

Repent! For the Kingdom of
Heaven is at Hand | 3

Our Synthema for 2023 | 6-9

From the Life of Saint
Ephraim of Katounakia | 10

ΘΕΟ ΕΙΜΙ ΕΓΩ

I BELONG TO GOD

GENESIS 50:19

ΛΑΧΝΟΣ

A GREEK ORTHODOX PERIODICAL

Η ΥΜΝΩΔΙΑ ΤΗΣ ΑΓΙΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΜΕΓΑΛΗΣ ΤΕΣΣΑΡΑΚΟΣΤΗΣ

Η υμνολογία της Ορθοδόξου Εκκλησίας μας, είναι πολύ πλούσια σε τροπάρια και ύμνους. Κατά τη περίοδο της Μ. Τεσσαρακοστής, οι ύμνοι δεν είναι ούτε ενθουσιώδεις, ούτε θριαμβευτικοί. Δεν έχουν το τόνο της νίκης και του θριάμβου όπως για παράδειγμα, οι ύμνοι της Αναστάσεως και του Πεντηκοσταρίου.

Η υμνωδία του Τριωδίου και της Μ. Τ. είναι πένθιμη και ταπεινή. Σοβαρή και κατανυκτική. Γεμάτη πόνο, δάκρυα, μετάνοια και συντριβή. Κατά κανόνα εκφράζει αφενός το φρόνημα του ανθρώπου που μετανοεί εκ βάθους καρδιάς, και αφετέρου την επίμονη εκζήτηση του Θείου ελέους.

Ο ευλαβής Χριστιανός που με προσοχή παρακολουθεί και ακούει αυτούς τους ύμνους, είναι αδύνατον να μη τους νιώσει ως τα μύχια της ύπαρξής του. Ο πόνος της υμνωδίας, τα δάκρυα και η μετάνοια της, μεταβάλλονται σε πόνο, δάκρυα και μετάνοια των πιστών. Αλήθεια, πόσοι αμαρτωλοί δεν μετάνιωσαν στο άκουσμα τέτοιων ύμνων!; Π.χ. «πόθεν ἄρξωμαι θρηνεῖν τὰς τοῦ ἀθλίου μου βίους πράξεις; ποῖαν ἀπαρχὴν, ἐπιθήσω Χριστέ, τῇ νῦν θρηνωδίᾳ; ἀλλ' ὡς εὐσπλαχνός μοι δός, παραπτωμάτων ἄφεσιν». (Από πού να αρχίσω το θρήνο για τις αμαρτωλές πράξεις της άθλιας ζωής μου; Από πού να αρχίσω τώρα Χριστέ μου, να τραγουδήσω το κλάμα μου; Αλλά Σύ σαν εύσπλαχνος δώσε μου την συγχώρηση των αμαρτιών μου.)

Σαν επιστέγασμα των ύμνων της Μ.Τ. και φυσική κατάληξη πολλών απ' αυτών, είναι η εναγώνια επίκληση της ψυχής του πιστού που αναγνωρίζει πως χωρίς την έγκαιρη επέμβαση του Κυρίου, κινδυνεύει να χαθεί. Όπως

«...ὁ ἐχθρὸς ἀπατᾷ με καὶ πολεμεῖ τὴν ψυχὴν μου. Κύριε, πρὶν εἰς τέλος ἀπόλωμαι, σῶσόν με».

(Ο εχθρός, ο διάβολος, με απατά και απειλεί την ψυχή μου. Γι'αυτό Κύριε, πριν τελικά χαθώ, σώσε με).

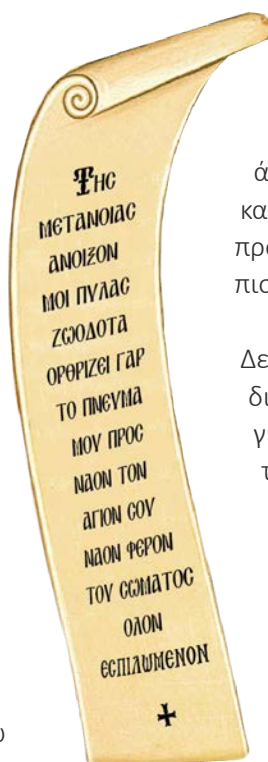
Οι Χριστιανοί που αγωνίζονται τον δύσκολο αλλά ωραίο αγώνα της πίστεως και της αρετής, ανακαλύπτουν σ'αυτή την υμνωδία, τον προσωπικό τους, τον δικό τους αγώνα. Αναγνωρίζουν επίσης πως δεν είναι μόνοι, αλλά πως έχουν πολλούς συναγωνιστές, αδελφές ψυχές που συμπορεύονται μαζί τους, παίρνουν θάρρος και

δύναμη, εντείνουν τον πνευματικό τους αγώνα. Εμπνέονται οι ίδιοι και με τη σειρά τους εμπνέουν και τα άλλα μέλη της Εκκλησίας να αγωνιστούν. Οι ιεροί υμνωδοί και ποιητές αυτών των ύμνων διακρίθηκαν για την ασκητικότητα, την άρνηση των εγκοσμίων, την ταπείνωσή τους, και τη μετάνοιά τους. Και αυτά ακριβώς τα προσωπικά τους βιώματα μεταφέρουν στους πιστούς με την ιερή υμνωδία τους.

Δεν είναι λόγια απλώς ποιητικά ή έστω μια διδαχή αλλά έκφραση ζωής και πολιτείας. Να, γιατί η υμνολογία και το μέλος των ύμνων της Αγίας και Μεγάλης Τεσσαρακοστής έχει τόσο πολύ εκτιμηθεί και αγαπηθεί από το Χριστεπώνυμο πλήρωμα της Εκκλησίας μας.

Τα κατανυκτικά αυτά ακούσματα επειδή ακριβώς αποστάζουν τα βιώματα αγίων ανδρών και γυναικών, γίνονται οδοδείκτες και πυξίδες για μας τους σημερινούς, που μέσα στη λαίλαπα της σύγχρονης τρικυμισμένης και αποπροσανατολισμένης κοινωνίας μας «χάνομε τα μπούσαλα» και δεν γνωρίζουμε πού πάμε, προς τα πού πορευόμαστε.

Τις εβδομάδες που ακολουθούν, μέχρι ν'άρθει η Αγία και Μεγάλη Εβδομάδα των Παθών του Κυρίου μας, να φυλάξουμε τις ψυχές μας μακριά και ανέπαφες από του κόσμου τις σειρήνες και τα άσματα. Τουναντίον να τις ανοίξουμε μέσα στους Ορθόδοξους ναούς μας. Εκεί που η ιερά υμνωδία της Μ.Τ. θα ηχεί γλυκύτατη στα αυτιά μας. Να προετοιμάσουμε το έδαφος της ψυχής μας να μπουν τα λόγια και τα μηνύματα μέσα μας, να καρπίσουν, να μας κινήσουν στη συντριβή και στη μετάνοια για να λάβουμε τη συγχώρηση και το έλεος από τον Δωρεοδότη και Φιλάνθρωπο Κύριό μας.



