



GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AUSTRALIA
PARISH OF ST. VASILIOS, BRUNSWICK, VICTORIA

SUNDAY
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PARISH INFORMATION BULLETIN

PROGRAM FOR 24—30 JULY 2016



SUNDAY 24 JULY <i>St Christina, Great-Martyr</i>	Fifth Sunday of Matthew —Matthew 8: 28-34,9:1 • 7.30– 11.00am Orthros and Divine Liturgy SUNDAY SCHOOL FOR AGES 5 TO 17 YEARS TAKES PLACE STRAIGHT AFTER HOLY COMMUNION. CLASSES TAKE PLACE IN THE DOWNSTAIRS ROOMS BEHIND THE CHURCH. BRING YOUR CHILDREN ALONG TO LEARN ABOUT THEIR ORTHODOX FAITH AND GOD'S LOVE FOR EACH ONE OF US.
MONDAY 25 JULY	• 9.00am Service of Holy Unction • 10.00am Meeting of Elderly Citizens in Church Hall.
TUESDAY 26 JULY <i>St. Paraskeve, Martyr</i>	• 7.00– 9.30am Orthros and Divine Liturgy • 7.00pm Parishes of St Vasilios and the Presentation of our Lord, Coburg Youth Group will meet in our Church Hall. The meeting will begin with the Compline Service in English. • 7.30pm Young Adults and Married Couples Bible Study Group —in downstairs building behind the Church.
WEDNESDAY 27 JULY <i>St Panteleimon, Great-Martyr</i>	• 7.00– 9.30am Orthros and Divine Liturgy • 5.00pm Paraklesis to the Theotokos followed by Bible Study
SATURDAY 30 JULY	• 3.45pm Service of Vespers

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Fr. Athanasios
and
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are available
at the Church

every Monday to Friday
between
4.00 and 6.00pm

for Holy Confession and
any spiritual need.

WORDS FROM THE CHURCH FATHERS

If a person wants to get an idea about the pyramids of Egypt, he must either trust those who have been in immediate proximity to the pyramids, or he must get next to them himself. There is no third option. In the same way a person can get an impression of God: He must either trust those who have stood and stand in immediate proximity to God, or he must take pains to come into such proximity himself.

- St. Nicholas of Serbia, *Thoughts on Good and Evil*

As it is impossible to verbally describe the sweetness of honey to one who has never tasted honey, so the goodness of God cannot be clearly communicated by way of teaching if we ourselves are not able to penetrate into the goodness of the Lord by our own experience.

-St. Basil the Great, *Conversations on the Psalms*, 29

It may be hard for us to relate to today's gospel passage. We are not possessed by demons, living in a cemetery, and so frightening that no one will come near us. And probably none of us have ever seen a whole herd of pigs run off a cliff and drown in the sea. On the surface, the story of Jesus Christ casting demons out of these wretched men may seem irrelevant to us. But if we look into the narrative more deeply, and with an eye on our epistle passage from St. Paul, we will see that it speaks to us directly.

First, the demon-possessed men were Gentiles, which we know because of the presence of the pigs, which were considered unclean by the Jews. The Fathers of the Church see their demon-possession as symbolic of the state of our ancestors, the Gentiles who worshiped idols and false gods. The good news of the Gospel is that Son of God became a human being for the salvation all people, Jew and Gentile alike. He has released us all from the bondage of sin and death and has restored us to His image and likeness. Just like demon-possessed people who are set free and in their right minds, all humanity is healed and liberated in the incarnate Son of God.

And did you notice that our Lord did not give those poor fellows a law? He did not require anything of them; instead, He simply set them free from the powers evil and restored them to a recognizably human existence. Here we see the basis of St. Paul's instruction to the Romans: "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." At the very heart of our faith is not a requirement for meeting a standard; instead, the unlimited mercy of God is the very foundation of our life. The same mercy that came to demon-possessed Gentiles, who represented all the idol-worshiping peoples of the world, has come to us in Jesus Christ, the God-Man, the Second Adam.

For He does not require us to earn His love. Just as He took the initiative to deliver the Gergasene demoniacs, He has taken the initiative with us, becoming one of us, taking upon Himself the consequences of all human corruption and sin to the point of death, burial and descent to Hades so that He could conquer them all in His glorious third-day resurrection. He has ascended into heaven with full, complete glorified humanity and sent the Holy Spirit to empower His Body, the Church, of which we are members. He lives within our hearts by the Holy Spirit, casting out our demons, forgiving our sins, and enabling us to share in His eternal life even now.

