

The Healing of the Blind Man

Sixth Sunday of Pascha

16 / 29 May

Resurrection Tropar, Tone 5: Let us, the faithful; praise and worship the Word, / Co-eternal with the Father and the Spirit, / born for our salvation from the Virgin; / for He willed to be lifted up on the cross in the flesh, / to endure death, / and to raise the dead / by His glorious Resurrection!

Kontakion of The Sunday Of The Blind Man, Tone 4: Blinded in the eyes of my soul, I draw nigh unto Thee, O Christ, like the man blind from his birth, and in repentance I cry to Thee: Thou art the exceeding radiant Light of those in darkness.

Kondak of Pascha, Tone 8: Though Thou didst descend into the grave, O Immortal One, yet didst Thou destroy the power of Hades. And didst arise as victor, O Christ God, calling to the myrrh-bearing women: Rejoice! and giving peace unto Thine apostles: Thou Who dost grant resurrection to the fallen.

Matins Gospel VIII

Epistle: St. Acts of the Apostles 16: 16-34

Now it happened, as we went to prayer, that a certain slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination met us, who brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling. This girl followed Paul and us, and cried out, saying, "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation." And this she did for many days. But Paul, greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And he came out that very hour. But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities. And they brought them to the magistrates, and said, "These men, being Jews, exceedingly trouble our city; And they teach customs which are not lawful for us, being Romans, to receive or observe." Then the multitude rose up together against them; and the magistrates tore off their clothes and commanded them to be beaten with rods. And when they had laid many stripes on them, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to keep them securely. Having received such a charge, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were loosed. And the keeper of the prison, awaking from sleep and seeing the prison doors open, supposing the prisoners had fled, drew his sword and was about to kill himself. But Paul called with a loud voice, saying, "Do yourself no harm, for we are all here." Then he called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. And he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" So they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptised. Now when he had brought them into his house, he set food before them; and he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household.

THEY SEIZED PAUL AND SILAS AND THREW THEM INTO PRISON

What could equal these souls? These men had been scourged, had received many stripes; they had been misused, were in peril of their lives, were thrust into the inner prison, and set fast in the stocks: and for all this they did not suffer themselves to sleep, but kept vigil all night. Do you mark what a blessing tribulation is? ...That the earthquake should not seem to have come of itself, there was this concurrent circumstance bearing witness to it: the doors were opened, and all their bonds were loosed. And it appears this happened in the night time, for the Apostles did not work for display but for men's salvation ...Here, they no sooner showed the doors standing open, and it opened the doors of the jailer's heart. It loosed two sorts of chains. That prisoner kindled the true light: for the light in his heart was shining ...He says immediately, 'What must I do to be saved?' What then does Paul answer? 'Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved: you and your house.' For this above all wins men: that one's household also should be saved ...The faith of the jailer was a voice in itself. What could be equal to this? He is put in bonds, and looses, being bound. He looses a twofold bond: him who bound him he looses by being unbound. These are indeed works of grace.

St. John Chrysostom. Homily XXXVI on Acts XVI. B#55, pp. 223-225



The Gospel According To St. John 9: 1-38

Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him. I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When He had said these things, He spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva; and He anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay. And He said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which is translated, Sent). So he went and washed, and came back seeing. Therefore the neighbours and those who previously had seen that he was blind said, "Is not this he who sat and begged?" Some said, "This is he." Others said, "He is like him." He said, "I am he." Therefore they said to him, "How were your eyes opened?" He answered and said, "A Man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and said to me, 'Go to the pool of Siloam and wash.' So I went and washed, and I received sight." Then they said to him, "Where is He?" He said, "I do not know." They brought him who formerly was blind to the Pharisees. Now it was a Sabbath when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also asked him again how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put clay on my eyes, and I washed, and I see." Therefore some of the Pharisees said, "This Man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath." Others said, "How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?" And there was a division among them. They said to the blind man again, "What do you say about Him because He opened your eyes?" He said, "He is a prophet." But the Jews did not believe concerning him, that he had been blind and received his sight, until they called the parents of him who had received his sight. And they asked them, saying, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered them and said, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; But by what means he now sees we do not know, or who opened his eyes we do not know. He is of age; ask him. He will speak for himself." His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed that He was Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." So they again called the man who was blind, and said to him, "Give God the glory! We know that this Man is a sinner." He answered and said, "Whether He is a sinner or not I do not know. One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see." Then they said to him again, "What did He do to you? How did He open your eyes?" He answered them, "I told you already, and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become His disciples?" Then they reviled him and said, "You are His disciple, but we are Moses' disciples. We know that God spoke to Moses; as for this fellow, we do not know where He is from." The man answered and said to them, "Why, this is a marvellous thing, that you do not know where He is from; yet He has opened my eyes! Now we know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does His will, He hears him. Since the world began it has been unheard of that anyone opened the eyes of one who was born blind. If this Man were not from God, He could do nothing." They answered and said to him, "You were completely born in sins, and are you teaching us?" And they cast him out. Jesus heard that they had cast him out; and when He had found him, He said to him, "Do you believe in the Son of God?" He answered and said, "Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?" And Jesus said to him, "You have both seen Him and it is He who is talking with you." Then he said, "Lord, I believe!" And he worshiped Him.