REPENT! FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS AT HAND

When Christ began His earthly ministry, he repeated the same words of repentance that St John the Baptist had preached (Matthew 4:17) as he taught the people how to repent by the example of His own life. Later, He commanded His Disciples to preach repentance having sent them out two by two (Mark 6:12). Finally, He commanded the Apostles to preach repentance and the remission of sins to all the nations shortly before His Ascension (Luke 24:47) and they continued this preaching after Pentecost (Acts 3:19). It is clear then that this commandment is central in the work of Christ for our salvation.

The Greek word used in the scriptures, *Μετανοεῖτε*, is in the present active voice, through which Christ is telling us to always and unceasingly turn our hearts to the Lord. Why? Quite simply, so that we may turn our back to sin. If we never cease to sin then we should also never cease repenting, remembering that "if we claim to be without sin then we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8).

However, repentance is not simply correcting a wrong and then moving on. Instead, it is a much deeper and complete change within a person to constantly acknowledge their inadequateness in being righteous before God. It is a state of existence, not simply an action which addresses the guilt we feel for wrongdoing.

To remain in repentance, one must have a sense of sinfulness before God, and a sense of God's immense mercy and philanthropy. Like two rails which guide us on our spiritual journey, if we lose sense of our sinfulness we fall into insensitivity and continue a path of sin, and if we lose sense of God's mercy then we fall into hopelessness which leads to despair. St John of the Ladder warns about this when he writes that we should fight against the demon of sorrow while repenting and strive for hope, the daughter of repentance which leads to spiritual peace and joy (Ch 5, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*).

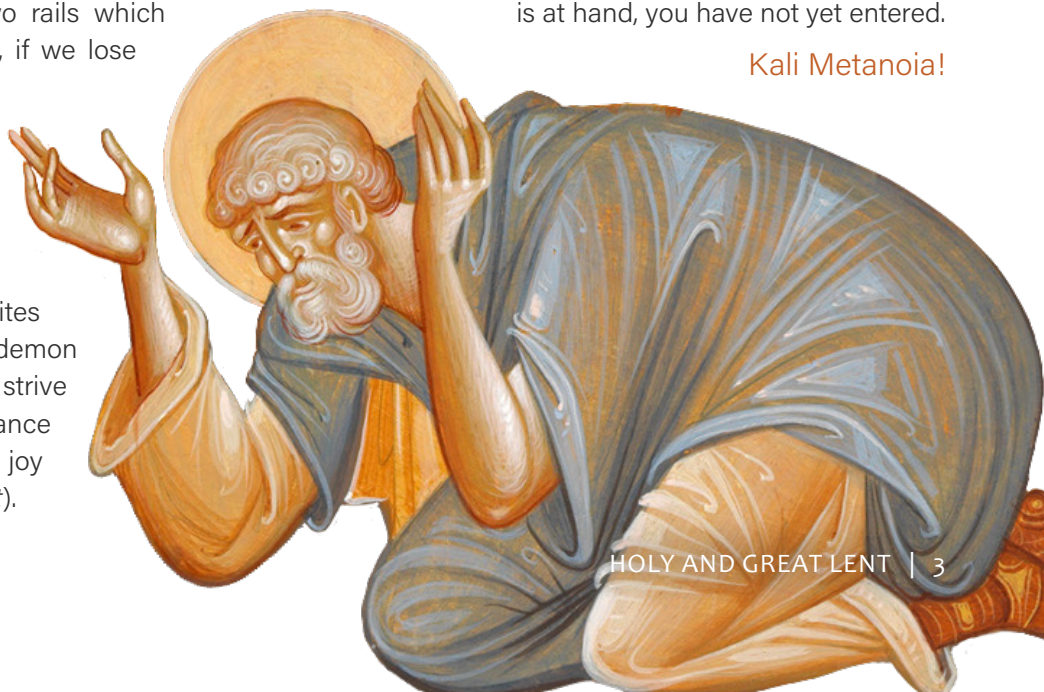
It is truly refreshing that it is possible to find true joy in repentance. And yet, God has made things in such a way that the unbearable weight of many years of living in sin is dissolved with a single tear of genuine repentance. But to make our repentance genuine we must also bring forth fruits worthy of repentance (Luke 3:8). The first fruit of our repentance is to go to Confession in order to ask for forgiveness. Actually, this is one Mystery, termed the Mystery of Repentance and Confession, and must be done together. We confess our sins, and the priest asks for forgiveness on our part before God through the Grace of the Holy Spirit (John 20:23).

Next, we begin our spiritual struggle. This struggle is not so that God may forgive us; this was already granted when we confessed. Rather, it is a process to train ourselves (as the word asceticism suggests) to not repeat our sin. Every sin has its corresponding virtue and as we grow in this, the more grace we attract and the more we realise the vanity of our life, which in turn leads to deeper repentance.

Brothers and Sisters, the best time to begin to repent is right now.

Brothers and Sisters, the best time to begin to repent is right now, especially during the period of Great Lent. So, for those who have not yet started, begin. For those who have, shed yet another tear and ask for God's mercy again, for although the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, you have not yet entered.

Kali Metanoia!





Α Γ Α Π Η

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing. Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

T rue and sincere love of the Christians is very different from the love of the world around us (secular love). The quality of Divine love is similar to that of God Himself, since *"God is Love"* (1 John 4:8). Furthermore, *"...while we were still sinners, Christ died for us"* (Rom. 5:8), so that our sins be forgiven.

The changes of God's love on the devout Christian person

With God's love the person wants to imitate God in his life. Its energies bless his soul, and its qualities are a fountain of Faith and an ocean of Humility. When one's life becomes incorporated into the love of God, his body reflects the inner glory of his own soul. His spiritual purity extinguishes the flames of passions and all illnesses. This purity elevated the disciple of love (Apostle John) to a theologian, able to describe the dogma of the Holy Trinity (St John of the Ladder, p 412-3).

The New Testament is replete with blessings of such love, and a search for them will illuminate our mind.

God's love is beyond human comprehension. We turn to the Bible!

The Apostle John tells us: *"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him not perish, but have everlasting life"* (John 3:16).

Since God is Love by nature and we are His Icons, we have to live by loving everyone. For this to be realised in our lives, we have to know God for *"...he who does not love, does not know God, for God is love"* (1 John 4:8). So, love can only exist in a heart that knows God!

Read the Hymn of Love (left) from 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13 many times, practice it in your daily life, be imbued by its spirit, and feel the presence of God in your heart!

Now, every Christian faces one problem – how does one reach a stage, where he loves God truly, with all his heart?

Our Lord had stated that the first and important step, is to live according to His commandments – *"He who has my commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him, and manifest myself to him"* (John 14:21).

Christ will reveal Himself to those who obey Him, by

illuminating their minds to understand His love, expand His blessings to them, by showing special kindness, and firing their hearts with the desire for His Kingdom and His Glory.

