

Last week with the calling of Nathanael, we heard that we shall see greater things than these if we believe.

Today we are again reminded that we must believe. We must continue the journey, run the race and fight the good fight. Salvation is our's if we believe. As we heard in this morning's Epistle, St. Paul reminded us...

Heb. 1:10-2:3 "therefore, we must pay close attention to what we have heard lest we drift away from it....How shall we escape if we neglect such salvation?"

In today's Gospel we see the desire of the paralytic and his friends for healing. Jesus not only healed the paralyzed man, but gave salvation to him by forgiving the man his sins.

Last week celebrated the Sunday of Orthodoxy and the Triumph of Orthodoxy with the restoration of Icons into the churches.

This week is the Second Sunday of Lent and we celebrate the Second Triumph of Orthodoxy. Why is it called the second triumph of Orthodoxy? It is because we commemorate St. Gregory of Palamas who lived 14th century. The debates between St. Gregory and a philosopher name Barlaam became very disruptive and involved all of the church as well as the Byzantine emperor. At one point Gregory was imprisoned for 4 years because of his teachings.

Several councils were convened and eventually, the viewpoint of St. Gregory was accepted as to being the true teaching of the Church. In 1351, a sixth and final council was held to settle the heated controversial issues in the church. The Council of Blachernae solemnly upheld the orthodoxy of Gregorie's teachings and anathematized and excommunicated those who refused them. This council was considered the second triumph of Orthodoxy. Later on, the memory of St. Gregory Palamas came to be celebrated in the Church on the second Sunday of Great Lent.

St. Gregory Palamas was born in the year 1296. He grew up in Constantinople. Gregory's family was wealthy. His father was a member of the senate. Upon his father's sudden death, the Byzantine emperor, who was a close friend of the family, gave it his full financial support.

The emperor had great respect for Gregory and wanted him to be an assistant to him after he finished his studies. However, instead of accepting a high office in the secular world, Gregory sought "that good part, which will not be taken away" from him (Luke 10:42). Following his heart, after completing his studies, at about the age of twenty, he left his home and went to Mount Athos. There, Gregory was especially attached to the prayer of the heart, also known as the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner".

The experienced practice of the Jesus Prayer, requiring solitude and silence combined

with physical exercises and breathing methods, is called "hesychasm" (from the Greek word *hesychos*, meaning inner stillness, peace, or silence). Those practicing it are called "hesychasts." Inner silence of this kind makes us capable of listening to the whispers of the divine within us. "The kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21). Therefore, the Jesus Prayer is the prayer of the whole person, involving the human body, mind, soul, and heart.

In addition to his spiritual practice and daily scriptural readings, St. Gregory studied the works of the great Fathers, theologians, and ascetics of the Church.

There was a great controversy in the first half of the 14th century concerning man's relationship with God.

Now at the same time as St Gregory there lived a philosopher, also a Greek, whose name was Barlaam. He was a famous scholar, a skilled orator, and an acclaimed Christian teacher. Barlaam valued education and learning much more than contemplative prayer. Therefore, he believed the monks on Mount Athos were wasting their time in contemplative prayer when they should be studying. He ridiculed the ascetic labor and life of the monks, their methods of prayer, and their teachings about the uncreated light experienced by the hesychasts.

Going against the traditional teaching of the Church that "the theologian is the one who prays," Barlaam asked: "How can an intimate communion of man with the Divine be achievable through prayer, since the Divine is transcendent and 'dwelling in unapproachable light' (1 Timothy 5:16)? No one can apprehend the essential being of God!" Barlaam was convinced that God can be reached only through philosophical, mental knowledge—in other words, through rationalism.

St Gregory recognized that this teach of Barlaam was blasphemy, a heresy. He recognized that Barlaam's logic was the logic of the godless who only trusted in his own mental powers and imagination, the mental powers of the created, not of the Creator.

