

THE BURNING BUSH

Monastic Journal



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CHRIST FULFILLS THE LAW WHICH IS LOVE

Fr. John Konkle

Today, Sunday, January 1st, we celebrate the Resurrection; it is also the eighth day after the Nativity of our Lord, so we have the Mosaic Law. It is also the day our Lord was circumcised, as well as the celebration of Him receiving His name. It is still the practice today in our Church for the name to be given on the eighth day: “And when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, His name was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb” (Luke 2:21). The name *Jesus* was revealed to Joseph in a dream because He will save the people from their sins. The name “Jesus”, “Joshua” means “Savior.”

On this day we celebrate also the feast of St. Basil the Great, one of the truly great saints of our Church. Considering the fact that he only lived to be 49 years old it is truly unbelievable how much the Church owes to him: his teaching and instructions, his guidance, the monastic life, the love and compassion towards those in need—the sick and the suffering, the poor—all have so much influenced the Church even though he had a short life.

It is also the Sunday before Theophany, in preparation for the upcoming feast of Theophany when we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord. So today is a very full day, therefore we will look only at a “slice” of all these things.

The hymns and the teachings of the Church express clearly that our Lord was circumcised in obedience to God. He placed Himself under the Law. He did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill” (Matt. 5:17). At the end of His life, after the Resurrection actually, we often hear of Him teaching people and the disciples. How is it that He is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets? Remember that beautiful text of Luke and Cleopas walking to Emmaus and Jesus appearing to them and teaching them how all the things in the Old Testament of the Law and the prophets point to Him, and are fulfilled in Him: “And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (Luke 24:27), and then how it is that He is present there and then, and later, after their eyes were opened, in the breaking of bread they said: “...did our hearts not burn within us as we walked on the way with Him and He explained these things to us?” (Luke 24:31-33). So our relationship to the Law is very clear throughout the Gospels: Christ did not come to overthrow it but to fulfill it. What does

this mean? The Law is sort of laid out so that it would be like a good apologetic tool. All these things were set down in the writing and teachings of the Old Testament so that when the Messiah came we would recognize Him and be able to argue or persuade others that He is the Messiah, the Christ. It is certainly true that these teachings are used that way. The Gospels of Christ are filled with references how it is that Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament teachings. But this is not the real theological understanding of Christ being the fulfillment of the Law by placing Himself under the Law, placing Himself even under obedience to His parents, being subject to all things, or by coming here as one who wants to serve not be served. The clearest way to understand how He is the fulfillment, the embodiment of the Law, is given by His own teaching when asked what the greatest commandment is. The greatest commandment is: “to love the Lord our God with your whole being, with your whole heart and with your all mind and with your whole strength” (Matt. 22:37). And the second is like it: “to love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 22:39). This is how St. Paul talks about it in his Epistle to the Romans. Christ did not fulfill the law for any other reason than that the Law is the expression of God’s love for us. Christ came to manifest the love of God for this world in a tangible, visible way, and He did this by simply fulfilling the Law that was given to Moses, taught through the Prophets, the Law that goes back to Abraham, and even before that, to Adam and Eve. The teachings of God are always directing us how to love, they invite us to that love that the Holy Trinity shares and that our Lord prays for us (cf. Jn 17:1-26). So our Lord’s fulfillment of the Law is not simply something that He had to do. It was Who He was. God is love. Sometimes it is difficult for us to think of laws, commands, instructions and guidance in this way from parents, bishops, priests, abbots, civil authorities. There are many different contexts in our lives where we are given commands, laws, things to do and opportunities for obedience. Do we see them as manifestations and opportunities to manifest and express love? Or we do it grumbling and complaining, somehow thinking it unjust or unfair or inappropriate?

It is possible to be quite attentive to the law and at the same time to grow up and be like the Pharisees: to be very attentive, to sacrifice, but have no mercy attached to it. So Christ somehow fulfilled not only the letter of the Law but its fullness, its purpose, its meaning, its expression of love. What it is offered to us on this day, Christ placing Himself under the Law and being in submission to the Law, is simply the manifestation of Who God is. God is love and all of His teachings are intended to communicate that love to us. All of His commandments, however, as little as we understand them, are to be expressions and manifestations, opportunities

for us to deny ourselves, to take up our cross and follow after Him, not to demand our own way.