But love of Jesus Christ presupposes that we love others – those close and afar, friends and foes, in fact everyone (John 13:34-35).

What was said so far, shows us that love is a gift to us by God Himself, if we ask for it eagerly – *"ask, and it will be given, seek and you will find, etc"* (Matt. 7:7).

Keep in mind the important features of Christian love as listed below. Our own acts of charity should incorporate one or more of them.

- + Love is a mysterious virtue – a combination of feeling and action.
- + Cannot be described by words, you can live it by practicing it. "Actions speak louder than words"!
- + It is sacrificial and works for the benefit of others.
- + It is deeper, more relational, more generous, than secular love.
- + Further, it is a blessing, not a burden; merciful and forgiving, like Jesus.
- + When Christians love one another, those around us gain knowledge of Jesus Christ, and admire the Faith and its Teachings.
- + Christian love more closely reflects how God loves us as Christians.
- + In short, - the Christian loves others, ***so that God be glorified***, and fills him with Divine Joy, bestowed on him by the Holy Spirit!

Deep down in our flesh, we feel it would be difficult to obey the lofty commands of Christian love. We do not have the strength or the willpower to fulfill its demands.

After all - who gives to people expecting nothing in return, or invites poor people to his table, or goes out of his way to help someone who is marginalised in society, or risks his life for one who is a stranger? Or how easily we ignore smaller opportunities for love and charity, by looking the other way!

Acts of Christian love can only be done by someone who has Faith, that gives him the power of the Sacraments of the Church, which bring the Holy Spirit to him, replacing his weakness with Divine Power, capable of solving all problems of this world!

How many of us belong to this group of people?



ΙΕΡΑ ΑΡΧΙΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΗ ΑΥΣΤΡΑΛΙΑΣ
ΟΡΘΟΔΟΞΟΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΙΑΝΙΚΗ ΕΝΩΣΙΣ
ΧΡΙΣΤΙΑΝΙΚΟΣ ΦΙΛΙΚΟΣ ΚΥΚΛΟΣ
ΧΡΙΣΤΙΑΝΙΚΕΣ ΝΕΑΝΙΚΕΣ ΟΜΑΔΕΣ

ΘΕΥ



ΕΙΜΙ



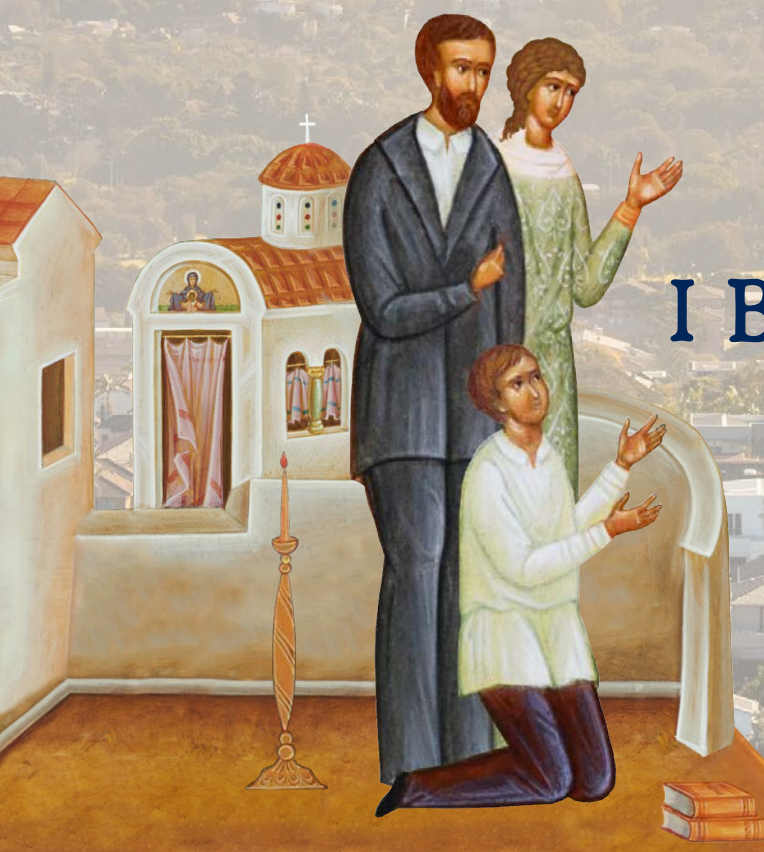
ΕΓΩ



I BELONG TO GOD

GENESIS 50:19

ΣΥΝΘΗΜΑ 2023



Our Synthema/ Motto for 2023

Do not be afraid, for I belong to God" (Gen 50:19). These were the words spoken by Joseph the All-Good when his brothers finally recognised him in Egypt. Joseph was saying that because he belongs to God, he would treat his brothers with kindness, just as God is kind, and not repay the evil they did to him with more evil. However, does "I belong to God" have any significance for our own life?

Firstly, let us say that our whole world belongs to God the Creator, as we pray in Psalm 100:3 – *"Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture"*. It is clear in the Scriptures that God wants **us**, our **hearts**, our **whole selves** dedicated to Him: *"My son, give me your heart"* (Proverbs 23:26). We were created in His Image according to His likeness to become like Him so that we may be partakers of the divine nature. (2 Peter 1:4).

How do we belong to God? Let's see some examples of Holy People from the Scriptures.

The first example is the **Righteous Noah**. In Hebrew, 'Noah' means 'rest.' We find rest in God when we belong to Him, and we are in His loving embrace. Like Noah, we live in the Ark of Salvation, the Church. We are not there alone; Noah is there with his family, the little church in the universal Church. We are not saved alone, but within the Church. It is also significant that *'God remembered Noah'* when he was in the Ark (Genesis 8:1). Because when we remember God, then God remembers *us*. St Gregory the Theologian in Oration 27 says, *"It is more important to remember God than it is to breathe"*.

The next example is **Joseph the All-Good**, who we mentioned above. He is the All-Good because he is the greatest type of Christ. Joseph gives the example of fleeing from sensual pleasures. Being conscious of the constant presence of God becomes a protection for the Christian. When Joseph was tempted, he called out for this very presence of God which saved him from a grave sin.

In St John's Gospel, Jesus proclaims seven **"I am"** statements about His unique identity. Jesus also mentions three **"I am not"** statements in Chapter 8: *"I am not alone; I am not of this world; I am not seeking glory for myself."* We must remember that we are not alone when we are with God. We must not be of the world. And we must not seek our own glory.

We constantly choose
between God and the
world. And the only way
to choose correctly is to
live a life of repentance
and to cultivate a
personal relationship
with the Lord.

If we study the lives of the Old Testament figures and the Saints, we will see that they all experienced an **identity crisis**: not 'crisis' in the modern sense, rather closer to the Ancient Greek κρίσις (a separating, decision, choice). These were a direct consequence of their relationship with God and the change that that relationship caused in their lives. We may not have obvious crises like the Saints to prove our relationship with God. However, we must remember that spiritual warfare is fought not in days or weeks or years, but in every moment, in every thought, in every small and seemingly insignificant action we take in our daily life. We constantly choose between God and the world. And the only way to choose correctly is to live a life of repentance and to cultivate a personal relationship with the Lord.

