

Saints Peter and Paul Orthodox Church

Albanian Archdiocese - OCA

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Rev. Nicholas Dellermann – Rector (860-861-7468)

SUNDAY, JUNE 30

1st Sunday after Pentecost

All Saints

Synaxis of the Holy, Glorious, and All-Praised Twelve Apostles

Tone 8 Troparion (Resurrection)

*Thou didst descend from on high, O Merciful One!
Thou didst accept the three day burial to free us from our sufferings!
O Lord, our Life and Resurrection, glory to Thee!*

Tone 4 Troparion (All Saints)

*As with fine porphyry and royal purple,
Thy Church has been adorned with Thy martyrs' blood shed throughout all the world.
She cries to Thee, O Christ God: "Send down Thy bounties on Thy people,
grant peace to Thy habitation and great mercy to our souls!"*

Tone 8 Kontakion (All Saints)

*The universe offers Thee the God-bearing Martyrs as the first fruits of creation, O Lord and Creator.
By their prayers keep Thy Church, Thy habitation, in abiding peace through the Theotokos, O most Merciful One!*

↻ Prokeimenon ↻

Tone 8 (Resurrection)

Pray and make your vows / before the Lord, our God! (Ps. 75:10a)
V. In Judah God is known; His Name is great in Israel. (Ps. 75:1)

Tone 4 Prokeimenon (All Saints)

God is wonderful in His saints, / the God of Israel. (Ps. 67:35a)

Saint Gelasius of Rimet

Saint Gelasius was the igumen of the Rimet Monastery in Transylvania. He had lived as a solitary near Rimet creek, and he was granted the grace of working miracles.

The saint fasted on weekdays, eating only on Saturdays and Sundays, and his only food was the Eucharist. During the day he fulfilled his monastic obediences, and at night he kept vigil.

Saint Gelasius was the spiritual Father of many hermits of Rimet Mountain, whom he would visit during Great Lent. He healed the sick, and cast out demons from those who were possessed. It is said that a spring of water appeared through his holy prayers.

His later years were spent as a bishop, and he departed to the Lord after many labors on behalf of his flock. Saint Gelasius was glorified by the Orthodox Church of Romania in 1992.

↻ The Epistle Reading ↻

The reading is from St. Paul's Letter to the Hebrews 11:33-40; 12:1-2

Brethren, all the saints through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and scourging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated - of whom the world was not worthy - wandering over deserts and mountains and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Letra e Apostull Pavlit drejtuar Hebrejve 11:33-40; 12:1-2

të cilët me anë të besimit mundën mbretëri, punuan drejtësi, fituan premtime, mbyllën gojë luanësh, shuan fuqinë e zjarrit, shpëtuan nga tehu i thikës, morën fuqi nga dobësitë, u bënë të fortë në luftë, thyen ushtritë e të huajve. Gra morën të vdekurit e tyre të ngjallur; edhe të tjerë u munduan, sepse nuk pranuan shpëtimin, që të fitonin një ngjallje më të mirë. Edhe të tjerë u provuan me të përqeshura e me të rrahura, po edhe me të lidhura e me burgime. U vranë me gurë, u sharruan më dysh, u nganë, vdiqën të vranë prej shpate; endeshin lart e poshtë veshur me lëkurë dhensh, e me lëkurë dhish, në nevojë, në shtrëngime, në keqtrajttime, ata për të cilët bota nuk ishte e denjë; – duke u endur nëpër shkretëtira e nëpër male e nëpër shpella e nëpër vrimat e dheut. Edhe këta të gjithë, ndonëse morën dëshmi të mirë me anë të besimit, nuk morën premtimin, sepse Perëndia pati urdhëruar që përpara një gjë më të mirë për ne, që të mos bëhen të përsosur pa ne. Prandaj dhe ne, të rrethuar prej një reje kaq të madhe dëshmitarësh, le të hedhim tej çdo barrë dhe mëkatin që na pushton lehtë, edhe me durim le të vrapojmë në rrugën që është përpara nesh, duke shikuar tek Jisui që është kryet dhe fundi i besimit, i cili për gëzimin që ishte përpara tij duroi kryqin, duke përbuzur turpin, edhe ndenji në të djathtë të fronit të Perëndisë.