St. Basil has a very beautiful discussion regarding this in his monastic rules when talking about the commandments in general and how it is that the commandments to love God and to love our neighbor sum up, express and manifest the totality of the Law and of the Prophets. He says it works in this simple way: “God places good things in us sort of in seed form.” He places seeds of virtue, of love, joy, peace, gentleness and patience. We need the ability to be under control, under God’s control, and not given to our own passions and desires. St. Basil says: “God places these seeds in us to grow.” The most important seed that He places in us is the desire for good, the desire for goodness, the desire to seek after, to search after, to long for, to yearn for what is good in this life, what is beautiful, beneficial, helpful. Then he tells us the difference between virtue and vice in this way: vice is when we take those seeds, and especially the seed of the desire for goodness, and we redirect it; we direct it at something else. God longs for us to desire goodness, but we desire a good job, a good reputation; we desire power and authority for ourselves instead of desiring to serve others. We redirect this desire for goodness in such a way that it becomes self-serving. It is the very same desire that God planted in us, but it has been perverted, turning us away from God. St. Basil says the desire for goodness has only one fulfillment. What is good is greater than all good. The source of goodness of everything in the world is God alone. The one good that we are called to search for, to long for, to direct our lives for is God alone. And when we do that we express that love, we respond to it and that in itself becomes our reception of God’s love by letting that seed grow, and by setting aside all those things that are in our lives that take up the space where goodness and love are supposed to grow. Virtue is letting that seed of the desire for goodness have its proper direction toward God. And all of these virtues, fruits of the Spirit are made manifest in us if our lives are rightly directed toward the true object of this desire that God has planted in us. St. Basil culminates this discussion by saying that this love of God will be the love that wounds us. He quotes the Song of Solomon: “I am wounded by Your love.” Wounded by the love of God; God’s love will wound us, will pierce us. We cannot see the ways in which we need to be weakened, weakened so that we are not strong in the ways of the world, not self-reliant, not turning and perverting the desires that God has placed within us toward the secondary goods for our own purposes and goals.

The Lord’s coming to fulfill the Law, to place Himself under the Law is most clearly and beautifully seen as the manifestation of Who He truly is. He is love and He calls us to no less. He Himself is the Christ after

Whom we are called Christians. We are the ones who are supposed to follow after Him, to be the recipients of God's love so that in turn we can manifest that love. We love because He first loved us. We cannot love on our own strength.

Our challenge is to see all those contexts in which we are given rules and commandments. The Church has lots of rules and instructions for us: prayer rules, fasting rules, rules for preparation for Communion, Confession, all different kind of rules. We can view them as burdensome, or we can fulfill them and take great pride and say hey, look at me I do all these pious acts; and we can do it with no love what so ever, and that is a great danger. The example and model of our Lord is to do the things that the Law asked Him to do in such a way that they were an obedience of love, love of the Father and love of us. This is our own challenge. This is the gift that is given to us today in the Feast of the Circumcision: that He Himself, willingly, joyfully placed Himself in this world in submission to so many of the authorities of this world: Mosaic, parental, political, to the point of His death so that love might be more manifested by His obedience and not by rebellion and rejection.

By God's grace and by the prayers of St. Basil, may we also be given this transformation by the rules, regulations, instructions and commandments in our lives so that each and everyone of them be a manifestation of God's love in us and through us to a hurting and broken world. ■

Adapted from a homily on January 1st, 2017

YEAR 2017 IN RETROSPECT

This year, by the grace of God, the prayers of the faithful and the hard work of our crew, we were able to complete the new workshop/root cellar building next to the old silo.

For the Feast of the Dormition this year, in celebration of the 30th anniversary of the monastery we were blessed to have the participation of 4 hierarchs, x priests, y deacons and sub-deacons and a record number of faithful (650). Glory be to God.

At the end of the Summer we were able to start a new project - the construction of a spacious conference room and small chapel in the place of the old chapel. The old pole barn that served as a chapel for 25 years was moved to the back of the property and is being reverted back to its original use: a pole barn.

With God’s help, the prayers and the support of the faithful we hope the new construction will be finished by this time next year.

The iconography work in the church entered its last phase, the work on the walls and ceiling of the balcony. We are grateful to Fr. Theodore Jurewicz and his son John for “donating” their time and talent to assist in the design of the iconography.



