

Synaxis of the Three Hierarchs: St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory the Theologian, and St. John Chrysostom.

Jan 30/Feb 12 2009

Readings at Vespers.

Today's readings, followed by a few pastoral & personal thoughts.

The "Parables" at Vespers

Sometimes Vespers has readings appointed; they are called "parables". The word "parable" literally means "a placing beside or together or a comparison". Everyone is familiar with the parables of Jesus, in which a fictional story illustrates spiritual truths. These are not the only parables; the word is also used to describe proverbs, prophetic utterances, and "dark sayings".

When a parable is read in the Vespers service, we should consider that the content of the text refers in some way, whether directly or allegorically, to the service being celebrated.

Typically, the parables for celebrated saints are from the OT, except in the case of one of the 12 Apostles, when they are taken entirely from the NT epistles. The parables for Feasts of the Lord or Theotokos are from the OT.

The Old Testament is a very difficult book to understand. We who are Orthodox are helped immeasurably in this task by the church services, which are replete with references to the OT, and the right interpretation of the myriad types and prophecies contained in it. All the services interpret the meaning of the Old Testament in the light of the New.

Anyone who attentively and consistently worships in the Vespers and Matins services will learn the most important parts of the Old Testament. Those whose Christian worship is almost entirely confined to the Divine Liturgy will not receive the benefit of this teaching.

The major portion of the pedagogy of the church is Vespers and Matins, whose content varies considerably day by day and season by season, The textual content of the Divine Liturgy, on the other hand, varies very little throughout the year.

One CANNOT understand the Old Testament without worshipping in the Vespers and Matins services. Also, one CANNOT understand the New Testament without understanding the Old, and one CANNOT understand anything in the scripture without

living according to the message of the New Testament. With some, this sounds like circular reasoning, but for those who have heeded the call to “come and see”, all things become clear.

We learn the truth of the scriptures by hearing them used in the context of worship, coupled of course with our struggle to learn and follow the commandments and our personal study of the scriptures.

Commentary on the Parables for the Vespers of the 3 Hierarchs.

The first parable, describes the necessary character traits of the judges God appointed over His people; these same traits are also exemplified by holy hierarchs, who are also appointed to judge, that is to “rightly dividing the word of truth”¹

“¹⁶ And I charged your judges at that time, saying, Hear the causes between your brethren, and judge righteously between every man and his brother, and the stranger that is with him. ¹⁷ Ye shall not respect persons in judgment; but ye shall hear the small as well as the great; ye shall not be afraid of the face of man; for the judgment is God's:”

The second parable also, in which God describes Himself, also describes more attributes of a holy bishop (or any Christian, of which a bishop should be the best example). The admonitions to the Jews also are fulfilled most exactly in the holy hierarchs:

“¹⁷ For the LORD your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty, and a terrible, which regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward: ¹⁸ He doth execute the judgment of the fatherless and widow, and loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment. ¹⁹ Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt. ²⁰ Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God; him shalt thou serve, and to him shalt thou cleave, and swear by his name.”

'This parable also contains a graphic reference to our hearts:

“¹⁶ Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked.”

This is a kind of “mini” parable in itself. We would do well to consider the metaphor literally. Just as circumcision is the cutting away of flesh, and involves blood and pain,

so also flesh must be cut away which is covering the heart. This “foreskin” covering our heart is our sins and sinful inclinations. The cutting away of these things can only be accomplished with pain and with blood. The pain occurs because the soul is attached to earthly things, and in the beginning, feels great sorrow when torn away from the earth. Blood contains the essence of our life, it permeates all parts of our body. In giving our blood we are giving our life.

The admonition to “**be no more stiffnecked**” targets the greatest passion which keeps us from true life and holiness: pride.

The last parable is used very commonly in the Vespers readings, for many Saints. An interpretation of it is, as my old math textbooks used to say: “left as an exercise to the reader.” Anybody what to take a crack at it?

Deuteronomy 1:8-11, 15-17 ⁸ Behold, I have set the land before you: go in and possess the land which the LORD swore unto your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give unto them and to their seed after them. ⁹ And I spake unto you at that time, saying, I am not able to bear you myself alone: ¹⁰ The LORD your God hath multiplied you, and, behold, ye are this day as the stars of heaven for multitude. ¹¹ (The LORD God of your fathers make you a thousand times so many more as ye are, and bless you, as he hath promised you!) ¹⁵ So I took the chief of your tribes, wise men, and known, and made them heads over you, captains over thousands, and captains over hundreds, and captains over fifties, and captains over tens, and officers among your tribes. ¹⁶ And I charged your judges at that time, saying, Hear the causes between your brethren, and judge righteously between every man and his brother, and the stranger that is with him. ¹⁷ Ye shall not respect persons in judgment; but ye shall hear the small as well as the great; ye shall not be afraid of the face of man; for the judgment is God's: and the cause that is too hard for you, bring it unto me, and I will hear it.

Deuteronomy 10:14-21 ¹⁴ Behold, the heaven and the heaven of heavens is the LORD's thy God, the earth also, with all that therein is. ¹⁵ Only the LORD had a delight in thy fathers to love them, and he chose their seed after them, even you above all people, as it is this day. ¹⁶ Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked. ¹⁷ For the LORD your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty, and a terrible, which regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward: ¹⁸ He doth execute the judgment of the fatherless and widow, and loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment. ¹⁹ Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt. ²⁰ Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God; him shalt thou serve, and to him shalt thou cleave, and

swear by his name. ²¹ He is thy praise, and he is thy God, that hath done for thee these great and terrible things, which thine eyes have seen.

Wisdom 3:1-9 ¹ But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them. ² In the sight of the unwise they seemed to die: and their departure is taken for misery, ³ And their going from us to be utter destruction: but they are in peace. ⁴ For though they be punished in the sight of men, yet is their hope full of immortality. ⁵ And having been a little chastised, they shall be greatly rewarded: for God proved them, and found them worthy for himself. ⁶ As gold in the furnace hath he tried them, and received them as a burnt offering. ⁷ And in the time of their visitation they shall shine, and run to and fro like sparks among the stubble. ⁸ They shall judge the nations, and have dominion over the people, and their Lord shall reign for ever. ⁹ They that put their trust in him shall understand the truth: and such as be faithful in love shall abide with him: for grace and mercy is to his saints, and he hath care for his elect.

Priest Seraphim 2009

[St Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, McKinney, Texas](http://www.orthodox.net/scripture/pentecost-monday-23_2008_1thessalonians1;1-5+luke10;22-24.rtf)

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¹ “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”
² Timothy 2:15