К Евреям 11:33-40; 12:1-2

которые верою побеждали царства, творили правду, получали обетования, заграждали уста львов, угашали силу огня, избегали острия меча, укреплялись от немощи, были крепки на войне, прогоняли полки чужих; жены получали умерших своих воскресшими; иные же замучены были, не приняв освобождения, дабы получить лучшее воскресение; другие испытали поругания и побои, а также узы и темницу, были побиваемы камнями, перепиливаемы, подвергаемы пытке, умирали от меча, скитались в милотях и козьих кожах, терпя недостатки, скорби, озлобления; те, которых весь мир не был достоин, скитались по пустыням и горам, по пещерам и ущельям земли. И все сии, свидетельствованные в вере, не получили обещанного, потому что Бог предусмотрел о нас нечто лучшее, дабы они не без нас достигли совершенства. Посему и мы, имея вокруг себя такое облако свидетелей, свергнем с себя всякое бремя и запинаящий нас грех и с терпением будем проходить предлежащее нам поприще, взирая на начальника и совершителя веры Иисуса, Который, вместо предлежавшей Ему радости, претерпел крест, пренебрегши посрамление, и воссел одесную престола Божия.

Tone 4

Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

V. The righteous cried and the Lord heard them, and delivered them out of all their troubles. *(Ps. 33:17)*

V. Many are the afflictions of the righteous; the Lord will deliver them out of them all. *(Ps. 33:19)*

The Gospel Reading

The Gospel According to Matthew 9:36, 10:1-8

At that time, when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity. The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean. and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. These twelve Jesus sent out, charging them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And preach as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying, give without pay."

Ungjilli Sipas Matheut 9:36, 10:1-8

Edhe kur pa turmën, u dhembshurua për ta, sepse ishin të drobitur e të shpërndarë posi dhen që s'kanë bari. Edhe si thirri pranë të dymbëdhjetë nxënësit e tij, u dha atyre pushtet kundër frymëve të ndyra, që t'i nxjerrin ato edhe të shërojnë çdo sëmundje e çdo lëngatë. Edhe emrat e të dymbëdhjetë Apostujve janë këto: i pari, Simoni, i quajtur Pjetër, edhe Andrea, vëllai i tij; Jakovi i Zevedheut edhe Joani vëllai i tij; Filipi dhe Bartolomeu; Thomai edhe Mathe tagrambledhësi; Jakovi i Alfeut edhe Leveu i mbiquajtur Tadé; Simon Kananeasi edhe Juda Iskarioti, i cili edhe e tradhtoi atë. Këta të dymbëdhjetë dërgoi Jisui, pasi i porositi ata, duke thënë: Në udhë kombesh mos shkoni, edhe në qytet samaritanësh mos hyni; por shkoni më tepër nëpër dhentë e humbura të shtëpisë së Izraelit. Edhe duke shkuar, predikoni duke thënë se u afrua mbretëria e qiejve. Shëroni të sëmurë, pastroni lebrozë, ngjallni të vdekur, nxirrni demonë; falas morët, falas jepni. 9 Mos mbani ar, as argjend, as bakër në brezat tuaj,

От Матфея 9:36, 10:1-8

Видя толпы народа, Он сжалился над ними, что они были изнурены и рассеяны, как овцы, не имеющие пастыря. И призвав двенадцать учеников Своих, Он дал им власть над нечистыми духами, чтобы изгонять их и врачевать всякую болезнь и всякую немощь. Двенадцати же Апостолов имена суть сии: первый Симон, называемый Петром, и Андрей, брат его, Иаков Зеведеев и Иоанн, брат его, Филипп и Варфоломей, Фома и Матфей мытарь, Иаков Алфеев и Леввей, прозванный Фаддеем, Симон Кананит и Иуда Искарот, который и предал Его. Сих двенадцать послал Иисус, и заповедал им, говоря: на путь к язычникам не ходите, и в город Самарянский не входите; а идите наипаче к погибшим овцам дома Израилева; ходя же, проповедуйте, что приблизилось Царство Небесное; больных исцеляйте, прокаженных очищайте, мертвых воскрешайте, бесов изгоняйте; даром получили, даром давайте.



