

# Take up thy bed and walk

Orthodoxe Jongeren Nederland — Weekend 1 - 3 June 2007

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## *THEME: PARALYTIC*

The theme of our weekend is the story from the Gospel in which a man sick of the palsy was brought to Jesus by his four friends; and because the house where he was teaching was so packed full with people, they broke up the roof and let him down through the hole which they had made, and Jesus healed him. I think we are all familiar with this story from the Gospel and I will not repeat it in full now. The story comes in all of the synoptic Gospels, that is, Matthew, Mark and Luke. The second Sunday of Great Lent is dedicated to the version from Mark. Later, this Sunday was dedicated to St. Gregory Palamas, but we still read Mark's account of the paralytic on that day. The account from Matthew also has its Sunday and that from Luke is read on a Saturday.

## *TOUCHING ON THE WHOLE OF THEOLOGY*

When we read any Gospel account and look at it carefully, we often find that one thing leads to another, and we could almost cover all of theology. This is a phenomenon of the Gospel which in itself is very important. Fr. Sophrony has said that the spiritual life is like a sphere; if you touch it at one point, you have the whole sphere. To touch it in a Word from the Gospel has the same nature.

In order to understand the Gospel, and even the writings of the Holy Fathers, and to gain profit from them, we need to have the mind of the Church. Part of having this mind of the Church is knowing her fundamental teaching. So I would now like to look briefly at some of these fundamental points of theology.

First of all, we must realize that all that we know about God is the result of revelation. When the Holy Fathers speak, and that includes the authors of scripture, they are speaking from experience. That is to say, they have met God personally and so are able to tell us something about him. It is not a matter of having some knowledge and

doing a bit of thinking and coming up with logical conclusions; because if we start from incorrect or incomplete assumptions, our conclusions will also be incorrect, even when our logic is perfect.

### *THE HOLY TRINITY - ONE NATURE IN THREE HYPOSTASES*

The fundamental revelation which we have of God is that he is Holy Trinity. God is one, but is revealed in three persons or Hypostases. The three persons are distinct, but they do not divide God, neither are they merely aspects of him. If we pray to the Father, we pray to God; likewise if we pray to the Son, or to the Holy Spirit, or to the Holy Trinity we pray to the whole God. Never the less, each person of the Trinity has his own unique character. The Fathers teach us that the Father is, as it were, the source, the Son is begotten of the Father, *before all worlds* (Creed), and the Holy Spirit *proceedeth from the Father* (Jn. 15:26). “The unoriginate Father, who is unbegotten, begets the Son outside time, conferring upon him the totality of his Being, and issues the Spirit who proceeds from him. The Son is begotten from the Father and lives totally in the Father and the Spirit, The Holy Spirit proceeds pre-eternally from the Father and reposes in the Son.<sup>1</sup>” “Each of the three Persons is perfect God. Each Hypostasis bears in Itself the fullness of divine Being.<sup>2</sup>”

### *THE TWO NATURES OF CHRIST*

Maybe it is easier for some of us to relate to Jesus Christ, than to God the Father or God the Holy Spirit. This seems natural to me because of the Incarnation. Christ became man, or in the words of St. John the Theologian, “And the Word was made flesh” (Jn. 1:14). In the person of Jesus Christ, God and man are perfectly united. Or, to put it another way, Christ possesses two natures, he is perfect God and perfect man. He possesses everything that every one of us has, a human body, a human soul and a human will; but at the same time he is perfect God; almighty, omnipresent, omniscient, etc.

The fact that Christ has two natures is of vital importance for our salvation, because salvation is the union of man with God, which man lost through the Fall. As we

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<sup>1</sup> Christ, Our Way and Our Life, Archimandrite Zacharias, St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, p. 19

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

had blocked our own way back to him, he had to come to us, in order to unite us to him again, and even more fully than with Adam in paradise. We can also say, roughly, that if Christ were not man, he would have nothing in common with our human nature, and could not unite that nature with God. If he were not God, he would only be a creature, like us, and could not unite us with God.

### *ESSENCE & ENERGIES*

The third fundamental doctrine of the Church is the distinction in God between his essence and his uncreated energy. God is unknowable in his essence, but we can be partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4) in his energy. We cannot be united with the essence of God, because then we would become God by nature, and that is not possible; we will always remain created beings. But we can be united with God through his energy, and we can become truly God by adoption. It is important to realize that the energy of God is uncreated and is fully and truly God. We can say, roughly, that his energies flow forth from him like the rays of the sun. The essence does not precede the energy, just as the sun does not exist without its rays. When we meet God in his energy, we meet God himself. Grace, therefore, is the presence of God in us.