Το Σύνθημά μας για το 2023

Είναι γνωστό πως όταν ένας άνθρωπος θέλει να γνωρίσει κάποιο πρόσωπο για πρώτη φορά, η συνήθης ερώτηση που του απευθύνει είναι: **«Ποιανού είσαι;»** και η ανάλογη απάντηση **«είμαι του τάδε»**. Θέλουμε να ξέρουμε σε ποιόν ανήκει αυτός που βρίσκεται μπροστά μας. Τι τον προσδιορίζει; Τι είδους πνεύμα τον κινεί;

Στην ουσία, αυτή η αναζήτηση για τον άλλον, αντικατοπτρίζει την προσωπική μας ενασχόληση με το ποιός είμαι εγώ; Ο βαπτισμένος Ορθόδοξος Χριστιανός οφείλει να το πάρει ένα βήμα παραπέρα, και να ρωτήσει επίσης - Ποιός είναι ο Θεός για μένα; Και ποιός είμαι εγώ στα μάτια του Θεού;

Το φετινό μας σύνθημα, μας καλεί να στρέψουμε την προσοχή μας στο τελευταίο κεφάλαιο του βιβλίου της Γενέσεως όπου περιγράφεται μια πραγματικά συγκλονιστική σκηνή. Είναι η στιγμή που αφού έχει κοιμηθεί ο γέροντας πατριάρχης Ιακώβ, παρουσιάζονται τα δέκα παιδιά του μπροστά στον αδερφό τους τον Ιωσήφ (τον πολύ-αγαπητό υιό του Ιακώβ, και νυν αντιβασίλεα και σιτιστή της Αιγύπτου) να του μιλήσουν. Έχει πέσει φοβερή πείνα παντού (εκτός από την Αίγυπτο), και βρίσκονται στο έλεος του Ιωσήφ για να μην πεθάνουν απ' την πείνα.

Σ'αυτή τη σκηνή, τ'αδέρφια του Ιωσήφ τον πλησιάζουν κυριευμένοι από φόβο, σκεπτόμενοι πως τώρα που δεν υπάρχει πια στη ζωή ο πατέρας τους, θα αλλάξει η στάση του Ιωσήφ απέναντί τους και θα τους εκδικηθεί για τη μεγάλη αδικία που του είχαν κάνει πριν πολλά χρόνια, όταν τον πούλησαν σε εμπόρους που ταξίδευαν για την Αίγυπτο. Φοβούνται πως ο Ιωσήφ δικαιολογημένα δεν θα τους συγχωρήσει.

Μπροστά σ'αυτήν τη συντετριμμένη στάση των αδερφών του, ο Ιωσήφ με δυσκολία συγκρατείται και τους λέει: **«Μὴ φοβεῖσθε· τοῦ γὰρ Θεοῦ εἰμι ἐγώ»** (Γεν. Ν' 19). (Δηλ. Μην φοβάστε! Του Θεού άνθρωπος είμαι εγώ!).

Προσπαθεί μ'αυτά τα λόγια, να τους καθησυχάσει και εξηγεί τον λόγο που δεν πρέπει να φοβούνται – «είμαι άνθρωπος του Θεού» τους λέει! «Και προσπαθώ να πολιτεύομαι κατά τις εντολές Του. Αυτόν φοβούμαι, Αυτόν έχω ως δείκτη της ζωής μου, Αυτός είναι διδάσκαλός μου, ο Πατέρας μου!»

Πώς θα φτάσουμε εμείς
στο σημείο που να κράζει
η καρδιά μας «του Θεού
είμαι εγώ»; Με τον
προσωπικό μας αγώνα.
Να πείσουμε τον Θεό πως
«ναι, θέλω να είμαι δικός
Σου!»

Στην εποχή που ζούσε, ο Ιωσήφ ξεχώριζε από τους άλλους ανθρώπους γύρω του, που έβλεπαν μέσα του ένα άλλο πνεύμα - άλλης πολιτείας, άλλων διαστάσεων, άλλης λογικής. Γνώριζε πως μέσα στον διαρκώς μεταβαλλόμενο κόσμο μας, το μόνο σταθερό σημείο αναφοράς ελπίδας και σωτηρίας, είναι ο Πανάγαθος Θεός, ο Κυβερνήτης του σύμπαντος κόσμου. Ο Ιωσήφ, με τη χάρη του Θεού, κατάφερε να γίνει καταφυγή, πηγή ειρήνης, αγαθότητας, πραότητας, δοχείο του Αγίου Πνεύματος για τους αδερφούς του και για όλους τους γύρω του.

Πώς θα φτάσουμε εμείς στο σημείο που να κράζει η καρδιά μας «του Θεού είμαι εγώ»;

Με τον προσωπικό μας αγώνα. Να πείσουμε τον Θεό πως «ναι, θέλω να είμαι δικός Σου!» και να Του το δείχνουμε στην πράξη, με τη ζωή μας. Η πάλη με τον εαυτό μας, τα πάθη μας, την αμαρτία. Να αδειάσουμε

τον εαυτό μας απ' οτιδήποτε διώχνει το πνεύμα του Θεού, ώστε να μπορέσει το Πνεύμα του Θεού να βρει χώρο κατάλληλο να κατοικήσει μέσα μας. Για να μεταμορφωθούμε εν Χριστώ. Απαιτούνται μετάνοια, άσκηση, με υπομονή, ελπίδα, και σταθερότητα.

Πού θα τα βρούμε; Όταν στεκόμαστε συνειδητά στο στερεό θεμέλιο της Μητέρας Εκκλησίας μας, στην μελέτη του λόγου του Θεού, στην τήρηση των εντολών Του, στην ώρα της προσευχής, στα Ιερά Μυστήρια. Τότε είμαστε στην προσπάθεια να γίνουμε του Θεού, να εξοικειωθούμε με το δικό Του πνεύμα, ν' αποκτήσουμε «νοῦν Χριστοῦ» (Α Κορ. 2:16). Στη συνέχεια θα το μεταδίδουμε και σε άλλους.

Ζούμε σε μια εποχή που ενώ είμαστε χορτάτοι με τόσα αγαθά και δυνατότητες που παλιά δεν υπήρχαν, όλοι έχουμε τόση ανάγκη να μας αγγίξει ένας άνθρωπος γεμάτος από πνεύμα Θεού. Άνθρωπος της ειρήνης, της υπομονής, της συγχώρησης, της πραότητας, της Αλήθειας.

Στην εποχή που ζούσε, ο Ιωσήφ ξεχώριζε από τους άλλους ανθρώπους γύρω του, που έβλεπαν μέσα του ένα άλλο πνεύμα - άλλης πολιτείας, άλλων διαστάσεων, άλλης λογικής.