Communion Hymn

Praise the Lord from the heavens, praise Him in the highest! *(Ps. 148:1)*
Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous; praise befits the just! *(Ps. 32:1)*
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

PRAYERS	Birthdays, Names-days, & Anniversaries	SCRIPTURE THIS WEEK
<i>For Those Who Have Fallen Asleep</i>		Church Lectionary
<p>Newly Departed Martin, Newly Departed Tom, Newly Departed Archpriest John</p>		<p><u>Today</u> Hebrews 11:33-40;12:1-2 Matthew 9:36, 10:1-8</p>
<p><i>[To be inserted after the petition for the departed]</i> Again we pray for those who have lost their lives because of conflicts in Ukraine, Armenia, and the Middle East: that the Lord our God may look upon them with mercy, and give them rest where there is neither sickness, or sorrow, but life everlasting.</p>	<p><u>Seven-Day Vigil Candles</u> Llukan Dylgjeri – health Tina Murianka - Health Seven-Day Vigil Candles are used for the Eternal Light that hangs above the Royal Doors and are often placed in front of the icons of Christ or the Birth-giver of God. If you would like to donate a Seven-Day Vigil Candle, Please include the name or names of those for whom the candle is donated, and we will place them in this section for special prayers.</p>	<p><u>Monday</u> I Corinthians 12:27-31;13:1-8 Matthew 10:1, 5-8</p>
<i>For Those Who Are Sick And Home-bound</i>		
<p>Virginia, Denise, Marie, James, Alexandra, Andrew, Christina, Louise, Porter, Alvin, Tracy, Kathy, Andrew, Maria, Helen, John, Nina, Sophia, Spresha, Kristin, Niko, Spiro, Angjeliki, Melod, Olgay, Ruth, Terry, Naomi, Annette, Tatiana, Lester Jr., Natalia, Otari, Lasha, Fr. Nikolas, Llukan, Marina, Sophia, Fr. Maxwell, Christina, Anastasia, Mary, Elena, Tatiana, Lauren, Tracy, Anita, Sandi, Anibal, Kakha, Christina, Jane, Vano</p>		<p><u>Tuesday</u> Hebrews 9:1-7 Luke 1:39-49, 56</p> <p><u>Wednesday</u> Romans 4:13-25 Matthew 7:21-23</p> <p><u>Thursday</u> Romans 5:10-16 Matthew 8:23-27</p>
<i>Prayers In General</i>		
<p>The community of Ss. Peter & Paul Miami, Fr. Dennis and his family, Fr. Ioan, Christian, Michael, Erica, Kaida, DuDash family, Michael, Robert, Ally, Steve, Jake and Amanda and their children, Katherine, Ron, Anthony, Volodymyr, Nick, Michael, Rafael, Bob, Barbara, Sandra, Enoch, John, Victoria, Melenie, Grace, Michael, Barbara, Giorgi, Molly, Jim, Chloe, Marsha, Ann, Lilly, Stephen, Gela, Gabriel Joseph, Lombrino, Kondakciu, Diana, Tyler, Alexi, Nora, Sophia, Davor, Davorka, Yannis, Logan, Monique & family, Richard, Thomas, Rizwan, Andreas, Alexander, Benjamin, William</p> <p><i>[To be inserted after the petition for the living]</i> Again we pray for mercy, life, peace, health, salvation, for those who are suffering, wounded, grieving, or displaced because of the conflicts in Ukraine, Armenia, and the Middle East.</p> <p><i>[Petitions at Augmented Litany]</i> Again we pray for a cessation of the hostilities in Ukraine, Armenia, and the Middle East, and that reconciliation and peace will flourish in these places, we pray thee, hearken and have mercy.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">COFFEE HOUR</p> <p>Coffee Hour is a wonderful chance for us to get together to break bread and spend time with each other, to celebrate those whom we have held memorials for, and to come together as the family of God outside of worship. To sign up, to host a coffee hour, contact Fr. Nicholas or Donna Bacon.</p>	<p><u>Friday</u> Galatians 5:22-26;6:1-2 Matthew 11:27-30</p> <p><u>Saturday</u> Romans 3:19-24 Matthew 7:1-8</p> <p><u>Reading the Bible in a Year</u></p> <p>June 30: Isaiah 45-48 July 01: Isaiah 49-52 July 02: Isaiah 53-57 July 03: Isaiah 58-62 July 04: Isaiah 63-66 July 05: Jeremiah 1-4 July 06: Jeremiah 5-8</p>

LEARNING FROM MARTYRS AND CONFESSORS: HOMILY FOR THE SUNDAY OF ALL SAINTS IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

Fr. Philip LeMasters

It is tempting to think that what we read about in the Scriptures and the history of the Church occurred in a world so different from ours that it has become irrelevant. This Sunday of All Saints reminds us that our Lord's fundamental calling to every generation does not change, but challenges the assumptions of every culture and the preferences of every human being. That calling is to participate personally in the holiness of God and to seek first His Kingdom, regardless of the cost.