Orthodox Christianity is not simply a set of beliefs and practices – in fact these things are only secondary to the true nature of our faith. Orthodox Christianity is at its core the encounter of man with God. Everything that we do is to facilitate that encounter and everything that we believe, our theology, is the description of that personal encounter with God. Today, like all the Sundays since Pascha, we read about a personal encounter with God. This man who had been born blind encountered the God/man Jesus Christ and his darkness was turned to light; he was no longer blind but could see. Jesus Christ is the Light of the world and where the source of the Light is, darkness can no longer exist. When this man encountered God, his life was altered for no one can see God and be unchanged.

We were created to live in union and communion with God, but because of the sin of Adam we are now estranged from God. But God loved us so much that He could not tolerate that separation and so He Himself came to us and opened the way that we might again live in union and communion with Him. His incarnation, His worldly life, His death and resurrection make it possible once again to encounter God face to face. But Jesus Christ no longer bodily walks the earth for after the resurrection, He ascended into heaven (as we will celebrate this coming week). How then can we encounter Him face to face now?

Although our Lord ascended into heaven, He also sent to us the Holy Spirit Who fills us and who unites us to God. Through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the Church – not the building, but the body of all believers – becomes the Body of Christ. In the Church then, we encounter God face to face. Today's Gospel reveals to us a great deal about the nature of the Church and how we encounter God within her.

This miracle of the healing of the man born blind teaches us about the sacramental nature of the Church. When Jesus healed this man, He made some mud and put this mud on the eyes of the man who could not see and sent him to wash in the pool of Siloam. Now Jesus was God and could have healed in an instant with only a word or even just a movement of His will, but He did not. Instead He employed this elaborate ritual. This is the same as the sacraments. The sacraments have not only a spiritual element, the grace of God, they also have a physical element. This is because we are not simply a soul trapped in a body or some kind of spiritual being with the illusion of a physical existence, but rather we are a unity of soul and body, of spiritual and physical. In order to encounter God with the fullness of our being, we must do so in both the spiritual and physical realms, with both the soul and the body. Thus when we receive the sacrament of Baptism, we not only receive the grace of God by which we are given new life, but we are also immersed in water that has been blessed. Not only is the soul washed but the body as well. Likewise in the sacrament of Chrismation, we are not just mysteriously filled with the Holy Spirit but we are anointed with the oil of Chrism as well. We commune with God not only in spirit, but we also commune with the elements of His Body and His Blood under the form of bread and wine in the chalice. It is likewise with all the sacraments,

indeed with all the blessings we receive – there is a physical element and a spiritual element for we are creatures of both soul and body and we encounter God with the fullness of our being.

The healing of the blind man also instructs us as to the nature of our interaction with God in the Church. It is not just God acting on us from the outside, but rather our interaction is a synergy of God with us. We do not sit passively and idly by and wait for God to do something to us, rather we offer our own efforts to Him and act in concert and union with Him. When Jesus had anointed the eyes of the blind man with clay, He then instructed him to go and wash. It was necessary for this healing to occur for the man to act as well as for God to act. He had to go and wash the clay from his eyes, bending his will to that of Christ and acting in obedience to the will of the Master. Our interaction with God is one of synergy, of acting together, of bending our will to conform to His and then acting according to His will. This blending of the divine and human actions, this synergy leads us into union and communion with God. Our Christian life, our encounter with God is not passive – it requires that we act together with Him.

How then do we shape this synergetic action? That is the next element of the Church about which this healing instructs us. The Church gives to us, through Holy Tradition and through the lessons of Scripture, a course of life to follow. There is a rhythm and routine to the life of the Church. That rhythm is expressed in the times of prayer, both our private prayer rule and our public prayer in the services. There are times to pray alone, times to pray together, times to pray for ourselves and one another. We also experience this rhythm of the divine life in the feasts and fasts of the Church. The way of life that we are given instructs us in works of righteousness – in charitable giving, in compassionate works, in loving our neighbor, in bearing one another's burdens. All of these things that we do are the actual working out of the Life of Christ in the Church.

There are times when it might seem to some that the requirements of this life are just a bundle of rules that restrict our lives, but in fact the purpose is entirely different. The practice of the life of Church is given to us for our health and salvation. These are all instructions in how to act, what to do, how to live in order to conform our will to the will of God, in order to strengthen both body and soul so that we can live more fully in union with God. This way of life is no different from a man who diets and exercises according to a certain regimen prescribed by a physician or trainer so that he might be more fit for some sport or other physical activity. The Great Physician, Jesus Christ has prescribed for us the regimen of diet and exercise of the life of the Church so that we might become more fit to live in union and communion with Him. We can choose whether or not to follow this regimen or how intensely to train, however the consequences of neglecting this life are that we do not prepare ourselves fully for life in the Kingdom of God and our desired union and communion with God (for which we should be preparing) is lost. Do you love and desire God? then keep His commandments. Live in the way that He has prepared for you so that you might be able to enter into His Kingdom.