If Barlaam was right, then all of Christ's work for us, from His Conception and Birth as a man, His Circumcision, His Presentation in the Temple, His Baptism, His Crucifixion, His Resurrection, His Ascension, and to His Sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, were futile. They were all in vain.

Unlike Barlaam, St Gregory said that since Christ the Creator had become man and part of creation, Christ had made human nature potentially holy - like His own human nature. By sending down the Holy Spirit, He had given us all access in our human nature to holiness. Just as the Sun is known to us through its energies of heat and light, so God can be known to us through the uncreated energies of the Holy Spirit.

Quite simply, if we reject the teaching of St Gregory on this, we reject all the work of Christ and therefore also reject the coming of the Holy Spirit. Barlaam's philosophy would mean that we cannot know God, that there is no purpose in fasting and prayer.

In fact, Barlaam's philosophy was a denial of God and therefore the foundation-stone of the last century's atheism and disbelief with all its massacres and genocides with their hundreds of millions of victims. Indeed, Barlaam's philosophy is the basis of all those recent ideas which said that there is no God, that man stands alone and lonely at the head of the Universe, for there is nothing greater than man - that he quite magically created himself in an empty and godless universe.

St Gregory asserted the opposite to Barlaam. He affirmed that man carries in himself two tendencies, one for good, the other for evil. However, the tendency for good can only be developed in man through acquiring the grace of God, the divine energy sent to us from God, accessible insofar as our hearts and minds are pure enough to receive that grace. But this grace which enlightens and brightens us can only come to us if we repent, if we accept the process of fasting and prayer, tears and self-sacrifice.

It is vital for us to understand that the thoughts of St Gregory, expressed in detail in his writings, are not just thoughts, not just another philosophy like Barlaam's, but they were based on his experience, they were divinely inspired. He was not talking about an idea, but about the reality which he had experienced as an ascetic. And the fact is that it is the wonder-working relics of St Gregory which go in procession through the streets of Salonica today, not the graceless dust of the bones of Barlaam.

This is the reality of the Church, this is the grace of the energies of God, this is holiness, the experience and knowledge of God, not imagined, not the fruit of fantasy and the studies of the mind, but the reality of God known to and experienced by those who are pure in heart and mind. For as it is written: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God'. And this precisely is the aim of all true Christian hearts and minds. Every single person, whether a man, a woman, or a child, has been given by God a deep, primal longing for Him.

Another of our saints, who lived quite early on in the Church's life, in the second century in what is now France—Irenaeus of Lyons—wrote that “the glory of God is a man fully alive.” And with that saying, all of the pieces fit together. God's breath, God's life, God's light—these are our experience of God's glory. When God's glory truly shines into a man or woman or child, then that person becomes fully alive, because God's glory is God. That is what life is, it is to have an intimate, personal experience of God's glory, of God. All the other things we call “life” are really just reminders of our loss of that one thing needful—the glorious, life-giving breath of God.

That's what salvation is. That's what the Church is. That's what Christian life is. That's what human life is. It is a struggle to overcome our distorted wills, our distorted desires,

so that we return to that perfect moment when the Holy Trinity breathed into Adam's nostrils the breath of life, that moment when the communion with the Creator was perfect.

So how do we do that? In the epistle reading for today, Paul asks us, "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" He by no means assumes that you can come here, fulfill an "obligation," and then can say, "Yes, I've got the breath of God back." Salvation is something that can be neglected, and if neglected, we will not escape all that the loss of the life given to Adam really entails—spiritual death, eternal death. Not ceasing to exist—no, for we will all exist forever—but an eternal existence of continual dying, decay and distortion.

But St. Gregory Palamas gives us the key. He earnestly taught that ordinary people, just like you and me, could see the divine light of God, could breathe the breath of God once more, if they will truly give themselves to prayer, to fasting, to worship, to good works, to humility, to real change, to becoming the kind of people concerning whom others can truly say, "Here is one in whom God lives, in whom God breathes. Here is one in whom I see God's glory." Can people say that about us? Let us spend the rest of this Fast achieving this and not on being people of the world.