Yes, the Orthodox Church has many rules, many canons, traditions, and practices. But at the heart of our faith and common life is not the obedience of law, for we are not called to be like the Pharisees of Jesus Christ's day. Instead, we are called, as St. Paul teaches, to confess with our mouths the Lord Jesus and to believe in our hearts that God has raised him from the dead; if we do so, we will be saved. "For with the heart one believes unto righteousness and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."

No, St. Paul is not giving us magic words which we say once in order to guarantee a spot in heaven. He is not giving us a new law that somehow earns salvation. To the contrary, He is pointing to the deep truth of how we share in the life of our Lord: we commend all our life unto Christ our God. We trust in Him; we offer our lives to Him; our words, deeds, and thoughts come to embody the new life that He has brought to the world. We are to be as transformed by our Lord as those formerly demon-possessed men, whose lives were living witnesses to the mercy of Jesus Christ.

Those particular men were set free from the control of demons, but that was surely only the beginning of their lives in Christ. Even though their deliverance was quite dramatic, it was only a beginning and they surely had to press on from there to resist temptation, to grow in holiness, to learn to love and serve Him in their neighbours. And the same is true of us. Our salvation is a process, an ongoing journey of sharing more fully in the new life that our Saviour has brought to the world. We are challenged each day to confess Christ more truthfully in all that we say and do. Throughout our lives, we are challenged to participate more fully in His resurrection, to manifest His victory over sin and death, and to turn away from temptations to do evil.

If our religion were about law, we could meet the standard and not think about it anymore. We could check off a box and move on to something else. But Orthodox Christianity is not about rules and regulations, but about a relationship with a Person, our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ. It is about participating in Him, about sharing in His blessedness, about partaking in His divine nature by grace. And because God is eternal and infinite and beyond even our best attempts to define and control Him, we may put no limits of any kind on what it means to confess Him and to believe in Him.

So we are constantly in need of Christ's mercy and grace. We don't say the Jesus Prayer because we like the way it sounds or someone requires us to do so. We say the Jesus Prayer because we are sinners constantly in need of Him. Our life in Christ is possible only because of His love, which we never deserve or can control in any way. And the more we open our lives to Christ, the more fully we share in His life, the more aware we will be of how far we have yet to go, of how undeserving we are, of how grateful we must be before an infinitely holy God Who has stopped at nothing to bring us into His blessed kingdom.

The formerly demon-possessed men could claim no credit for their deliverance. They could only marvel at their great blessing and do their best to live lives worthy of what Christ had done for them. We all face the same challenge: to live in ways that reflect what our Lord has done for us, to bear witness to the healing and fulfilment that He has brought to our lives, and to continue to open ourselves more fully to His salvation. And must all continue to struggle against whatever evil thoughts, habits, and deeds have become second nature to us.

Of course, none of does that perfectly. We get side-tracked and distracted by all kinds of things. And that's why we need to build holy habits—like attending services, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving—into our lives, to wake us up, to keep us alert, to remind us that the ultimate choice of our lives is ongoing, is constant: And that choice is whether we will grow in communion with Christ, in relationship with Him by faith, repentance, humility and a life that confesses what He has done and is doing for us; or whether, instead, we prefer to return to the graveyard, to the powers of evil, to worshipping the false gods of our own will. Our choice is not whether to obey a law, but whether to grow in a relationship of love with a Person, the only One Who can set us free from slavery to sin and death and give us the freedom to become our true selves in His image and likeness.

If we turn away from Christ, we do so as isolated individuals who prefer our own will to His, who would rather brood and decay in the loneliness of a cemetery—of a dark tomb—than share in the blessed banquet of the Kingdom. But if we embrace Christ, we enter into eternal joy through His Body, the Church; we become members of His own Body. The standards and practices of the Church help us to grow in relationship with the Lord and with one another. They sustain our faith, teach us to confess Christ, and help us grow in freedom over our passions and slavery to sin. They enable us to do what we cannot do alone.

So like those Gergasene demoniacs, it's time for us all to leave behind the graveyard of evil and instead become who we are called to be in Jesus Christ. By sincere faith, honest confession, and genuine repentance, let us grow in the new life that He has brought to the world and accept the mercy of the One who loves us so much that He conquered sin and death in order to bring us into the joy of the Kingdom.

Whatever struggles we face in turning from the darkness to the light are well worth it. Whatever excuses we make not to do so are simply lies that will destroy us, if we let them. Now is the time to do whatever it takes to get out of the insanity of sin and to enter into the unspeakable blessedness for which we were created in the image and likeness of our Lord, God, and Saviour Jesus Christ. Fr. Philip LeMasters