When we hear today of our brothers and sisters in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia who are killed, abused, or become refugees due to their faithfulness to Jesus Christ, His words from today's gospel reading should come to mind: "Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My Name's sake, will receive a hundred fold, and inherit eternal life. But many that are first will be last, and the last first." When we hear of terrorist attacks upon churches, the kidnapping of bishops and priests, and other atrocities, we should recall the graphic descriptions in Hebrews of the suffering of the Old Testament saints who hoped for the Messiah: "Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and scourging, even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth."



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The first saints recognized by the Church were martyrs and confessors, people who accepted death or severe physical suffering instead of denying their Savior. As St. Polycarp said when urged to save his life by denying Christ, "For eighty and six years have I been his servant, and he has done me no wrong, and how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" Whether at the hands of the pagan Romans, Persian and Islamic empires, Communists, Fascists, ISIS or other terrorist groups, countless Christians have made—and continue to make—the ultimate witness for the Lord. According to His promise, He will acknowledge them before the Father because they acknowledged Him in the most profound way possible.

For Orthodox Christians, the saints are not dead figures from the past, but alive in Christ. There is one Church in heaven and on earth, and we are members of the Body of Christ together with them. They are the white-robed martyrs around the throne of God who worship Him eternally. We pray and worship God together with them, asking for their intercessions and seeking to follow their example of holiness. As our epistle reading states, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings to closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfection of our faith." As shining examples of what it means to love and serve Christ, the saints inspire us to ever greater faithfulness to Him. They are living proof that He has conquered death and that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we may participate personally in His holy and eternal life. They point us to Him.

On this Sunday of All Saints, we commemorate all those who have entered in holiness into this great cloud of witnesses, especially those whose names we do not know. The Holy Spirit has revealed the names of many saints to the Church for our edification, but that is hardly an exhaustive list. And since humility is a necessary quality of holiness, that should not be surprising. When we remember the harsh realities of martyrdom and persecution through which they bore witness, it becomes immediately clear that the saintly path is not one of self-exaltation or pride. No, it is how those who are last—those who give up even life, family, and the most basic necessities—become first in a Kingdom not of this world.

Regardless of the country or time period in which we live, Christ calls us—no less than the martyrs and confessors—to acknowledge Him before others, to love Him even more than our families, and to take up our crosses. Today He calls us to be faithful witnesses to Him in a culture that has little place for principled self-restraint of any kind. We live in a time when many worship at the altars of immediate gratification and self-indulgence in every area of life. The selfishness, anger, hatred, and violence that we see so often in our culture reflect a failure to control our passions, which is a symptom of our collective disdain for putting anything or anyone before doing or saying whatever we feel like at the moment. Holiness in the relationship between man and woman, as well as faithful self-sacrifice in rearing children, are strange goals in our age of promiscuity and pornography, when many see no higher standard in life than fulfilling whatever desires they happen to have at the moment. Gluttony, greed, and trying obsessively to get what we want when we want it make many so spiritually and morally weak that they probably cannot even imagine living otherwise. And the fact that we celebrate these ways of thinking and living in the name of freedom or being true to ourselves makes them all the more dangerous.

To be true to ourselves as human beings means to become holy, to direct all our desires to their ultimate fulfillment in the Lord, and to be healed from our self-imposed slavery to self-centered desire. The saints are icons of what it means to be true to ourselves as those created in God's image and likeness. The martyrs and confessors are shining examples of how to love and serve Christ above all else, and to order all our other attachments in light of our most fundamental commitment to Him. Their example calls us to acknowledge Him each day by living in this way. We acknowledge Him by taking up our crosses as we resist the pervasive temptations in our culture to worship ourselves, our possessions, our pleasures, and our loved ones. It may seem strange for Christ to warn against loving family members more than Him, but think for a moment how destructive it is for anyone to become a false god to another person. That kind of idolatry leads only to abuse, disappointment, and despair; we diminish ourselves and others when we do that. We distort marriage, family, and sex when we make them ends in themselves. It is far better to serve Christ in our family members through prayer, encouragement, and self-denial. That is how we and our loved ones will find fulfillment, blessing, and joy together as God's children.