When we do all these things, when we encounter God and are changed by that encounter, then we no longer quite fit in the fallen world. Rather than rejoice with the blind man who was healed, the religious authorities reviled him and condemned him because this miracle did not occur according to their ideas of how God should act. We too, if we follow Christ, will face difficulties and resistance from those in the world who demand that God act according to their rules. When they see us acting according to the life of the Church rather than the life of the world, they may question us and even turn against us. The same thing occurred to the Holy Apostles Paul and Silas as we heard in the epistle today. They healed a woman tormented by a demon but were accused and reviled by those who valued the money that this woman's torment brought them than they valued compassion and love for another human being. The values of the Kingdom of God, though they at times appear to be the same as worldly values, are in the end different and will come into conflict with the world. Our encounter with God will change us and we will no longer walk according to the way of the world, but rather we will endure difficulty and resistance from the world when we forsake its ways for the path of salvation.

Finally the epistle reminds us of another characteristic of the Church and that is the communal nature of our faith. We are not saved as individuals, but rather as a community. When Paul and Silas were brought by the jailer to his home, he asked them how he might be saved. Paul replied, "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved *and thy house.*" And in the same night this man, and his entire household (wife, children, servants and all) was baptized. We are saved as a part of the community of the saints, as a part of the family of the Church. It is not just "Jesus and me" but rather "Jesus and all of us" Even the saints who have finished their course on this earth and who stand at the threshold of the Kingdom of Heaven are waiting for us, not yet entering into their reward until we are all united and enter together into the Kingdom of Heaven. We are saved, not by ourselves, but together with the whole Church. We encounter God together.

When we encounter God, we will encounter Him through the Church and the nature of this encounter is described for us today in the Scripture. Our encounter is sacramental – that is it encompasses both body and soul, both our physical and spiritual nature. Our encounter with God is synergetic – we act in concert with God, bending our will to His and then acting according to His will. Our encounter with God is defined and given shape and form by the life of the Church. The life of the Church is the life of Christ and as we adopt His life, we become more and more able to live in union and communion with Him. Our encounter with God will put us at odds with the world, for the ways of the Lord are foolishness to the world. The worldly life will lead us away from God, but the heavenly life will lead us into union and communion with God. Finally our encounter with God is not individual but communal. We encounter God as a part of the unity and community of the Church. In all these ways we encounter God face to face and entering into his Kingdom, we live in union and communion with Him.

Archpriest David Moser
<https://homilies2020.wordpress.com>

Saints of the Week

16 / 29 May — Our Holy Father Theodore the Sanctified - he was a disciple of St Pachomius, being born and growing up an unbeliever. Coming to the true Faith as a young man, he was baptised and, having heard of St Pachomius, fled to him in his monastery unknown to his parents. St Pachomius made him a monk and came to love him for his rare zeal and his obedience. When his mother came to fetch him back home, he would not let her see him, but prayed to God to enlighten her with the truth. And indeed, his mother not only did not take her son back home but herself did not return. Seeing a women's monastery, ruled by Pachomius's sister, close by, she entered it and was tonsured. After a certain time, Paphnutius, Theodore's brother, also came to the monastery and was tonsured. It once happened that the Bishop of Panopolis invited Pachomius to build a monastery for the many people who were desirous of the monastic life. Pachomius took Theodore with him, and entrusted to him the duty of building the monastery. Upon Pachomius's death, Theodore became abbot of all Pachomius's monasteries and lived until great old age, guiding a multitude of monks on the way of salvation. He entered peacefully into rest and went to the Kingdom of eternal light in the year 368.

St. Brendan the Voyager, abbot of Clonfert (578) - St. Brendan sailed in skin-covered coracles, from Ireland to Scotland, then to England and Wales. His most famous voyage in search of the promised land, was described in a famous saga known as the 'Navagatio,' which indicates that he reached Greenland or even North America. It is still possible to construct a coracle according to the instructions of the Navagatio, and to sail it from Ireland to Newfoundland. St. Brendan was born near Tralee on the west coast of Ireland, and he was brought up by a saint called Ita, who taught him three things that God truly loves: 'the true faith of a pure heart; the simple religious life, and bountifulness inspired by Christian charity.' (She added three things that God hates: 'a scowling face; obstinate wrong-doing; and too much confidence in money'.) He founded several monasteries the most renowned being at Clonfert, a centre famous for missionary work, where he is said to have directed three thousand monks.; The Blessed Maiden Musa; St Nicolas Mysticus, Patriarch of Constantinople; The Holy New Martyr Nicolas; Our Holy Fathers martyred at St Sava's.