GOD IS LIGHT

Fr. John Konkle

St. John tells us in his first epistle that “God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all” (1 Jn. 1:5). It is hard for us to imagine a world without darkness. Even on the brightest and clearest day there is some reminder of darkness, we are always seeing at least shadows. But our God whom we serve has no darkness in Him at all. He is pure light. In this world we have not just physical darkness, but spiritual darkness. In his Gospel St. John also tells us that Christ is the “true light that comes into the world that enlightens every man,” (Jn. 1:9) every person, every human. And it is easy for us, in this world, to think that the darkness is out there somewhere. If we only turn on the news we see darkness all around. We think the world is full of darkness, and it is only out there, but when St. John tells us that Christ comes into the world to enlighten every one of us it is a reminder that there is darkness also inside of us. We need the enlightenment; not the kind of enlightenment that we had in the 18th Century—the Renaissance—where reason is supposed to be our enlightenment, but we need the light of Christ, the true Light, the Light that came in the world to enter us, to shine light into the darkness inside of us, not just outside into this world.

So, we have in today’s Gospel this very simple description, that nobody who lights a lamp covers it up or puts it under a shelf or a bed. You put it on a stand, so that those who enter can see. When we are in darkness we run into things, we trip over things, we injure ourselves in various ways. Christ came into the world to enlighten us, to be His lights, His lamps, and He put us on a stand called the Church. The light of the world that He shines now into this world shines through us, through His Church, regardless how inadequate we feel about our ability to be His lights in this world. That is the point of this Gospel: He is the one who gives us light, He is the One who enlightens our lives, He is the One who puts us on a stand so that others can see. We do not, in a certain sense, have to do anything

ourselves, we are not the ones who are the source of that light and we are not the ones that put ourselves on the stand, it is Christ who does it.

Then there is this very interesting, subtle warning: "...take heed how you hear. For whoever has, to him more will be given; and whoever does not have, even what he seems to have will be taken from him" (Luke 8:18). Be careful how you hear. I think the point is this: it is so easy for us to come to church, to put ourselves in the places where God is present, stay in our prayer corner, read the scriptures, be present in the services and yet not hear. The words enter our ears but they do not sink in. A couple of weeks ago we had the parable of the 'Sower and the Seed' (cf. Luke 8:5-15), and it was all about whether or not that word was going to sink down into us or did it just sit on the path, or rocky soil and it did not sink in. So I think what Christ is saying is that there is this danger in which we present ourselves in this world in such a way as if we were the light and that we have been enlightened by Him, but we have not really let His light penetrate into us. We have not heard His word in such a way that the darkness in us is being cast out. We find ways to pretend, but not really let the light shine inside of us. And this becomes our judgment. St. John also says, "The light comes into the world," not to judge the world, but it seems that some of us love darkness better than light, and this is because we do not want our deeds exposed. We do not want God to reveal, to make known, what is inside of us. Immediately after saying that He puts the light on the stand He says that everything that is hidden is going to be made known, everything that is whispered in secret is going to be shouted on the housetops (cf. Luke 8:17); everything in our lives will be exposed. If we are the light of Christ in this world then people will feel exposed in our presence, but that will only happen if we are letting ourselves be exposed by Christ. This is all just a foretaste of the second coming. In the Second Coming, Christ the true light will come into this world and there will be no shadows, just like on Mount Tabor, no place to hide. Adam and Eve hid behind a tree, but the light of Christ went right through that tree.

We find ways to hide behind things, behind words, behind piety, and all of these are ways that we do not want to be exposed. We are afraid of who we truly are, and yet God is love, and love casts out all that fear. It is not the judgment of God that makes us hide, it is us being afraid and ashamed of who we are and of not being willing to receive that love. And so we have to hear in such a way that we hear the words for us not for somebody else. Often when we read the scriptures, hear a sermon, or read a book we might think, "Oh, I wish so and so knew about this, my parents, my children, and so on, but if we hear the word of God as if for someone

else we hear it incorrectly. We hear it in such a way that we are not letting it penetrate, to shine its light into our lives.

It is important how we hear. And then what does the Gospel say? Jesus' Mother and His brothers came to see Him, but they could not see Him because there were too many people there. When He was told about them He said, "My Mother and My brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it" (Luke 8:21). And of course the Church understands this to be precisely His way of telling us that this was what was true of His Mother; she heard the word of God and did it: "Be it done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). She is our model, our example, our support, the one who embraces us to live precisely this kind of life: to hear the word of God and not be afraid of it, not think it is for someone else, but to let it enter and shine into our lives so that the darkness that is in us is expelled. And that will always bring forth a doing, an activity. It will not be something that happens by our own doing, it will be something that arises out of that seed that is planted in us.

Going back to the same Gospel text of St. John about the light not coming into the world for the sake of judgment, and those who love the darkness more than light is because they do not want to be exposed, but he continues on saying that there are also those who come to the light because they want it to be revealed, that their deeds are produced in God and by God. Those are the ones who hear the word of God and let it sink in, so that what comes forth from them, their actions, their words, are not just external, superficial, pious actions, not simply playing the part, but having the word heard carefully.

