

August 19, 2012

Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple Skete



Matthew 18:23-35

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We often hear the phrase, “the Kingdom of Heaven.” It’s used in Scripture, it’s used in the writings of the Church Fathers and saints, and we find it even in our prayers. We heard this phrase in this morning Gospel reading when the Lord began a parable with these words: “The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king...” and so forth.

But what does this expression, “Kingdom of Heaven” mean? We know how the Lord explained it in the parable we heard this morning. It has to do with righteousness, with a loving and forgiving attitude towards others, and a lifestyle commensurate with that spirit of forgiveness. This, the Lord explained, is part of what the Kingdom of Heaven is all about, and thus we can see that it actually begins in *this* life, in this world.

But of this parable St. John Chrysostom wrote: “Terrible indeed is this parable...” Now the word “terrible” has two basic meanings: the first is refers to something extremely shocking or distressing: as in “a terrible crime”; the second means causing or likely to cause terror. It is *both* of these meanings that St. John Chrysostom wants us to understand concerning this parable about this Kingdom of Heaven: it is something shocking and at the same time terrifying.

And so he writes:

“Terrible indeed is this parable, brethren, terrible its words and fearful its sentence. It is dreadful and terrifying for transgressors of God’s commandments, but for those that keep them it is sweet and grace-filled. Let us, therefore, learn from this parable to forgive our contentious brethren their offences against us. For if we forgive our debtors, God will also forgive us our transgressions; but if we do not relieve and forgive them, we shall not be forgiven or pardoned by God; rather, we shall incur greater displeasure and punishment for ourselves, and terrible torments.”

St. John Chrysostom was writing more than 1500 years ago, but it’s not often that we hear such strong words as these from anyone in Christianity, not even in Orthodoxy, any more—not from bishops, not from priests, not even from most contemporary monastics. What is often emphasized today is instead a kind of dangerous and generic version of Christ—a “Jesus meek and mild” form of the Lord, something perceived as “nice” and harmless, and this

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has enabled us in this culture to “take it or leave it” in terms of the Lord’s commandments. But the actual fact is that the Lord *did* have some stern and sometimes frightening things to say. And this parable is one of them.

St. John Chrysostom isn’t called “the Golden Tongued One” for nothing. His great sermons, all of which have long been translated into English, and his important commentaries on much of Holy Scripture, are pretty much ignored today. We serve his Divine Liturgy—rightly called “the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom”—and we observe his feast day, but you will find it hard to locate anyone who knows much of anything about his life, much less his writings, and this is a great pity. We need so badly the clear-headed and firm teaching of such pastors today.

Continuing his commentary on this morning’s parable, St. John observes that although “the gentle Lord converses with us in this life, arranging our affairs in the midst of angels”, the time will come for judgment, when the Lord will look deeply into our hearts and consciences, for “each and every man [will be] exposed and rebuked by his own conscience; [and] by some judicial reckoning everyone [will be] examined concerning what he has done, and thus brought to a salutary awareness of his deeds...”

This “reckoning”, this “judging”, will take place for all of us, and the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity will preside over this reckoning, when we give account for the life, the opportunities, and the graces He gave us, for, as St. John also says:

“We and all men are debtors in the sum of ten thousand talents” he says. Now, in today’s monetary value that would be the equivalent of 160 years of daily labor or salary! So, *“We and all men are debtors in the sum of ten thousand talents, because we have received many good things from God and we ought to love Him greatly, yet instead we sin against Him.”*

The Lord’s parable ends with this emphatic and sobering warning to us: “So likewise shall My heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.”

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This concluding verse is the sole reason for this parable; everything in it leads up to this. And when He ordered, yes *commanded*, us to forgive others, He said that it must be from our hearts, “not only with our lips but with our very hearts,” as St. John Chrysostom explains. “Here God asks two things of us: that we censure our own sins, and that we forgive others their trespasses; *for one who knows his own failings will be more lenient towards his neighbor.* The Lord does not seek the forgiveness which comes merely from the lips; He commands us to grant forgiveness which is from the heart.”

Now, you and I know, in the private recesses of our hearts, that we really have not yet fully forgiven those who have offended us and, in fact, we constantly renew that sin by remembering those offenses and then compound the sin by repeating those offenses to others. In this way we also constantly commit sins of bringing others into disgrace, injuring others by our words and thoughts. St. John Chrysostom bluntly adds that by doing this “we are likened unto wolves who eat freshly-killed flesh; we are similar to carnivorous reptiles and birds; we resemble all the unclean irrational beasts”!

Strong words, no? But may these words, and this parable, wake us up from our spiritual slumber so that we may rise from such brutish behavior to embrace our true calling, which is little less than that of the angels, for we are made in the image of God.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.