17 / 30 May — The Holy Apostle Andronicus - One of the Seventy, he was a kinsman of the Apostle Paul, as Paul wrote (Rom. 16:17), remembering also St Junia, Andronicus's helper. Andronicus was made Bishop of Pannonia, and did not stay in one place, but preached the Gospel throughout the whole of Pannonia. With St Junia, he was successful in bringing many to Christ and in demolishing many temples of idolatry. Both of them had the grace of wonder-working, by which they drove out demons and healed every sort of sickness and disease. They both suffered for Christ, and thus received a twofold crown: of apostleship and of martyrdom. Their holy relics were found in the excavations in Eugenius; The Holy Martyr Solochon; St Stephen, Patriarch of Constantinople;

St. Melangell, virgin hermitress of Wales - Imagine a party of huntsmen in the thick, green undergrowth of a small, wooded valley. The dogs are barking as they begin to follow the scent of a hare. One of the huntsmen sounds the horn. Riding at the front is the local prince. The time is 607 A.D. The place is the Pennant Valley in the kingdom of Powys, in central Wales. The hare disappears into a huge thicket of undergrowth, and the hunters prepare to follow. Then suddenly strange things begin to happen. The dogs turn back in fear. The huntsman with the horn finds he cannot sound a blast, yet he cannot take the horn from his lips. The prince, brave and proud, leaps from his horse. He will not show fear in the face of magic. He draws his sword and begins to cut his way through the brambles and shrubs. In a circular clearing in the centre of the thicket stands a young woman. She is dressed very simply. She stands calmly, radiating a sense of peace. At her feet the hare has crouched down for safety. Prince Brochwel of Powys has just come face to face with Melangell, the daughter of an Irish warrior. Melangell refused a pre-arranged marriage to an old warrior chieftain. She fled to Wales and began a life of prayer, living in a cave on the side of the Pennant Valley. As she was drawn deeper into the spiritual life, animals began to come to her in complete trust. Around her the world was restored to Paradise. Prince Brochwel granted her the valley as a place of prayer and refuge for ever. Gradually a small convent grew up, and a church was built. When Melangell died, the nuns placed her body within the church. The holy woman came to be known as a saint. No one knows how long the convent lasted, but archaeologists have shown that nuns were still being buried outside the church in the 9th and 10th Century. Around 1160 A.D. a new stone church was built, with a shrine where people could come to venerate the bones of Saint Melangell. Pilgrims began to arrive, and miracles of healing took place. The valley was noted as a place of peace, a sanctuary for hares, a comfort to the sick, a glimpse of heaven. Then came the upheavals and pain of the Reformation. The shrine was desecrated, and chunks of masonry from the shrine were hurled out of the church. Often the relics of saints were destroyed at this time by the reformers, but Saint Melangell was reburied in the floor of the church. Pilgrims were no longer encouraged to make the long journey into the Welsh mountains to visit this holy place. Centuries passed, and times changed. Hardly anyone lived near the tiny church in the hidden valley. The few local sheep farmers could not afford to repair the building. By the 1980's the church was almost derelict. Then in 1988 work began to restore the church and shrine of Saint Melangell. Many parts of the ancient shrine were found built into walls, or on neighbouring farms. New masonry was carved to match the old stonework. Today, the church and shrine are beautiful once more. Hundreds of pilgrims flock to pray there and to ask for the prayers of the early Celtic holy woman. A centre for healing and rest has been established a few yards from the church, so that Saint Melangell's work may continue.

18 / 31 May — The Holy Martyr Theodotus, and the seven maiden martyrs: Tecusa, Alexandra, Claudia, Favina, Euphrasia, Matrona and Julia. Theodotus was a married man and an innkeeper in Ancyra in the time of the Emperor Diocletian. Although he was married, he lived according to the words of the Apostle: 'Let them who have wives be as though they had not' (I Cor. 7:29). But he kept the inn on, in order to be able unsuspectedly to help Christians, and his inn was a refuge for persecuted Christians. Theodotus secretly sent help to the Christian refugees in the mountains, and secretly gathered the bodies of those who had been killed, giving them burial. At that time, seven maidens were taken for trial and tortured for Christ. They were tortured, mocked and then thrown into a lake. One of them, St Tecusa, appeared to St Theodotus and told him to take her body out of the lake and bury it. Under cover of night, Theodotus set off with a companion to carry out the martyr's wishes, and, led by an angel of God, succeeded in finding all seven bodies and burying them. But this friend betrayed him to the authorities and the judge put him to harsh torture. Theodotus endured all the tortures as though not in his own body, having his whole mind steeped in God. When the torturers had made his body one great wound and broken his teeth with stones, it was ordered that he be beheaded. When he was taken to the scaffold, many Christians wept for him, but St Theodotus said to them: 'Don't weep for me, my brethren, but glorify our Lord Jesus Christ, by whose aid I am finishing my course and overcoming the enemy.' Saying this, he laid his head on the block under the sword and was beheaded, in the year 303. A priest buried the martyr's body on a hill outside the city and a church dedicated to St Theodotus was later built on the site; The Holy Martyrs Peter, Dionysius, Andrew, Paul and Christina; The Holy Martyrs Heraclius, Paulinus and Benedimus.