Φέτος, ας αναλύσουμε συχνά και ξανά - Ποιός είναι ο Θεός για μένα; Και ποιός είμαι εγώ στα μάτια του Θεού; Και σ' όποιον θέλει να μας γνωρίσει, να ενημερώνεται απ' την ίδια τη ζωή μας, πως το πνεύμα που φλογίζει την καρδιά μας και μας κινεί σε κάθε άποψη της ζωής μας, είναι του Θεού.



Saint Ephraim of Katounakia

Commemorated February 27th

Amongst the many sanctified elders of the 20th century, Saint Ephraim of Katounakia (1912-1998) stands as a unique figure. This Athonite elder was not an abbot of a great monastery, nor did he establish any large monastic brotherhoods. Known affectionately on the Holy Mountain as 'the charismatic disciple,' he was called by God to carry a unique cross in his life, that of obedience.

As a young man, Saint Ephraim became a monk at a small hermitage in Katounakia, a desert and barren region of Mount Athos. His life in the hermitage was lonely and difficult. As the sole young monk, he undertook most of the manual labour while enduring a severe form of dermatitis which caused great pain in his leg. Because the brotherhood could not afford a mule, the Saint had to carry heavy baskets on his bag and traverse the steep and rocky paths of the Holy Mountain to bring supplies to Katounakia. He also served as the cook, gardener, labourer, and craftsman, while having the responsibility to serve the Liturgy as a priest for the other hermitages in Katounakia.

Nonetheless, Saint Ephraim never abandoned his spiritual obligations. At his hermitage he strove to combine the hesychastic way of life, where particular attention is given to the cultivation of ceaseless prayer, with the cenobitic way of life, which emphasizes obedience to the elder and the brotherhood. In his monastic struggle, Saint Ephraim was given much guidance by Saint Joseph the Hesychast, who lovingly counselled him on the acquisition of prayer and compensated for the coldness and severity of his own elder Nicephorus, who was apathetic to the spiritual struggle of his disciple.

Under the guidance of Saint Joseph, Saint Ephraim became a true elder and possessor of Divine Grace. After the death of Saint

Joseph, his disciples became important elders and repopulated many monasteries on Mount Athos and beyond as abbots and spiritual fathers, while Saint Ephraim was still under obedience to his elder Nicephorus. When the latter developed severe dementia, Elder Ephraim cared for him to the point of exhaustion. Considering that his elder was now unable to fulfill his prayer rule due to his infirmity, Saint Ephraim increased his own hours in prayer to complete the prayer rule of his elder as well as his own.

When Elder Nicephorus was on the point of death, he finally blessed his disciple for his many years of obedience by shouting,

*'May God bless you, may God bless you!
You aren't a man, you're an angel!'*

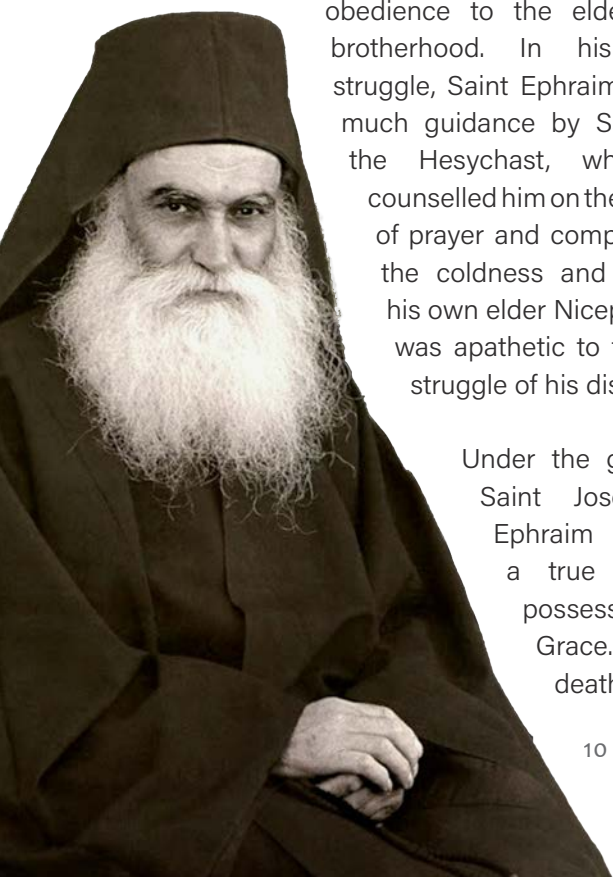
With the death of his elder, Saint Ephraim finally became an elder himself at the age of 60.

Personal accounts of those who knew him reveal that he had supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as clairvoyance and the ability to prophecy. Nonetheless, as an elder, his advice was simple. His personal motto was 'obedience is life; disobedience is death.' Once when the abbot of Vatopedi visited him, he received the following advice:

"Because you're in this position, monks from both within and from outside the Holy Mountain will approach you with complaints about their elder. I advise you not to justify any disciple. The elder never wants something bad for the disciple. Out of my own experience, I confess to you that I had a terrible battle with a desire to leave Elder Nicephorus, but through the advice and prayers of Elder Joseph, I practiced patience. I'm not sorry I did, because forty years later Grace showed me that I had acted according to the good pleasure of God's will."

The Saint passed away on the 27th of February 1998, having formed a small group of disciples around him. He was buried in a grave dug by his own hand, in the hermitage he lived his whole monastic life in.

Ephraim of Katounakia was declared a saint by the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate on the 9th of March 2020, and his feast is celebrated on the day of his repose.



The Bronze Serpent

There is a small and often overlooked passage in the Old Testament book of Numbers which has deep significance for our Christian lives. In this passage, Moses and the Israelites are on a long journey. As they walk through deserts and over mountains, they become discouraged. The Israelites complain (literally: “speak against God”), saying “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?” (Num. 21:5).

Something worse happens next. A plague of snakes attacks the camp, and many people are bitten, and die. When this happens, they repent of their words, recognising that this must be from God because they “spoke against the Lord.” They ask Moses to pray for them, which he does.

Then the Lord God replies to Moses’ prayer with instructions. Moses creates a serpent out of bronze and fastens it to a pole. Whoever was bitten by a serpent looked at the bronze serpent, and then lived.

What are we meant to understand from this curious passage? As with so many elements of the Bible, it can be easily overlooked. But “those who have ears to hear” will understand deeper meanings. This Old Testament passage also appears in a hymn of our Church which is sung on the feast of the Elevation of the Cross (14th September).

The hymn reveals succinctly the meaning of the passage: “He

horizontally fixed to the wood, symbolic of the Cross, the snake of bronze and vanquished the affliction of the slithering serpent” (Ode 1 Troparion).