### *THE MYSTERY (AS REVEALED)*

In all of the three doctrines which I have outlined above there is one thing in common. They are all mysterious antinomies, apparent contradictions. God is three yet one. Christ is God and man, creator and created (for his body and soul were created). We can know God in his energy but not in his essence, yet divine energy is God himself, as the essence of God is God himself.

We see in these antinomies the element of distinction and unity at the same time. Distinctions which do not divide God, for God is one. They are incomprehensible to us, because we know of no such phenomena in this world, they are unique to God. But as I said before, they have been revealed to us by the Church, through the Holy Fathers who have experienced these things. They have met the Holy Trinity and know, first hand, what he is like. This is the essence of the word *mystery* in the Church. Something

incomprehensible and unknowable; something which we would never invent by our own reasoning; yet which has been revealed to us by God himself ,

### *THE PARALYTIC*

If I were giving a course on theology I should now go on to speak about man, the fall and salvation. But I should stick to our theme and now go on to speak about the Gospel story in question. For completeness, I should just say that St. John Chrysostom is very dear that this man is not the same as the paralytic which we read about in the Gospel of St. John. In John, he was in Jerusalem, here in Capernaum; there he was alone, here he was borne of four. And St. John Chrysostom gives other reasons why the two men are different.

So, the man was sick of the palsy; that is to say, he was paralysed and could not move. In the English dictionary the word *palsy* also means, figuratively speaking, a *condition of utter helplessness*<sup>3</sup>. His friends brought him to Jesus, probably for physical healing, but they could not get at him because of the crowd. And so they went up on the roof, broke a hole in it and lowered the man down to Jesus.

### *EFFORT & how to come to God*

Do you see the effort which they made in order to come into the presence of Christ? From this we learn that we must seek Christ for healing, and that it is necessary for us to make great effort to come into his presence. St. Nikolai Velimirović says that there are three ways to come into the presence of the Lord. When the Lord himself comes and reveals his gracious presence to us; when the apostles bring someone to the Lord; or when people themselves make the greatest efforts to come into the Lord's presence. He goes on to say, "We must take these three ways in reverse order, which is to say that we must, with faith and longing, do all we can to come into God's presence; then we must follow the call and directions of the holy, apostolic Church and the Church's Fathers and teachers; and lastly, only after fulfilling the first two conditions, we must, with prayer and

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<sup>3</sup> Concise Oxford Dictionary: pa'lsy (paw'ly, pō'ly) *n.*, & *v.t.* **1. n.** paralysis, esp. with involuntary tremors; (fig.) cause or condition of utter helplessness. **2. v.t.** affect with palsy, paralyse (usu. fig.). [ME *pa(r)lesi* f. OF *paralisie* f. Rom. \**paralisia* f. L (PARALYSIS)]

hope, wait upon God to bring us to himself and, by his presence, to illumine, strengthen, heal and save us.<sup>4</sup>”

### *DEATH & Resurrection*

If you look at the situation from above the house, the letting down of the paralysed man into the house is like the letting down of a dead man into a grave; a burial. The man was as if dead, and indeed we are all spiritually dead as a consequence of the sin of Adam.

It seems to me a common thing that meeting the Lord is closely bound up with death. We are taught that when we die, we will meet Christ at the judgment seat. When Simeon received the Lord in his arms at the Presentation, he prayed that he may now depart this life. When Christ died on the cross, he descended into Hades, that is the place of the dead, in order to grant them resurrection.

Before the resurrection, the dead went to Hades, they did not cease to exist but they were impotent, they were not able to do anything. We see in the Old Testament that people do not pray to the prophets and holy men like we pray to the saints. Instead they offer their prayer directly to God with phrases like, “O Lord God of our fathers” (2 Chron. 20:6), or “O Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel” (1 Chron. 29:18). But when Christ descended into Hades he destroyed the power of Hades and death was abolished. All those who were there met Christ at that time, and the righteous were numbered among the saints. And we can pray to them. But we, who live after the resurrection, meet Christ at the moment of our death. Then we are judged according to our works.

### *FAITH of whom?*

And the sick of the palsy descended into the house and met Christ. “And Jesus seeing their faith said unto the sick of the palsy; Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee” (Mt, 9:2). It is worth asking ourselves at this point, Whose faith did Jesus see? The obvious answer is the faith of the four who carried him, and this is true. St. John Chrysostom shows that there are several passages in the Gospel where Christ heals and

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<sup>4</sup> Nikolai Velimirović, *Homilies, Vol I: Great Feasts, Lent, Eastertide and Pentecost*, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1996, p147.

does not require faith of the one receiving healing, for instance when they are insane or in any other way, through their disease, are out of their own control. But he goes on to say that the sick man here has faith too; for he would not have suffered himself to be let down, unless he had believed. And St. Gregory Palamas is in agreement, saying that the man sick of the palsy was present and in his right mind, intimating the same thing<sup>5</sup>.