Our path to holiness will likely be through our daily struggle to be faithful in small ways that few will notice or celebrate. The question is not whether to serve God through grand gestures or extraordinary circumstances, but whether there is something of the martyr and the confessor in each of us. That means dying to our self-centeredness out of love for Christ. That means loving people in Christ, ordering our relationships such that they fulfill His purposes for us and them, even when that requires suffering. And it means turning the other cheek and loving our enemies, even when we risk being rejected, criticized, or ignored for being out of step with the ways of the world.

No, that is not easy. But when we remember the martyrs and confessors and all that they endured—and still endure—for faithfulness to Christ, we should have confident hope that the same Lord Who strengthened them even to the shedding of blood will surely not abandon us in our smaller struggles each day. And unless we are faithful in small challenges, we will never be prepared for the large ones. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfection of our faith." It is through His love, mercy, and grace that we too may share in the holiness that shines so brightly in all the saints

June Events

June

Bishop's Visit

30 – 10:00am Divine Liturgy
Luncheon with His Grace

July

03 – 12:00pm Sixth Hour
7:15pm Bible Study via GoogleMeets
05 – 7:30am Matins
6:00pm Fun Night
07 – 10:00am Divine Liturgy
10 – 12:00pm Sixth Hour
7:15pm Bible Study via GoogleMeets
12 – 7:30am Matins
14 – 10:00am Divine Liturgy

Can't join us in person?

We stream our services on our YouTube Channel:
<https://www.youtube.com/@sspeterpaulorthodoxhurch01810>

Want to donate by Venmo?

St Peter St Paul Alb Orth Ch James Schaeffer



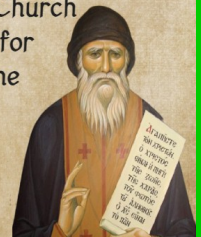
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Something which can help a person who is depressed is work, interest in life. The garden, plants, flowers, trees, the countryside, a walk in the open air - all these things tear a person away from a state of inactivity and awake other interests. They act like medicines. To occupy oneself with the arts, with music and so on, is very beneficial. The thing that I place top of the list, however, is interest in the Church, in reading Holy Scripture and attending services. As you study the words of God you are cured without being aware of it... in our Church a cure is to be found through love for God and prayer, provided this is done with all the heart.

Saint Porphyrios

Wounded by Love



Tending the Garden of the Heart

Both my grandfathers, and my mother, were avid gardeners, so I grew up surrounded by the beauty of plants and flowers. The cottage garden is a distinct style of garden that is certainly my favorite. The use of traditional materials, in an informal design, together with dense plantings, and a mixture of ornamental and edible plants, is identified the world over as English in origin. The grandeur and formal structure, found in classical English estate gardens, has surrendered to homie and functional gardens that are filled with grace and charm.

Plantings of perennials, annuals, vegetables, and flowers of every size and color, display like nothing else, the beauty that bespeaks God's creation. These gardens remind me of people, coming, as we do, in every size and color, all beautiful in our own special way. Some are like climbing roses, reaching to the heavens. Others are like creepers, hugging the ground, and covering large areas like a carpet of green. Some are like cacti, needing little water, while able to live in the ascetic splendor of an Egyptian desert. Others, like water lilies, display beautiful blooms, even while floating in squalid water.

Like plants, we need watering and tending. For Christians, the Waters of Life can be found in baptism, where we are immersed in the Living Waters that bring us into life. Standing before the Creator, God, like the gardener, tends to our needs, that we may grow and bloom to all our potential.

As we tend to our own heart, we must make sure we have guarded ourselves against the weeds that would strangle us, and smother our full potential as children of God. We must make sure we avail ourselves to the life-sustaining food and water that comes from God as His Uncreated Grace. And, as the Body of Christ, the Church, ("neither male nor female, Greek nor Jew") we will flower together, making up a garden of beautiful souls, basking in the Light of the Son of Righteousness.