How does the bronze serpent on the pole symbolise the Cross? St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain further draws out this meaning for us:

“My dear Christian, there is a lesson behind this hymn which is useful for you also. Because just as back then the living serpents were biting and poisoning the Hebrews, so do the spiritual serpents bite you now also. The spiritual serpents are the evil demons, which never walk upright, but always slither down on the earth and among earthly things, just like the living serpent. And it is not only this, but those filthy ones also do their utmost to drag us down and slither among them. What is the poison of these spiritual serpents? It is sin and the passions. How do they bite us? By means of the attacks of the evil and shameful and blasphemous thoughts, and simply through anger and desires.

Therefore, my brother, whenever the demons bite you with the attack of some sin, immediately seek refuge in the Cross of Christ, and by looking upon the Lord Who is nailed upon it, call upon His help with fervent faith. He will surely come to your aid, and He will not allow you to fall victim to the deadly compromise or fulfilment of that sinful assault.”

St Gregory of Nyssa in his *Life of Moses* makes two observations on this Old Testament passage also:

“Firstly, to look upon the Cross and upon Him Who was nailed upon it means that you must consider yourself dead and crucified to the world and worldly things, and not moved by any sin. Secondly, the bites of the serpents

can be healed. This means that the death brought upon sinners does not have any power when you look upon and place all your hope in the Cross and in the crucified Lord.”

The Israelites wandering in the desert with Moses were often wilful and wayful, turning away at small provocations (or so it seems to us). Yet, we in the 21st Century who believe in Christ, face even smaller provocations and “speak against the Lord” in a multitude of ways. Yet no matter what we do, Christ shows us through this passage, and multiple others in the Bible, that forgiveness will be granted to those who ask for help from God and repent.

These deeper elements of the Old Testament passage are very important because they reveal to us the nature of God’s love for us. Yet we must not forget the most important element of this story, and that element is revealed to us by Christ Himself who refers to this incident when prophesying to His disciples in one of the most famous passages of the New Testament:

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved” (John 3:14-17).





«Ἄγγελος πρωτοστάτης, οὐρανόθεν ἐπέμφθη,
εἰπεῖν τῇ Θεοτόκῳ τὸ Χαῖρε· καὶ σὺν τῇ
ἄσωμάτῳ φωνῇ σωματούμενόν σε θεωρῶν
Κύριε, ἐξίστατο καὶ ἵστατο κραυγάζων πρὸς
αὐτὴν τοιαῦτα·»

*“The angel who stands in the first rank, was
sent from heaven, to say to the Bearer of
God, ‘Rejoice!’ And together with bodiless
voice, seeing You being embodied O Lord,
he was amazed and stood, crying aloud to
her as follows:”*

First Stanza of the Akathist Hymn

The Akathist Hymn as it is performed today is the only entire Kontakion Hymn preserved in the worship services of the Orthodox Church and is composed of 24 stanzas - separate poem verses - interposed with salutations which are preceded by the exhortation, Χαίρε! / Rejoice!

In parish practice it is performed in four parts, one for each of the first four Fridays of Great Lent and in its entirety on the fifth Friday.

We do not know who composed the Akathist Hymn. It was passed down to us anonymously or attributed to various authors including St Romanos the Melodist, the most famous exponent of the Kontakion Hymn. However, it is agreed that it was written sometime near the end of the 6th century.

There is no doubt that the author of the Akathist was influenced by the Church Fathers, especially Saints John Chrysostom, Ephrem the Syrian, Proclus of Constantinople; however, it is the Gospel narrative of St. Luke (1:26-38) upon which this hymn, essentially a sermon in poetic form, is based on.

The first stanza introduces the central subject matter of the first four stanzas, the Annunciation of the Angel to the Theotokos.

Already, in the second line of the first stanza, we encounter a fundamental tenet of the Orthodox Dogma of the Incarnation of God.

The Archangel Gabriel, representing the bodiless angels - creations of God who existed before the Creation of the world and of human beings - bears witness to an event beyond not just human understanding but even the comprehension of the invisible heavenly powers.

The Logos of God, “the exact image of the Father” as the Fathers of the Church express it, takes on a tangible, visible and fleshy form, the physical body of his chief and final creation, human beings. The poetic devices used in just two lines alone of this first stanza, serve to transmit this truth to us.

The device of juxtaposition is used to contrast between the bodiless nature of the angel and the just formed human body - albeit in embryonic form - of “the Creator of Heaven and Earth.”

Furthermore, the device of consonance in the repeated ending sound of the verbs ἐξίστατο and ἵστατο (‘amazed’ and ‘stood’), together with the device of personification where the bodiless Archangel is described as crying out, seeing, and standing - essentially physical actions being attributed to a bodiless being - allow us to share in the Archangel’s awe and amazement at the conception of the Word of God in the womb of the Most Holy Lady Theotokos.

Let us all attend the services of Akathist Hymn this coming Great Lent to immerse ourselves in the deep theology and meaning of the saving works of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Ladder of Divine Ascent by Saint John Climacus

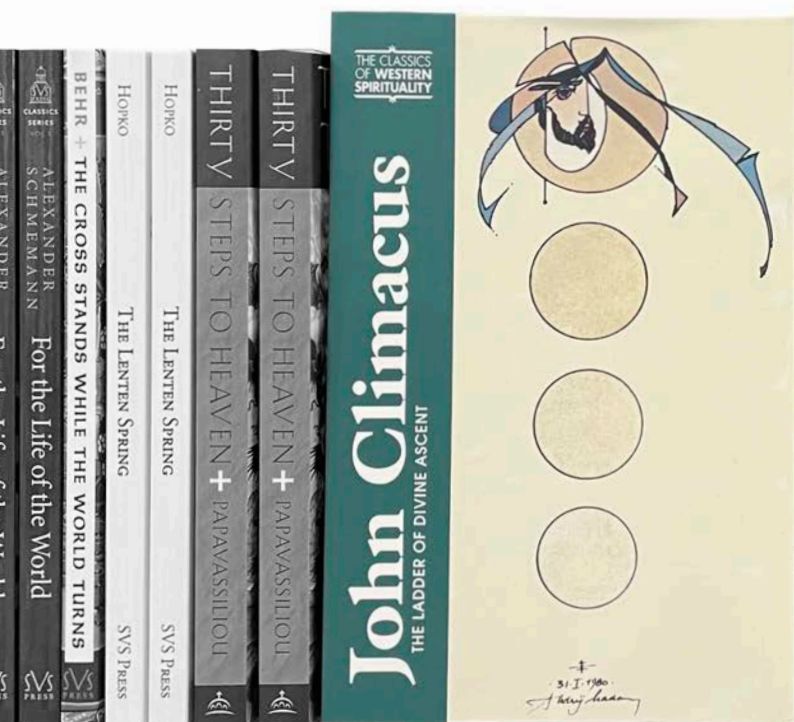
The Ladder of Divine Ascent, written by St John Climacus in 600AD, is a classic ascetical text and guide for how to progress in the spiritual life. Through the exceptional spiritual wisdom and discernment of its author, *The Ladder* aims to lead the reader up the thirty steps of the spiritual ladder with the aim of achieving salvation and unity with God.