*CHRIST IS GOD, He knows the heart of man – to forgive & to reveal secrets of the heart to us*

At this point several things happen invisibly. Christ sees their faith and he forgives the man's sins, which is healing of the soul. But the scribes said within themselves, "This man blasphemeth," and Christ also sees their hearts. All these are signs, or even proofs, of Christ's divinity. When the scribes say, "Who can forgive sins but God only?" they are right in that only God can forgive sins. So either Christ is God, or the scribes are also right about him speaking blasphemies. But to show that he is God, he reveals the secret thoughts of their hearts. For the prophets say, "Thou only knowest the hearts of the children of men" (2 Chron. 6:30), and, "God trieth the hearts and reins" (Ps. 7:9). And these are no small matters, for the forgiveness of sins is a gift too great to speak of.

#### *ON CONFESSION*

How many of us at confession confess all our sins, and confess them with faith that they will be forgiven, and confess with a spirit of repentance that we truly wish to put those things away from us for good? And confess with a spirit of humility that we are powerless over sin and that we rely on God, and to ask him to give us the power and strength to resist temptation?

In our confession we turn to God. And we see how this man, on turning to God receives complete forgiveness of all his sins as a free gift, as God's response to his faith.

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<sup>5</sup> The Homilies of Saint Gregory Palamas, trans. Christopher Veniamin, Volume One, St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, Hom. 10.

*HEALING the paralytic, to heal (if possible) also the unbelieving scribes (& on the person of CHRIST)*

The scribes however, have no faith, as their thoughts show. But Christ attempts to heal them too by asking the question, “Whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk?” St. John Chrysostom comments that it is really easier to heal the body, and to heal the soul is a far greater thing, but because that is a spiritual event, it is not readily apparent. So the scribes think that to say, “Thy sins be forgiven,” is easier, but empty of power.

So in order to prove the one by the undeniable performance of the other, Christ also heals the man’s body and tells him to go to his house. The proofs of the divinity of Christ are many, but there is another aspect, that the Son is equal to the Father. St. John Chrysostom says, “Whereas, when he spake unto the sick of the palsy, he spake without clearly manifesting his own authority; for he said not, ‘I forgive thee thy sins,’ but, ‘thy sins be forgiven thee:’ upon their constraining, he discloses his authority more clearly, saying, ‘But that ye may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins.’ Seest thou, how far he was from unwillingness to be thought equal to the Father? For he said not at all, ‘The Son of Man hath need of another;’ or, ‘He hath given him authority,’ but, ‘He hath authority.’<sup>6</sup>”

*SICKNESS & our mortality - because of the Fall*

Christ then heals the whole man, for, as Chrysostom again says, he is the creator of souls and bodies. And not only the creator, but also the restorer, for the consequence of the fall is death, and sickness is the herald of death. Sickness reminds us that we are not immortal, and that sooner or later we shall depart from this earthly life. But God did not intend man to be mortal, for he planted both the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil, but only of the tree of knowledge of good and evil was he forbidden to eat. After the fall, Adam and Eve were cast out of Paradise; “and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life” (Gen. 3:24).

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<sup>6</sup> Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew, Hendrickson, Homily XXIX, 2.

The Fathers of the Church teach us that this banishment from the garden of Eden, or rather death, was “a great benefit” for us. Because through the gift of death “man does not remain forever in the condition of sin.”<sup>7</sup> But in the Gospel we see Christ, even before the crucifixion, showing us the way back to life: he heals many people of their physical infirmities, and by the crucifixion, death itself is overcome.

#### *WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN TO US PERSONALLY?*

*(on descent and ascent)*

Up to now I have spoken mostly about Christ. But we must also consider ourselves. What do we learn about ourselves from this story? Because there is no point in reading and studying the Word of God if it has no effect on us. God’s words are healing words and they are the words of eternal life; so we must allow them to work in us. The man was let down, met Christ and was told, “Arise,” and he arose. We see here a movement of descent followed by ascent. This theme of descent and ascent is of great importance to us. The way down is synonymous with humility. Humility is going down. Christ himself descended from heaven to earth, and then to Hades. Afterwards he ascended again to heaven and sitteth on the right hand of the Father. The resurrection, in a sense, took place in Hell.

The man sick of the palsy was forgiven his sins after he descended into the house. St. Silouan saw the living Christ, in the place of the icon of the Saviour in church, after a period of extreme despair; he was almost on the point of giving up completely, but he managed to utter, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me a sinner,” and then he saw the Lord<sup>8</sup>.