Let us be careful how we hear. Let the word sink so deeply into us that it shapes, molds, gives direction and form to our actions in this world. Actions not arising from our own strength, but from Christ Himself, from the Word of God. This is the light that comes into the world to enlighten every single one of us. God has called us to be that light, but we cannot do it on our own strength. We can only do it if we are careful how we hear, and we let those words that we hear sink in to our hearts, then the actions that will flow from us, will flow from us in harmony with the life that the Mother of God lived in this world. What flowed from her and her life arose from careful hearing and letting the word of God sink in to her.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. ■

Adapted from a homily given on October 28, 2017.

SPEAKING TO GOD

Archimandrite Aimilianos of Simonopetra

How many of us can say that we have spoken to God and that God has heard us? How many of us can say that we have heard the words of God; that we have received within ourselves the deep impression of the divine voice? How many of us have our mouths opened to God; our ears poised in readiness to hear Him? On the contrary, we are deaf mutes, forever silent and unhearing though standing in the presence of God.

In the Gospel of Mark we are presented with the parable of the 'Healing of a Deaf Man:' "Then they brought to Him one who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech, and they begged Him to put His hand on him. And He took him aside from the multitude, and put His fingers in his ears, and He spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, He sight, and said to him: 'Ephphatha,' that is, 'Be opened.' Immediately his ears were opened, and the impediment of his tongue was loosed, and he spoke plainly" (Mk. 7:32-35).

When we stand before God, we know that, in order to hear and be heard, we must enter into a personal dialogue with Him and this can only take place by means of the intellect. "God is spirit" (cf. Jn 4:24), and He communicates Himself to man spiritually, addressing Himself to man's highest spiritual faculty: the intellect. When we cry out to God, God hears us, because He receives the waves of the mind which pulsate outward like sounds of the mouth. The intellect can generate waves without the mouth. What is important is that it should speak to God.

What does it mean to "speak"? People engage in conversations because they want to communicate with each other. When I "speak" to God, therefore, it means that I communicate with God and am united to Him. It follows then, that for my intellect to speak to God, it must first of all turn towards Him. Such a turn is necessary because the intellect is in constant motion, it is forever being side-tracked, thrown off its course, endlessly shifting its focus upward and downward, this way and that way. St. Basil says: "We must try to keep the intellect in tranquility...man's intellect when distracted by his countless worldly cares cannot focus itself distinctly on the truth" (cf. Letter 2:2). This is why we say things like "I lost my train of thought," or "my mind was wondering," which indicate that the intellect, in a manner of speaking, has removed itself to another place. Clearly the intellect moves about, wanders off, and at times gets lost.

As a result, communication with God requires a movement towards God. It presupposes a passage of the intellect to the creator of the intellect,

an exhalation of the mind to the source of inspiration (cf. Gen 2:7); a movement to Him from Whom the intellect came forth, and to Whom it naturally returns. To speak to God, then, means to turn towards God. It means that our intellect stretches forth out to Him (cf. Phil 3:13). Our communication with God, our conversation with Him, our prayer to Him, is precisely this extension of our intellect, which is an extension of our entire being; it is the bending down of my intellect upon God. I do not call this an inclination of the heart, because more often than not the heart deceives us. When our heart inclines towards someone, bending, as it were, in that person's direction, it is because that person somehow satisfies the needs of our ego. The intellect, however, yearns for its counterpart in the spiritual world; it seeks that to which it has a natural affinity, its prototype and model, whose form and character it shares.

Communicating with God requires that the intellect be kept in a certain tension, as if I were about to release it from a sling, and send it flying to God directly, without any deviation from its path. It requires an exclusively dedicated movement of the intellect, in which the intellect is free from all thoughts, feelings, concepts, images, and indeed from anything whatsoever that might absorb it, attract its attention, and make it go astray.

Turning to God, then, it means that I stretch forth to Him with perseverance. Why? Because I am down here on earth, and He is in heaven above. I cannot reach Him; I cannot ascend. He must descend in order to find me. When I want to receive Him and speak to Him He has to come down from the heavens, empty Himself, and surrender His being to me (cf. Phil 2:7-8). Only thus can the exchange occur, namely, for me to enter Him, and for Him to enter me. And while I am waiting His advent, the only distraction that I permit myself is the distraction of God.

