

Date: July. 28, 2024

Subject: 5th Sunday After Pentecost

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

In a few days, we will begin the month of August. During August, we will be fasting very strictly for two weeks during the Dormition Fast. The month is also a rich month spiritually in terms of church feast days, both major feast days and minor holidays. Therefore, we will be given an ample amount of spiritual nourishment as we approach the end of the summer months.

**Matthew 8: 28-9:1**

*And when he was come to the other side into the country of the Gergesenes, there met him two possessed with devils, coming out of the tombs, exceeding fierce, so that no man might pass by that way.*

*And, behold, they cried out, saying, What have we to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of God? art thou come hither to torment us before the time?*

*And there was a good way off from them an herd of many swine feeding.*

*So the devils besought him, saying, If thou cast us out, suffer us to go away into the herd of swine.*

*And he said unto them, Go. And when they were come out, they went into the herd of swine: and, behold, the whole herd of swine ran violently down a steep place into the sea, and perished in the waters.*

*And they that kept them fled, and went their ways into the city, and told every thing, and what was befallen to the possessed of the devils.*

*And, behold, the whole city came out to meet Jesus: and when they saw him, they besought him that he would depart out of their coasts.*

*And he entered into a ship, and passed over, and came into his own city.*

In this Sunday's Gospel reading, a great spiritual tragedy is described. The Savior arrives to a new city and is met by two greatly suffering men. These unfortunates, being both spiritually and physically possessed by demons, suffered greatly themselves, as well as causing a real ruckus for the residents living in the area.

When the merciful Savior freed the two men from demonic possession, a most incredible thing happened. Instead of rejoicing and thanking the Lord for His mercy, *the whole city came out to meet Jesus: and when they saw Him, they besought him that He would depart out of their coasts.* They expelled the Savior from their lands, which meant that they chose material benefits given to them through their illicit raising of swine over salvation and eternal blessedness, that could be given to them by the Savior.

But the Lord, always concerned with our spiritual welfare, provides us, members of the Russian Orthodox Church, with a second but completely different remembrance. Today, we also celebrate the memory of the holy Great Prince, St. Vladimir, who made a different choice than the one made by the citizens of the country of the Gergesenes.

When the Savior came to Vladimir by mystically placing in his heart a deep spiritual thirst, he, despite being a pagan, did not expel Him. Instead, he accepted Him wholeheartedly and shared Him with the people that God had entrusted him to govern. Through this, he opened the path to salvation and a blessed eternity to both himself and them. He was baptised and baptised all the people of his nation. It is, therefore, due to him, that we, who live more than a thousand years later, are able to walk up on this path to Heaven.

How did it happen that a renowned pagan decided to reject paganism, join the true faith, and then share it with his people? As described by the holy New- Martyr Patriarch Tikhon, in a homily that he gave in a parish in Alaska in the year 1899, St. Vladimir became disillusioned with paganism. As God gave him a bright mind and a sensitive heart, he came to the realization that figures made out of material by human hands could not be divine. Therefore, he felt an internal deep need to find the true God and the true faith.

Word spread to different countries that the grand-prince of Rus was searching for a new faith, and envoys of the then-prominent religions, Jewish, Orthodox, Moslem, and Catholic, rushed to the prince to present to him their faiths as the true religion. It was a presentation on the Orthodox Church, made by a Greek monk, that deeply moved the prince. His boyars, however, urged him to first send envoys to the different church centers, to witness first hand how each faith was practiced.

The envoys who traveled to Constantinople were so moved by the liturgical services in the great cathedral of St. Sophia, that they told the prince that when they stood during the services in that cathedral, they did not know whether they were in Heaven or on earth. This convinced St. Vladimir to convert himself and his countrymen to Orthodoxy. And it is this faith, the Orthodox Faith, profoundly accepted by St. Vladimir and the Russian people, that both protected and preserved the life of the Russian nation to the present day.

The people of the country of the Gergesenes were tested by having to make a choice between faithfulness to the world or to God. They failed and chose the material world, which is very short-lived and ends in eternal damnation for its proponents.

This choice is also one that we need to make correctly and steadfastly throughout our life. But it is becoming very hard to choose correctly with the overwhelming amount of people choosing world values and persecuting those who disagree with them. Only remembering the final results of the two choices, eternal damnation or eternal blessedness, will enable us to steadfastly choose correctly.

My dear brother and sister in Christ, when we soberly look at the world, we will understand the importance of the choice made by St. Vladimir in his life. We are members of the Church that he brought to the Russian nation. The Russian nation brought this church to America. It is here now and can provide us with grace, that will greatly strengthen us to make a final choice of choosing God or the world. Therefore, let us pray with gratitude to St. Vladimir, thanking him for making the choice in his life, which gave us the Church through which we can complete our earthly journey leading into a blessed eternity.

With Much Love in Christ,  
Archpriest Serge Kotar