19 May / 1 June — APOSDIS (Leavetaking) OF PASCHA - *Fast Day, Fish, Wine & Oil allowed* - The Hieromartyr Patrick, Bishop of Brussa with three priests: Acacius, Menander and Polyenus - they suffered for the Christian faith in the time of Julian the Apostate in Asian Brussa. The imperial governor, Junius, brought Patrick to a hot water spring and asked him: 'Who created this healing water, if not our gods, Aesculapius and the others, whom we worship?' St Patrick answered: 'Your gods are demons; and this water, like all other water, was created by Christ, our Lord and God.' Then the governor asked: 'And will this Christ of yours save you if I throw you into this boiling water?' The saint replied: 'If He wills, He can keep me whole and uninjured, although I would wish, in this water, to be parted from this temporal life, that I may live eternally with Christ; but let His holy will be done, without which not a hair of a man's head can fall.' Hearing this, the governor ordered that Patrick be thrown into the water. The boiling drops fell on all sides, and scalded many of the onlookers, but the saint remained untouched, as though he were standing in cold water. Seeing this, the governor was wild with shame and commanded that Patrick and three of his priests be beheaded with axes. So these goodly followers of Christ said their prayers and laid their heads under the executioner's axe. When they had been beheaded, their souls were taken merrily to Christ's Kingdom of light, to reign eternally. St John, Bishop of the Goths; The Holy Prince Ivan of Vologda.

St. Dunstan, archbishop of Canterbury (988) - nephew of the Archbishop of Canterbury, spent a privileged youth at the court of King Athelstan and eventually became abbot of Glastonbury. English monastic life had almost totally disappeared as a result of the Viking invasions. Dunstan set about vigorously reviving it. He founded monasteries at Bath, Exeter, Malmesbury, and elsewhere, drawing up new rules for their good order. He installed monks in Winchester, in Chertsey, Surrey, and Milton Abbas, Dorset and restored the old abbey of Abingdon. After a period of exile King Edgar recalled him to be Archbishop of Canterbury in the year 960. There he founded an abbey to the east of the city, along with three churches dedicated to St Mary, Saints Peter and Paul, and St Pancras. As a skilled metalworker, scribe and bell-founder himself, he stimulated the revival of church art and illuminated manuscripts. He also loved to play the harp and wrote several fine hymns.

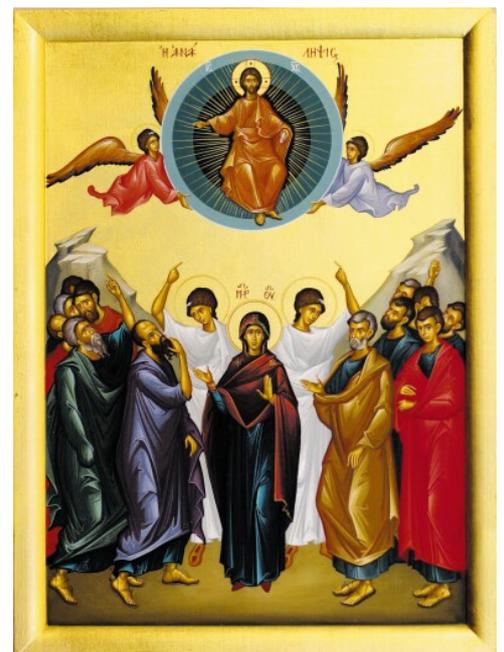
20 May / 2 June — THE ASCENSION OF OUR LORD -

Troparion, Ascension of the Lord, Tone IV — Thou didst ascend into glory, O Christ our God, having gladdened Thy disciples by the promise of the Holy Spirit. And this blessing convinced them that Thou art the Son of God, the Redeemer of the world.

Kontakion, Ascension of the Lord, Tone VI — Having accomplished for us Thy mission and united things on earth with things in heaven, Thou didst ascend into glory, O Christ our God, being nowhere separated from those who love Thee, but remaining everpresent with us and calling: I am with you and no one is against you.

“He Ascended into Heaven.”

Four of the greatest miracles of Christianity are: the Son of God becoming the Son of man, the Resurrection, the Ascension into heaven, and His coming again to judge the world. It was a great day for our planet when the Son of God appeared upon it in the likeness of our flesh. It was a momentous day when He rose from the grave. It was a majestic day for the Church when a cloud received Him out of sight. It will be an even greater day for the world when the ascended Christ shall return in glory.



