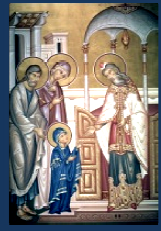


August 7, 2011

Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



Feeding of the Multitude Mathew 14: 14-22

This morning's Gospel reading on the feeding of the multitude with only five loaves of bread and two fishes, is so well known that I need not recount it here. Instead, I would like to share some reflections on the deeper meaning and implications of this narrative.

St. Nicolai Velimirovich, the 20th century Serbian bishop and contemporary Holy Father of the Church, who also spent a number of years living in America, wrote several volumes of extensive commentaries on the Sunday Gospel readings. These were not intended to be sermons; they are much too long. Rather, they are very deep reflections, meditations, on the words of the Gospel, which sprang from his own profound prayer life. Sometimes it seems that St. Nicolai isn't even talking about the appointed reading for that Sunday—although he does get to it in time, in his long essays. But he takes a very long look at the Scriptural narrative, viewing it from several different directions and perspectives, seeking the hidden dimensions, meanings, and teachings that each biblical account so richly contains and drawing practical conclusions from these.

Here is how he began his exposition of this morning's Gospel. I'm going to quote just from the first few paragraphs, which have something very important for us to think about. He wrote:

"All that the Most High does, He does as is fitting. There is nothing in what He does that is aimless, unnecessary or superfluous."

Having made this important point—that God wastes nothing—St. Nicolai then contrasts the activities of God with our own human activities, saying: "Why do some people wander about so aimlessly and do so many aimless things? Because they are unaware of the purpose of their lives and the goal of their journeying. Why do some people load themselves down with unnecessary cares, being scarcely able to move under the great heap of superfluous things? Because they do not know the one thing that is needful."

Now, you and I see this kind of aimless and useless behavior, brothers and sisters, in ourselves and in many people in our society and culture, who have plenty of time to wander around



shopping malls, watch TV and DVDs, and read silly magazines and books that do not lift the spirit, the soul of man, which is so very much weighed down in our time. I see many articles on the net these days about people who are not only addicted to mindless television programs of all kinds, but addicted now also to the internet and to pods and mobile phones—I don't even know the correct names for these gadgets but I see people of all ages walking around everywhere with them in their hands, as though they are physically attached! Especially it has become a plague with young people. I understand that texting has now become so mindless and foolish that people even text all of their friends that they have just now entered the drug store! I have heard that there is even something now called "sexting", which I don't really know anything about, but assume, from the name, that it cannot be good.

And yet the sands of life are slipping quickly through the hour glass. With each day that passes we have less and less time to complete our journey to God, to repent and draw closer to Him.



St. Nicolai continues:

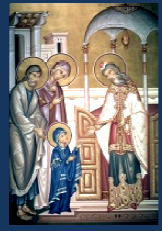
"In order to bring together man's fragmented mind, to heal man's divided heart and to unite man's disordered strength—in order to do all this, the Lord Jesus, from first to last, revealed *one goal, and one only*: the Kingdom of God. A cross-eyed man," he continues, "looking two ways at once, sees neither way. Oh, how aimless is the life of a man striving after many ends! How insensitive is a divided heart! How weak is the will if its strength is frittered away!"

Now, men and women today, especially those who must go out into the work force, have no choice but to live with a mind that is, to some extent at least, divided and distracted—unless, that is, they can acquire a firm habit of prayer that quietly accompanies them everywhere and helps to keep them balanced and whole. For everyone, however, when they return from work, the home should be a family church—quiet, serene, peaceful, no loud noises or words, no stress, no anxiety or angry words. But what do many do instead? They plunge immediately into more noise—the distraction of TV, radio, CD, and loud and often distressing conversations, etc. And in this way they keep their mind divided and distracted, just as it was at work. There

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is no rest for either the mind or the soul. They maintain a worldly atmosphere even at home, and instead of the home being a peaceful refuge, it continues to bombard the mind, the heart, and the soul, stressing people out as much as when they were at work.

What did St. Nicolai say about this? Again, commenting on the larger context of this morning's Gospel, he wrote: "*One thing only is needful: the Kingdom of God!*" Brothers and sisters, do you hear? One thing only is needful! St. Nicolai continues: "Christ the Wonderworker strove to direct the eyes of all men to this one point. He who so looks, has one thought—God; one feeling—*love*; one yearning—to draw near to God. Blessed is he who has come to this integrity; such a man has become *like a glass lens that concentrates the sun's rays in order to produce fire!*"

In all of the hustle and bustle of life—much of it quite unnecessary, you know—the worry and anxiety, fearfulness and busy work of each day, how quickly this simple message of Christ is forgotten! Yet we hear the message over and over in the Scriptures, in the lives of the saints, in our formal prayers. Why don't we listen? Why are we so spiritually deaf? So lazy?

Again, listen to St. Nicolai: "The words that the Lord said to Martha: 'Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things, but *one thing* is needful' [Luke 10:41-2]—these words were, in fact, said as a reprimand and a warning to the whole of mankind. And this *one thing needful* is the Kingdom of God. All that the Lord said and did, was done with this aim in view. To this point was gathered all the flame that lights travelers as they wander around the chasms and whirlpools of this transitory life."

This includes Christ's establishment of His Church, the sacraments, the moral and theological teachings He entrusted to the Church, and all of the miracles He worked while in this world in the flesh.

St. Nicolai continues: "All that the Lord does is fitting; all is done with this highest, this sole and unique aim; all is fitting and absolutely necessary both in the words spoken and the deeds accomplished. Never a superfluous word; never an inappropriate deed. And how fruitful were

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His words and deeds! How many millions of times has the fruit of every word and deed of His borne fruit, right down to our own times! And how sweet, fragrant and life-giving is this fruit!"

And the same is exactly and precisely true of this morning's account of the feeding of the multitude. St. Nicolai goes on for six more pages to explain how this particular Gospel illustrates the points he has made in the introduction, and which I have quoted. But a Sunday morning sermon is too short to go into all of the details, regrettably. (I urge everyone, however, to obtain his homilies and read and study and apply them. Get them while they are still in print, for we do not know how much longer it will be possible to get good Orthodox literature.)

But St. Nicolai concludes his long reflection by saying of this Gospel reading that "all these mysteries are so deep and unfathomable; who can dare to look too deeply into their depths?...[But] the angels drink to their fill of the sweetness of the Gospel. The more a man reads, the more he prayerfully ponders on it and the more he directs his life according to it, so much the more will it open its depths and delight him with its fragrance."

And to this I must add one thing more: single-mindedness.

We must stop looking at the world and all of life as though we were cross-eyed. We must see the one thing needful: which is Jesus Christ Himself, "the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow," the "Way, the Truth, and the Life." And as Gerondissa and I often say to those who visit us: in order to have a serious spiritual life you really must be willing and prepared to lay down your life for it. Yes, literally. You can't just make it one other "part" of your weekly procession of activities, work and responsibilities. *The Lord God* must become the foundation and the center and focus of each day and everything, for to Him belongs all glory, honor, and worship, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.