fastened on Him", we too, not just today but throughout the forthcoming year, and throughout our lives, remain fixed and focussed upon Christ.

Through the prayers of the Holy Fathers, Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy on us and save us. Amen.