Let us concentrate on the miracle of the Ascension: what it is and what it means.

Just as the Lord Jesus came to earth in a supernatural way so He left in a supernatural way. One of the best descriptions of the Ascension is found in Acts 1:9-11, "And when he (Jesus) had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'"

"Lifted Up."

The words "and when he was lifted up" do not mean that Jesus was elevated so many feet above sea level. They mean that through His ascension Jesus entered a higher existence. When a school boy says that he has been promoted to a higher class, we do not take him to mean that he was transferred from a classroom on the ground floor to one upstairs. Likewise, the words "and he was lifted up" mean that Jesus was promoted to glory, to a different realm of life, to heaven.

It is interesting to note that when one does go "up" into outer space, one enters a new and different realm than what we know here on earth. For example, scientists tell us that by the end of this century we will be able to break the light barrier just as we did the sound barrier. In other words, men will be able to travel at the speed of light, i.e., 186,000 miles per second. To reach the nearest star at that speed would require ten years: five years to go and five to return. We here on earth will be ten years older when the astronauts return but they will be only ten days older. Why? Because when they break the light barrier, they reach the point where time almost ceases to exist. Time in space is not as it is here on earth. It is a completely different realm. So it is that when the New Testament says that Jesus "was lifted up," it means to say that He entered a new realm of life completely different from what we know here on earth.

"A cloud took Him out of their sight."

In the Bible, a cloud is a sign of the presence of God. It was a cloud which enveloped Mt. Sinai as God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. When Jesus was transfigured we read that "a bright cloud overshadowed them" (Matthew 17:5). It was probably from a cloud that God's voice came when Jesus was baptized saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am pleased." So when we read in Acts, "A cloud took him out of their sight," it means that Jesus entered into the very presence of God.

Why did He go Away?

Why did Jesus go away when there was so much He could have done here on earth? The answer was given by Jesus Himself: "It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (John 16:7). Jesus tells us here that His human form will be replaced by the presence of the Counselor, the Helper, the Holy Spirit. He will bring us into much closer contact with Jesus than His human form could bring about.

Seen in this light, the Ascension and Pentecost are not two separate holy days. The Ascension is a prelude to Pentecost. Jesus goes away that He may send the Holy Spirit. He goes away in order to change the form by which He will work among us. Now He will work through us, the Spirit-filled, Christ-filled members of His body, the Church.

Humanity Ascends with Christ.

Jesus came down from heaven as the Eternal Son of the Father, but when He went back to the seat of honor and glory at God's right hand, He took with Him our human nature. He returned to His Father as God-man. It was our nature, in everything except its sin, that sat down at the right hand of God. The Son of God descended to become one of us and ascended to enable us to ascend with Him. Through the ascension and enthronement of Christ, all human nature has been enthroned at the right hand of the Father. Since the manhood of Jesus was taken up to the heavenly places, our manhood will also be taken up. The Ascension is proof that man was made for heaven not for the grave, for glory not for corruption. St. Paul does not hesitate to describe Christians as "enthroned above the heavens, in Christ Jesus."

He Ascends to Reign.

The Ascension was the enthronement of Jesus. It was His coronation as King of the Universe. Jesus ascends into heaven to resume His universal rule and dominion. This is brought out beautifully in one of the icons of the Ascension where the iconographer depicts the ascending Christ as growing larger and larger until the earth itself becomes no bigger than a ball which He holds in His hand. In other words, through His ascension Christ is no longer a prisoner of space and time. He is no longer confined to Palestine in the first century A.D. He now transcends space and time as Ruler of the Universe.

A Friend Awaits us in Heaven.

When Jesus ascended into heaven, He passed into another world, spiritual, invisible, yet just as real as the world in which we live today. This tells us that we mortals may be at home somewhere else in this vast universe than on earth. "I go to prepare a place for you that where I am there you may be also," said Jesus. The Ascension gives us the certainty that we have a Friend not only on earth, but also in heaven. He is our forerunner who has gone on before us to prepare for our arrival. To die is not to go out into the dark; it is to go to Him.

He Will come Again.

The message of the ascension concludes with the announcement of the return of Christ: "This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). The Ascended Jesus is Lord of the future. He will return one day in the same manner as He ascended. He left in person, He will come back in person. He left in His glorified body, He will come back in His glorified body. He left in sight of men, He will return in sight of men. Only then, as we read in Revelation, not a mere handful of select disciples, but "every eye will see him" (Rev. 1:7). Before His judgement seat

will appear every person who ever lived. No Christian can take lightly his ultimate appearance before God — when all his thoughts, words and deeds will be laid bare. The great mystery of God's grace is that He who will judge the world is the same One who gave His life to save the world!

He Prays for Us.