The Ladder's author, St John, was a hermit living in Sinai who was renowned for his spiritual knowledge. He wrote *The Ladder* in response to a request by the Abbot of the Monastery of Raithu to record his wisdom in a book. Although it was written with monastics in mind, *The Ladder* quickly became one of the most important and influential books in the entire Church. Its significance is such that the Church commemorates its author, St John Climacus, as well as *The Ladder*, on the fourth Sunday of Great Lent each year. It is also tradition for the entirety of the book to be read in monasteries every year during Great Lent.

The Ladder is divided into thirty chapters, with each chapter representing one step in the spiritual journey. Each chapter, in turn, focuses on a specific virtue or vice, such as obedience, repentance, chastity, despondency, vainglory etc. Within each chapter, St John provides his wisdom on the significance of the respective virtue or vice in our spiritual lives (illustrated with examples), as well as his guidance on how to progress in the attainment of the respective virtue or destroy the respective vice. Through his clear discernment and depth of understanding, St John also explains the interrelationship between virtues and vices, such as which vices lead to other vices, and which virtues can be deployed to destroy other vices.

Although the book is not strictly sequential – in that one does not fully master one step before proceeding to the next – it broadly reflects the journey necessary to achieve theosis, namely unity with God. In this way, Steps 1 to 3 are devoted to renouncing the world. Once that foundation has been set, Steps 4 to 26 concern the practice of the virtues and the struggle against the passions, with an internal development from fundamental virtues such as obedience and penitence, to the passions which afflict us, and finally to higher virtues such as humility and discernment. Finally, Steps 27 to 30 concern union with God and include St John's commentary on matters such as stillness, prayer, dispassion and love.

The Ladder is a spiritual classic and contains spiritual insights for all Christians. Given its depth, it can be repeatedly read. Due to the significance of the topics with which it deals, however, and its initial intended audience for monastics, *The Ladder* should be read with the guidance of a spiritual father. An alternative text which attempts to interpret *The Ladder* for the everyday Christian is *Thirty Steps to Heaven: The Ladder of Divine Ascent for All Walks of Life* by Archimandrite Vassilios.



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Απόστολος Παύλος γράφει στον Τιμόθεο: «Πᾶσα γραφή θεόπνευστος καὶ ὠφέλιμος» (Β΄ Τιμ. γ΄ 16). Τί σημαίνει λοιπόν ο όρος θεόπνευστος; Αυτό που είναι εμπνευσμένο από τον Θεό, δηλαδή από το Άγιο Πνεύμα. Θα πρέπει εδώ όμως να σταθούμε λίγο. Ένα θεόπνευστο κείμενο δεν είναι εξ ολοκλήρου έργο θεϊκό. Συμμετέχει και ο ανθρώπινος παράγοντας. Ας αρχίσουμε με τη γλώσσα. Κάθε λαός επικοινωνεί με κάποια συγκεκριμένη γλώσσα. Άραγε πιά γλώσσα μιλάει ο Θεός; Οπωσδήποτε όλες τις ανθρώπινες γλώσσες, αλλά ο άπειρος νους Του δεν μπορεί να περιοριστεί σε ανθρώπινη λαλιά. Αυτά που συμβαίνουν στον Ουρανό δεν είναι δυνατόν να περιγράφονται από εμάς με το περιορισμένο μας μυαλό και λεξιλόγιο – όπως και διαπίστωσε ο Απόστολος των εθνών όταν τον «άρπαξε» το Πνεύμα του Θεού μέχρι τον τρίτο ουρανό (Β΄ Κορ. ιβ΄ 2-3). Ο Πανάγαθος Θεός λοιπόν επικοινωνεί μαζί μας με τον τρόπο που σκεφτόμαστε και επικοινωνούμε – κάτι σαν τις δισύλλαβες φωνές που χρησιμοποιούμε εμείς όταν μιλάμε σε βρέφη (μαμ μαμ = φαγητό, νάνι

= ύπνος κ.ο.κ.). Επίσης η Σοφία του Θεού χρησιμοποιεί τον ίδιο τον άνθρωπο για να γράψει το θέλημά Του. Και αυτός ο άνθρωπος έχει τον δικό του τρόπο στην έκφραση και γενικά στο λέγειν. Ένας αναλυτής της Αγίας Γραφής, διαβάζοντας ένα μη τιτλοφορούμενο κείμενο, εύκολα μπορεί να καταλάβει εάν ο συγγραφέας του συγκεκριμένου χωρίου είναι ο Λουκάς, ο Ιωάννης ή ο Παύλος.

Τα θεόπνευστα κείμενα λοιπόν είναι Θεανθρώπινα. Με εξαίρεση ορισμένων χωρίων- Δεκάλογος, προφητείες («τάδε λέγει Κύριος») κ.λ.π. αφήνει τον κάθε συγγραφέα να εκφραστεί με τον δικό του τρόπο. Και αυτά που του εμπνέει το Άγιο Πνεύμα δεν είναι πράγματα των οποίων η κατανόηση μπορεί τελικά να γίνει με την δωρεά της λογικής, που έχει ως αποτέλεσμα την εξέλιξη της γνώσης και της επιστήμης, αλλά αποκάλυψη ψυχοφελών και σωτηριολογικών αληθειών. Ο Θεόπνευστος συγγραφέας μεταφέρει το Θείο μήνυμα με τη γλώσσα του, με το ύφος του αλλά και με τις περιορισμένες γνώσεις που κατέχει. Ο Ψαλμωδός δοξολογεί το μεγαλείο του Παντοδύναμου Θεού που δημιούργησε τα πάντα με εκφράσεις που οδηγούν στην εντύπωση πως η γη είναι επίπεδη και πως ο ήλιος κινείται από τη μια άκρη έως την άλλη άκρη της. Εάν το κείμενο αυτό γραφόταν σήμερα οι εικόνες που θα χρησιμοποιούσε ο ιερός συγγραφέας θα αντικατόπτριζε τις σύγχρονες γεωλογικές γνώσεις.

Αυτή η μη κατανόηση της Θεανθρώπινης προέλευσης των Ιερών κειμένων έχει οδηγήσει σε ακρότητες στο παρελθόν λ.χ. με την Ιερά Εξέταση να κατηγορεί τον επιστήμονα Γαλιλαίο ως αιρετικό για τη θεωρία του περί ηλιοκεντρισμού. Αλλά και

στις μέρες μας η διαφοροποίηση των εικόνων που χρησιμοποιούν οι Ιεροί συγγραφείς από την επιστημονική πραγματικότητα έχει οδηγήσει πολλούς ανθρώπους, ιδιαίτερα νέους, σε αμφίβολους λογισμούς που αρκετές φορές τους έχουν απομακρύνει από τη Θεία αλήθεια.