With love in Christ,
Abbot Tryphon

Divided Against Yourself

“E Pluribus Unum” Out of the Many – One. This is the motto of the United States of America, a republic founded in 1776 after a war of Independence from the British Empire. Of course, now the story of the founding of our Republic has come under fire in the last several years by those who “want to change the narrative” of the beginning of our country. They argue that “really, the Revolution was fought to perpetuate slavery and white privilege.” Works like the “1619 Project” sponsored by the New York Times, attempt to “retell” the story of our founding, but this retelling isn’t meant to be taken as “true fact” but a different narrative. Huh?

By the way, this is what the author of the “1619 Project” said, so it isn’t conjecture.

There are nuanced and honest ways to see how this nation has always worked for a “more perfect union” with stumbles, mistakes, injustices, and victories, courage, and hope for the whole world. But the notion that there could be a place where all people, regardless of their “tribe” or “status”, could live as a united nation is solidly founded on the vision of God for humanity. Just read John’s Revelation of Jesus Christ, and look into heaven where “out of every kindred, tribe, and tongue” all the people are united to adore the Risen Lord of Glory.

Look at our lesson today in Matthew 12:14-16; 22-30:

At that time, the Pharisees took counsel against Jesus, how to destroy him. Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. And many followed him, and he healed them all, and ordered them not to make him known.

Then a blind and dumb demoniac was brought to him, and he healed him so that the dumb man spoke and saw. And all the people were amazed, and said, “Can this be the Son of David?” But when the Pharisees heard it they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons.” Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand; and if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand? And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges. But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can one enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house. He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.”

The jealous religious leaders of Jesus’ day were desperate to discredit Him in the eyes of the people. But that’s what self-serving leaders always do. They desire control over the population because the population outnumbers them 1000 to 1. They know if they lose control, they will lose everything. And they love being in charge.

So, these short-sighted leaders insisted that the great authority Jesus displayed by setting people free from demonic control was actually a “trick” of the Devil to confuse the people and draw them away from their “wonderful” leaders.

But, Jesus knew their thoughts, and He confronted these men with their shallow hypocrisy. And He revealed why they were so desperate to defend their “status quo.” Watch closely.

Jesus tells them a kingdom divided against itself will destroy itself. And that’s always true. A nation that is increasingly divided is in real trouble. When the constant communication is “us vs. them” this is a symptom of the fear of the leaders in losing control; it is a symptom of a people forgetting the “Why” of their nation. It reveals the desperation of the provocateurs that they are trying to destroy so they can gain power. And it’s a dangerous time. So, if the Devil is casting out the Devil, like the enemies of Jesus are suggesting, then the Devil’s kingdom is crumbling. Makes no sense.

BUT, if God’s power is being displayed in crushing the power of the devil in people’s lives then the Kingdom of God has actually come among them, and they better pay attention to this Man that has authority over the demons, nature, and even death itself! The Lord offers them a clear invitation, and He offers that same invitation to us today: You’re either for Him or against Him. There is no neutral territory.

The Lord again confronts the spiritual blindness of His day and our day as well. He offers us true freedom from the bondage of the fear of death and He invites us to see our unity, not in our customs, cultures, or language, but in our fidelity to Him as He makes us a “new nation” made up of everyone invited to the Kingdom of God.

Nowhere is this clear message more plain than in the longest canon the Orthodox Church prays every year during Great Lent. The Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete is a masterpiece of laying out the damning slavery of sin and the freedom won through repentance and turning towards Christ. We chant this canon over several days during Great Lent and I encourage you to read it as often as you can. St. Andrew is commemorated today, and I find it uniquely fitting that this minstrel of repentance would be remembered on July 4, the day of the celebration of Independence for the US. It reminds me of the passage in 2 Chronicles 7:14. This is a passage that we must embrace in our country if we hope to pass through the madness of our current chaos – “If My people, who are called by my name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and forgive their sins and heal their land.”

Today, Jesus makes it clear to the people of His day and to us right here, right now. There are two kingdoms – the kingdom of selfish slavery, and the Kingdom of God. Only two. And our peace and unity and the highest aspirations of humanity are only found in the Kingdom of God. That is the only place of true unity, peace, justice, and love. All other lesser “kingdoms” always disappoint and fail. So, if you were to take inventory of your own life, your decisions, and your day-to-day routines, do they reveal your citizenship in God’s Kingdom or the always unstable kingdom of yourself? Are you reorienting your life daily so that you can live in the true “land of the free, and the home of the brave?” That’s the only way to know a Normal Orthodox life.