



SUNDAY OF THE HOLY FATHERS

Luke 8:5-15

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

Today is the Sunday of the Holy Fathers of the 7th Ecumenical Council, and also the 21st Sunday after Pentecost. Before speaking about today's Gospel reading, I want to say a few words about the great 7th Council.

This Council took place in Nicea in 787 AD, and is also known as the Second Council of Nicaea. It is the last of the Ecumenical Councils to date, and it dealt with the theology of images—in other words, icons and sacred art.

Doctrinal disputes concerning the Person of Christ did not end with the Sixth Council in AD 681, but continued through the eighth and ninth centuries. But this time, the controversy focused on icons and the struggle lasted for 120 years. There were the "iconoclasts" or "icon-smashers", who were influenced by both Islam and Judaism and were suspicious of any art depicting God or humans: they considered iconography to be idolatry. And there were the "iconodules" or "venerators of icons", who defended the place of iconography in the Church

But this controversy was more than a disagreement about Christian art or taste. Very profound issues were involved, and this is what the Council debated, resolved, and ultimately addressed in a definitive manner

Largely through the work of St. John of Damascus the position of the icon-venerators won out, and the Council declared that the veneration of icons and having them in churches and homes, is the true teaching of the Church, revealed by the Holy Spirit, because they are "open books to remind us of God." Concerning their doctrinal significance the Holy Fathers of this Council proclaimed that icons are necessary, even essential, because they protect the full and proper doctrine of the Incarnation. You see, while God cannot be represented in His eternal nature, yet He can be depicted because He became a human being and took flesh, and of this material body images can be made.

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Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



In today's world, where the human body is so abused and degraded and where whole cultures no longer have a proper understanding of it or its purpose and use, much less of the ancient theology of the image, it is very important for us, as Orthodox Christians, to know and understand something about the 7th Council and the huge controversy which preceded it.

Now to the Gospel reading for this Sunday, from St. Luke, which presents us with one of the numerous parables the Lord spoke to His disciples during His life here on earth.

Our world is a poor and sad place, becoming poorer and sadder by the day, it seems. It is all hurrying about, distraction, anger and anguish, disappointments, sorrows, losses, and confrontations both between individuals and between nations and even between religions. But at the same time, there is still some beauty in this world—and we see it in God's incredible nature, which is all around us, and in Christ-like individuals (especially the saints), and in the beauty of iconography, great music and art and sacred music, too, and—though this may surprise you—we see this beauty in the parables of the Lord. We see especially how, in many of His parables—and certainly in this morning's parable of the Sower who went out to sow his seed—the Lord made use of nature, the nature which He Himself of course had created. Yet "what is more ordinary than...a tree growing from a mustard seed, the sun, sparrows, grass and wild lilies, wheat and tares, rock and sand"? (St. Nicolai Velimirovitch) What is more beautiful than these?...

It is really not necessary to "explain" this parable, for Jesus explains it completely Himself when He says:

"The seed is the word of God. ¹² Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. ¹³ But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away. ¹⁴ Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity. ¹⁵ But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience."

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We must realize and remember that “all spiritual truth is from the other world—the spiritual, heavenly world—and it can be perceived and grasped only with spiritual sight, hearing and understanding....Many have lost the sight, hearing and understanding of spiritual truths.” (St. Nicolai V.) These are the one who hold on for dear life to this world, to the earth, to material things, and to themselves, their bodies and their personalities, and to other people, *instead of cleaving for dear life to the Immortal One, who will never disappoint or let us down, Jesus, The Christ, the Son of the Living God.* Those who cleave instead to this world are often fearful or bitter, because they see that everything is passing away, everything changes, nothing remains the same. The word of God cannot grow in their hearts, and so they experience little joy. Brothers and sisters, there are very, very many such fearful men and women in the world today. But let us not be among them!

Very often, when the Lord was teaching, when He was explaining heavenly mysteries or when He was telling another parable, He would conclude with this phrase: “*He that hath ears to hear, let him hear!*” And sometimes, after this repeated and emphatic statement, He would then weep. This command to “hear” applies to you and me today, brothers and sisters, gathered together for Divine Liturgy, the eternal Mystical Supper of the Lamb. But it applies not to our *physical* hearing, but to our *spiritual* hearing.

And what is it that we must “hear” in this parable? Simply—but terribly—this: this parable is a cry of warning from the Lord, the great Friend and Lover of mankind, a cry of danger ahead, for He wants so much to show us the “one and only narrow path to salvation from the decaying, burning, and smoking of this world.” (St. Nicolai) In this parable the Lord talks about the portion of the seed (that is, *us*) that falls by the wayside and the birds eat it, and another falls upon rock and withers away for lack of water; one-fourth of the seed falls on the thorn or briar patches and are choked, unable to grow, and only the last fourth falls on good soil and grows and comes to fruition.

Think about this for a moment.

The Church Fathers tell us that this means there is a possibility that only one-fourth of humankind will be saved; the rest will be lost. Nor can we rest on our laurels because we are Orthodox Christians, for as I once heard my spiritual father say to someone: “We Orthodox

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know the way into the Kingdom of Heaven, and we know that it is the shortest way; what remains to be seen is *whether* we will stay on that road and complete that journey!”

This cry of warning is from the “meek and gentle Lord,” remember, Who is rarely given to outbursts or to frightening others. But here He comes across very vigorously and sternly because He knows that our eternal life is at stake. He doesn’t care about our material possessions—our homes, land, clothing, cars, even our jobs, etc.—but whether we will be with Him forever in eternity. He sees the danger, and like a good mother or father, He wants to warn us, His children.

“And so Christ cries out to men, from end to end of history: *‘He that has ears to hear; let him hear!’* [Therefore] Glory and praise be to our living and life-giving Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit—the Trinity consubstantial and undivided, now and forever, through all time and all eternity.” (St. Nicolai)

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