Jesus ascended into heaven not to end His work for us but to continue it — this time as our great intercessor before the throne of God. Even before His Ascension Jesus prayed to God for us. He prayed for His disciples, especially for Peter that his faith might not fail him. In His sublime prayer at the last supper He prayed for all Christian believers, past, present and future. Now that He is in heaven He continues this intercession. "... who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us" (Romans 8:34).

If it helps to know at times that some wife or little child, or blessed mother or father, or true friend is praying for us, if the thought of those prayers helps and strengthens and purifies, so that our hearts are brave again and strong, how much more will it help us to remember that the Ascended Christ is now our great intercessor in heaven ever praying for each one of us?

"While He Blessed them..."

St. Luke records that as Jesus was ascending into heaven, He raised His hands in blessing: "Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them" (Luke 24:50-51). His whole life among us was a blessing. He died as a blessing. He rose as a blessing. He left His followers with a blessing. In almost every icon He is pictured with His hand lifted up in blessing. It is His blessing that the priest bestows upon the congregation when he says, "Peace be with you." And now through His Church He seeks to enrich all of us with the greatest blessing there is: the promise of pardon and peace and life with God.

A Continuing Ascension.

Our Lord promised the disciples that they would see "heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man." What do these words mean, "the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man"? They refer to the continued presence of Christ in the world even after His ascension. Christ's coming into the world marks the opening of heaven. He came down the ladder from heaven and ever since then heaven has remained open. We may say that Christ Himself is the ladder — the only way to the Father and to heaven. There is a constant stream of traffic on that ladder. Those angels ever going up and coming down are our prayers. Up to gain help and inspiration — down to bring a little bit of heaven, a breath of Godly air into this world of struggling humanity. "Prayer," writes St. John of the Ladder, "is a continuous ascension to heaven." We may add, so is the liturgy and the reading of God's word — a continuous ascension to where God is.

For Us.

In conclusion we remember that everything Jesus did, He did for us. For us He ascended into heaven. For us He sits at the right hand of the Father. For us He pleads and prays. For us He has gone to prepare a place in the presence of God. For us He has opened heaven that our prayers may ever ascend to Him. For us He shall come again to take us unto Himself that we may ever be with the Lord.

Anthony M. Coniaris - Gems from the Sunday and Feasts Gospels

The Holy Martyr Thaleleus - born in Lebanon, his father's name being Berucius and his mother's Romylia, he was an eighteen-year-old youth, handsome and well-grown and with ginger hair. A doctor by profession, he suffered for Christ in the reign of Numerian. When he courageously confessed his faith in Christ the Lord before the judge, the latter commanded the two executioners, Alexander and Asterius, to bore through his knees, pass a rope through the pierced bone and hang him from a tree. But the executioners, as though the unseen power of God had deprived them of sight, bored through a plank and hung it on the tree. When the judge discovered this, he thought that the executioners had done it deliberately, and ordered that they be flogged. Then Alexander and Asterius cried out under the flogging: 'The Lord is alive to us; from now on, we are become Christians. We believe in Christ, and suffer for Him.' Hearing this, the judge ordered that they be beheaded. Then the judge took the awl, to bore through Thaleleus's knees himself, but his hand was paralysed and he had to ask Thaleleus to heal him, which the kindly martyr, with Christ's aid, did by his prayers. Then he was thrown into water, but showed himself alive to the judge (for Thaleleus was praying within himself that God would not have him die at once, but would let his tortures continue). When he was thrown to the wild beasts, they licked his feet and rubbed tamely round him. He was finally beheaded and entered into eternal life in 284.

The Holy Martyr Asclas - Asclas suffered in the town of Antioch in Egypt during the reign of Diocletian. He was flogged, scraped, burned with candles but he remained unwavering in the Faith to the end. When the tormentor Arrian was crossing the Nile by boat Asclas, through prayer, stopped the boat in the middle of the river and would not allow it to move until Arrian wrote that he believes in Christ as the One and Almighty God. But, ascribing this miracle to a magical skill of Asclas, the tormentor forgot what he wrote and continued to torment the man of God. Finally, they tied a stone around his neck and tossed him into the Nile river. On the third day Christians found the body of Asclas along the shore with the stone around his neck (as the martyr foretold them before his death) and honourably buried him in the year 287 A.D. Leonides, the holy martyr, also suffered with him. Arrian, their tormentor, later repented, believed in Christ with his whole heart and openly began to express his faith before the pagans. The pagans also killed him and so Arrian, a one-time tormentor of Christians, was made worthy of the martyr's wreath for Christ; Our Holy Father Stephen of Pipheri; St. Ethelbert, king and martyr (c793)