Ένα άλλο παράδειγμα του ανθρώπινου στοιχείου στην συγγραφή των βιβλικών κειμένων είναι τα τέσσερα Ευαγγέλια. Ομολογουμένως υπάρχουν κάποιες μικροδιαφορές σε γεγονότα, στο χρονοδιάγραμμα και στο πώς ακριβώς εκφράστηκε ο Κύριος σε συγκεκριμένες περιπτώσεις. Αλλά αυτό είναι αποτέλεσμα της ανθρώπινης μνήμης των Ιερών Ευαγγελιστών και Αποστόλων. Ο Ματθαίος και ο Ιωάννης, όπως και οι άλλοι απόστολοι που μίλησαν στον Μάρκο και στον Λουκά, είχαν αποτυπώσει τα τεκταινόμενα της επίγειας ζωής του Κυρίου με κάποιες μικροδιαφορές, όπως γίνεται σχεδόν πάντα όταν περιγράφουν διαφορετικοί μάρτυρες ένα συγκεκριμένο γεγονός. (Και είναι προς τιμήν της Εκκλησίας που δεν παρασύρθηκε από τις πιέσεις μερικών οι οποίοι ζητούσαν να γίνει κάποια επεξεργασία των Ευαγγελίων για να επιτευχθεί μια «αρμονία»). Ποια ήταν λοιπόν η συμβολή του Αγίου Πνεύματος στα Ιερά Ευαγγέλια; Οι ίδιοι οι Ευαγγελιστές μας πληροφορούν πως αρκετά πράγματα που είπε και έκανε ο Κύριος δεν τους ήταν κατανοητά έως ότου έγινε η Ανάστασή Του και η επιφοίτηση του Αγίου Πνεύματος την μέρα της Πεντηκοστής.

Η θεοπνευστία της Αγίας Γραφής λοιπόν έχει να κάνει με την Αποκάλυψη του θελήματος του Θεού χρησιμοποιώντας τη γλώσσα, το ύφος και τις κατά κόσμον γνώσεις των ανθρώπων της εποχής.



OUR CREED

...and who spoke through the prophets...

The final phrase of Article 8 declares that it was the Holy Spirit Who spoke through the prophets of the Old Testament.

St Gregory the Theologian, in 'Oration 41: On Pentecost', says: *"...He [the Holy Spirit] acted in the patriarchs and in the prophets; the first saw God in an image or knew Him, the others even foreknew the future, as the Spirit imprinted on the directive faculty of their souls, and associated with future events as if they were present, for such is the Spirit's power."*

It was the Holy Spirit Who inspired and directed the prophets to speak on behalf of God; to be His witness in the world. Apostle Peter states *"for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit"* (2 Peter 1:21).

**But who were the prophets?
What was it that moved God to
select them as His messengers?**

Certainly, the prophets of Israel came from diverse backgrounds, including that of shepherd, priest and nobleman. One of their key roles was to repeatedly call the people of Israel to repentance; to return to worship of the One True God. At times they were called to

reprimand those in authority for their sins. Often, this unpopular role landed them in a difficult position with harsh consequences including being threatened, beaten, imprisoned and even killed.

It is worth noting that the prophets were first receivers of God's word, and then preachers of it. Through their way of life (repentance, prayer, asceticism, practicing virtue), they attracted the Holy Spirit. For as St Basil the Great says, *"In souls pure and cleansed from all defilement, the prophetic gift shines clear. In a foul mirror you cannot see what the reflection is, neither can a soul preoccupied with cares of this life, and darkened with the passions of the lust of the flesh, receive the rays of the Holy Spirit."* Purification of the mind and heart are needed for us to receive the Holy Spirit and to be enlightened.

St Seraphim of Sarov famously said, *"The true aim of Christian life is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God."* Each of us has received this gift of the same Holy Spirit Who came upon the prophets, at the time of our Baptism and Chrismation. We are called to cultivate and maintain this gift of the Holy Spirit through the spiritual struggle, using the means available to us. As St Seraphim remarks,

"As for fasts, vigils, prayer and almsgiving, and other good works done in the name of Christ, they are only the means of acquiring the Holy Spirit of God"

Once, a young man approached a wise man of great experience: *"I have two questions for you. What do you think is essential for each person, and for our society?"*

The wise man responded: *"I would give the same answer to both. We need the Holy Spirit."*

The young man was taken aback. *"Why?"* he asked.

*"Listen, you can acquire titles, positions and money. But what your soul desires deep down, is love, joy, peace. Isn't that so? All of these are the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Take a look also at our society. There are so many people in possession of various skills, degrees, positions, etc. What we lack, are people filled with the Holy Spirit. This is why we lack genuine love, understanding, long suffering, goodness, peace. **Can you become a person who will be inspired and moved by the Holy Spirit?** You will be offering the most valuable thing possible to the world. It will be the greatest accomplishment of your life. There is nothing greater."*



Annual Camps

During the month of January, the Orthodox Girls and Boys Groups (Ομάδες) of Sydney held their annual Camps at Vision Valley, Arcadia, two hours north of Sydney from Monday 9th to Friday 13th, and Monday 16th to Saturday 21st, respectively. The highlight of both Camps was the visit of His Eminence Archbishop Makarios, accompanied by the Chancellor of the Archdiocese Very Rev. Fr Christophoros at the girls camp, and His Grace Bishop Silouan of Sinope at the boys camp. The youth welcomed their Shepherd chanting hymns at the entrance of the Retreat centre and performed Christian songs. His Eminence addressed the camp participants with words of spiritual edification, encouraging them to love Christ and to place Him as the number one priority in their lives. The remainder of the camp programs was filled with spiritual talks and Bible Studies, indoor and outdoor games, common meals, daily morning and evening prayers, time for spiritual reading and reflection. The Abbot of Pantanassa Monastery, Very Rev. Fr Eusebios, celebrated the Divine Liturgy for the girls at the Retreat centre, while the boys visited Pantanassa Monastery for the spiritual climax of their camp.



On the weekend of February 10th-12th, the men of the Greek Orthodox Christian Society, Sydney, held their annual Camp at the Bethshan Camp and Conference Centre, Wyee, with around 120 participants from a range of ages. A highlight of the camp was the late-night vigil service held at Pantanassa Monastery on Saturday evening with the Liturgy ending in the early hours of Sunday morning.

The theme of all the camps was *"I belong to God"* (Gen 50:19). Eight brothers and sisters from Adelaide were welcomed at the camps.

Key Dates

MARCH

5  Sunday of Orthodoxy (1 st Sunday of Lent)	12  Sunday of St Gregory Palamas (2 nd Sunday of Lent)
19  Sunday of the Holy Cross (3 rd Sunday of Lent)	25  Saturday ANNUNCIATION OF THE THEOTOKOS
26  Sunday of St John Climacus (4 th Sunday of Lent)	30  Thursday Great Canon of St Andrew of Crete

APRIL

2  Sunday of St Mary of Egypt (5 th Sunday of Lent)	9  PALM SUNDAY
14  HOLY FRIDAY The Passion of Our Lord	15  HOLY SATURDAY
16 GREAT AND HOLY PASCHA	23 Thomas Sunday Great Martyr George



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