#### *THE BASIC PATTERN*

Because Christ showed us this way, our task is to follow him. The basic pattern is something like this: we go down in humility, we consider ourselves the worst of men, we acknowledge our true state, which is a state of utter wretchedness. We know that the world is in a mess because we, man, have made it so. I know also that I personally am in

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<sup>7</sup> Theophilos of Antioch, To Autolykos II 26, quoted in *The Mystery of Death* by Nikolaos P. Vassiliadis, pub. The Orthodox Brotherhood of Theologians “The Savior,” Athens, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> *The Enlargement of the Heart*, Archimandrite Zacharias, Mount Thabor Publishing, p. 10.

a mess because I personally have made it so by my sins. Additionally I have inherited a condition of death. When we confess the truth about ourselves, this attracts the grace of God, because we are true, and when we are true we attract the Spirit of Truth. When we call upon the Lord for help, he will quickly hear us, and he is the one to raise us up; no-one else can.

This basic pattern then is our way out, our escape. I have said much about our miserable condition, illness and death. Our burning question is, "How can we escape all these things, as well as our future condemnation?" When we die, will we be granted a place in paradise or cast out into outer darkness? The whole purpose of Christ's incarnation was to die, and by his death to effect our salvation. Christ's death was voluntary, and, if we are to follow him, we must also undergo a voluntary death.

The Fathers teach us that at the Fall, not only was man condemned to death, but creation was also dragged down by the one who had dominion over creation (cf. Gen. 1:28), and so the whole creation is also fallen. We could say that creation is also dead: it is certainly not life-giving. If the fall is separation from God, and union with God is life and salvation, then we cannot find salvation and eternal life in this world or through this world. Our work is to die to this world, to crucify the old man (cf. Rom 6:4), which we do by practising humility, by going down. Then, if we die voluntarily to everything of this world, if we die to everything which is death, we shall rise with Christ.

Take up thy bed and walk

Matthew 9:1-8, Mark 2:1-12, Luke 5:17-26

**Sun 6th wk of Matthew 9:1-8**

- 1 ¶And he entered into a ship, and passed over, and came into his own city.
- 2 And, behold, they brought to him a man sick of the palsy, lying on a bed: and Jesus seeing their faith said unto the sick of the palsy; Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee.
- 3 And, behold, certain of the scribes said within themselves, This *man* blasphemeth.
- 4 And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts?
- 5 For whether is easier, to say, *Thy* sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk?
- 6 But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house.
- 7 And he arose, and departed to his house.
- 8 But when the multitudes saw *it*, they marvelled, and glorified God, which had given such power unto men.

**2nd Sun in Lent Mark 2:1-42**

- 1 ¶And again he entered into Capernaum after *some* days; and it was noised that he was in the house.
- 2 And straightway many were gathered together, insomuch that there was no room to receive *them*, no, not so much as about the door: and he preached the word unto them.
- 3 And they come unto him, bringing one sick of the palsy, which was borne of four.
- 4 And when they could not come nigh unto him for the press, they uncovered the roof where he was: and when they had broken *it* up, they let down the bed wherein the sick of the palsy lay.
- 5 When Jesus saw their faith, he said unto the sick of the palsy, Son, thy sins be forgiven thee.
- 6 But there were certain of the scribes sitting there, and reasoning in their hearts,
- 7 Why doth this *man* thus speak blasphemies? who can forgive sins but God only?
- 8 And immediately when Jesus perceived in his spirit that they so reasoned within themselves, he said unto them, Why reason ye these things in your hearts?
- 9 Whether is it easier to say to the sick of the palsy, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and take up thy bed, and walk?
- 10 But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (he saith to the sick of the palsy,)
- 11 say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy bed, and go thy way into thine house.
- 12 And immediately he arose, took up the bed, and went forth before them all; insomuch that they were all amazed, and glorified God, saying, We never saw it on this fashion

**Sat in 2<sup>nd</sup> wk. Lukt 5:17-26**

- 17 ¶And it came to pass on a certain day, as he was teaching, that there were Pharisees and doctors of the law sitting by, which were come out of every town of Galilee, and Judaea, and Jerusalem: and the power of the Lord was present to heal them.

18 And, behold, men brought in a bed a man which was taken with a palsy: and they sought means to bring him in, and to lay him before him.

19 And when they could not find by what way they might bring him in because of the multitude they went upon the housetop, and let him down through the tiling with his couch into the midst before Jesus.

20 And when he saw their faith, he said unto him, Man, thy sins are forgiven thee.

21 And the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, Who is this which speaketh blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone?

22 But when Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answering said unto them, What reason ye in your hearts?

23 Whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Rise up and walk?

24 But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power upon earth to forgive sins, (he said unto the sick of the palsy,) I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy couch, and go into thine house.

25 And immediately he rose up before them, and took up that whereon he lay, and departed to his own house, glorifying God.

26 And they were all amazed, and they glorified God, and were filled with fear, saying, We have seen strange things to day.