21 May / 3 June — Fast Day - The Holy Emperor Constantine and the Empress Helena - Constantine's parents were the Emperor Constantius Chlorus and the Empress Helena. Chlorus had further children by another wife, but by Helena he had only the one, Constantine. Constantine fought two great battles when he came to the throne: one against Maxentius, a tyrant in Rome, and the other against Licinius not far from Byzantium. At the battle against Maxentius, when Constantine was in great anxiety and uncertainty about his chances of success, a shining cross, surrounded by stars, appeared to him in the sky in full daylight. On the cross were written the words: 'In this sign, conquer!' The wondering Emperor ordered that a great cross be put together, like the one that had appeared, and be carried before the army. By the power of the Cross, he gained a glorious victory over enemies greatly superior in number. Maxentius drowned himself in the Tiber. Immediately after this, Constantine issued the famous Edict of Milan, in 313, to put an end to the persecution of Christians. Conquering Byzantium, he built a beautiful capital city on the Bosphorus, which from that time was named Constantinople. At this time, Constantine fell ill with leprosy. The pagan priests and doctors advised him to bathe in the blood of slaughtered children, which he refused to do. Then the Apostles Peter and Paul appeared to him and told him to seek out a bishop, Sylvester, who would heal him of the disease. The bishop instructed him in the Christian faith and baptised him, and the leprosy vanished from the Emperor's body. When there was discord in the Church about the troublesome heretic Arius, the Emperor summoned the first Ecumenical Council in Nicaea, in 325, where the heresy was condemned and Orthodoxy confirmed. St Helena, the Emperor's devout mother, was very zealous for the Christian faith. She visited Jerusalem and found the Precious Cross of the Lord, and built the Church of the Resurrection over Golgotha and many other churches in the Holy Land. This holy woman went to the Lord in 327, at the age of eighty. The Emperor Constantine outlived his mother by ten years and entered into rest at the age of about sixty in 337, in the city of Nicomedia. His body was buried in the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople; Our Holy Father, the Martyr Pachomius.

22 May / 4 June — The Holy Martyr Basiliscus - a kinsman of St Theodore the Tyro, he was martyred together with Eutropius and Cleonimus (March 3rd). When these two were crucified and gave up the ghost, Basiliscus was taken back to prison. A change of governors occurring at this time, Basiliscus remained a long time confined in prison. He besought God with tears that He would not deprive him of a martyr's death for His sake. After he had prayed at length, the Lord Jesus appeared to him and promised to fulfil his desire, sending him to his village to say farewell to his mother and brothers. Thereupon the new governor, Agrippa, arrived and sent to have Basiliscus brought from the village immediately. On the way to the city of Amasea, the Lord worked great wonders through His martyr, bringing many of the people to faith in Christ. Agrippa ordered the martyr to offer sacrifice to Apollyon. "Apollyon" means "Destroyer", said Basiliscus, and, with fervent prayer, he knocked the idol to dust and burned the temple with fire from heaven. The terrified Agrippa attributed this all to magic, and ordered that Basiliscus be beheaded with the sword. Agrippa immediately became insane and, in his madness, went to the place of execution, found a little of the martyr's blood in the dust and smeared it on himself under his belt, being restored to health by it. Having come to his senses, he was baptised. Later, a certain Marinus, a citizen of Comana (the place of Basiliscus's execution) built a church over the martyr's relics, and many of the sick found healing there.

The Holy Martyr John Vladimir, King of Serbia - John Vladimir was of princely lineage from Zahumlje. His grandfather was called Hvalimir and his father Petrislav. As a ruler, he was wise, merciful, meek, chaste and brave. He fervently prayed to God and voluntarily built churches and supported them. However, he had difficult struggles both internally and externally. Internally, from heretics and the Bogomils and externally from Tsar Samuel and Tsar Basil who wanted to conquer him. Samuel deceitfully captured him and cast him into prison. While he languished in prison an angel of God appeared to him and foretold that he would shortly be freed, but that he would die a martyr's death. Getting to know him better, Samuel grew to like him and gave his daughter Kosara to be his wife. When Samuel died, his son Radomir was crowned Tsar. But Vladislav, his twin brother, slew Radomir and deceitfully summoned Vladimir and beheaded him in the year 1015 A.D. The relics of this saintly king repose uncorrupt in his monastery near Elbasan and over his relics, throughout the ages and even today, numerous miracles occur. In 1925, a church was built to honor this crowned martyr adjacent to the monastery of St. Nahum since John Vladimir was the benefactor of this glorious monastery.

The Second Ecumenical Council - This Council was called during the reign of Emperor Theodosius the Great in Constantinople in the year 381 A.D. Its goal was to confirm the Orthodox teaching concerning the Holy Spirit about Whom the Patriarch Macedonius of Constantinople erroneously taught. He erroneously taught that the Holy Spirit is God's creature and not a divine person [Hypostasis] equal to the Father and Son and One in essence with Them in the Holy Trinity. Macedonius was condemned by this Council and the teaching about the Holy Spirit was added to the Nicene Symbol of Faith [the Nicene Creed].

Holy and Righteous Melchisedek, King of Salem - Melchisedek was a contemporary of our forefather Abraham. According to the words of the Apostle Paul he was a king, priest and proto-type of the Lord Jesus Christ (Hebrews 7).