The Holy Fathers use the term "distraction" because we have become so egotistical, and our existence has become so false, we think that life consists in nothing more than our selfish, self-regarding behavior. Because of that our mind must abandon the place in which it has become accustomed to dwell; it must break free from itself and turn to that which truly exists, that is, to God (cf. Ex 3:14). And this constitutes a "distraction" in the sense of a radical change of direction, a breaking away from our habitual self-centeredness. Viewed positively, "distraction" as communication with God means a resolute and stable orientation to God. It is a spiritual disposition that does not vacillate or change.

When your intellect is focused in this manner, something strange happens. There, where you least expect it, in the foggy mist of your soul, in the gloom of your sins, your eyes will begin to shed tears. This is the support that God gives us to lean on as we begin the journey towards union

with Him. It is a sign of help from God, the first indication that He has heard us. Think of these tears as the first bell that God rings to let us know He is on His way. When such tears come we know that help has arrived, and that God is somewhere in the vicinity. Having received this help, we realize that, without any effort on our part, we have attained a measure of spiritual concentration. And this happened because our intellect brought into unity all that was divided within it, thereby creating a singular, unified orientation towards God. Now the intellect ascends upward and is afraid of nothing. The more it contemplates the heights to which it must ascend, the more it is astonished, amazed, and encouraged, and thus nothing can halt its climb.

Your intellect begins to ascend in “spirit and truth (cf. Jn. 4:23). That means that this ascent occurs solely by the power and attraction of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit first attracts us like a magnet before God Himself comes close to us. And because He is the exclusive bearer of truth, being pulled in His direction means that I must abandon all my illusions, I must abandon, in other words, all that is mortal and fleeting; all that had a beginning and will one day come to an end. In spirit and truth I must abandon myself, which also had a beginning and at one point in time will die. I abandon my views and my opinions; I abandon what I believe, what I feel, what I experience, what I know. Having abandoned all of this, our spirit ascends, and it does so by the attraction of the Spirit, although it is not without its own power of attraction. The soul attracts the Holy Spirit by ardent, excessive love which overwhelms it as it stands upon the summit of spiritual progress. In the word of the Holy Fathers, the Holy Spirit “urges the intellect toward love” (Evagrius, *On Prayer*).

Communion with God means prayer. Evagrius also says: “If you have not yet received the gift of prayer, preserve patiently and you will receive it. Ask the Holy Spirit for it; He will hear you and you will receive it.”

And if we live in a way that was just described, what happened to the deaf and mute that spoke, will happen to us” “And they were astonished beyond measure, saying: ‘He has done all things well. He makes both the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak’” (Mk. 7:37). ■

Adapted from Archimandrite Aimilianos of Simonopetra, *The Way of the Spirit, Reflections on Life in God*, Ch. Communion with God, pgs. 71-93, Indiktos, Athens 2009.

**FEAST OF THE NATIVITY & THEOPHANY
2017 - 2018**

SCHEDULE OF SERVICES

Sunday, December 24	Akathist & Hours	8:00 am
Eve of Nativity	Holy Liturgy of St. John	9:00 am
	Great Vespers	11:00 am
	Vigil Service	6:00 pm
Monday, December 25	Akathist, 3rd & 6th Hours	9:00 am
Nativity of the Lord	Divine Liturgy of St. Basil	10:00 am
	Vigil Service	6:00 pm
Tuesday, December 26	Akathist, 3rd & 6th Hours	9:00 am
Synaxis of the Theotokos	Divine Liturgy of St. John	10:00 am
	Lunch & Caroling	12:30 pm
	Vigil Service	6:00 pm
Wednesday, December 27	Akathist, 3rd & 6th Hours	8:00 am
Protomartyr Stephen	Divine Liturgy of St. John	9:00 am
	Vigil Service	6:00 pm
Saturday, December 30	Divine Liturgy	9:00 am
	Vigil Service	6:00 pm
Sunday, December 31	Akathist, 3rd & 6th Hours	8:00 am
	Divine Liturgy of St. John	9:00 am
	Vigil Service	6:00 pm
	Thanksgiving Service	11:30 pm
Monday, Jan. 1, 2018	Akathist, 3rd & 6th Hours	9:00 am
Circ. of our Lord	Divine Liturgy of St. Basil	10:00am
Friday, Jan. 5, 2018	Matins	5:00 am
Eve of Theophany	Royal Hours, Typica	6:30 am
	Vesperal Liturgy of St. Basil	8:00 am
	Blessing of Water follows.	
	Vigil Service	6:00 pm
Saturday, Jan. 6, 2018	Akathist, 3rd & 6th Hours	9:00 am
Feast of Theophany	Divine Liturgy of St. John	10:00 am
	Blessing of Water	11:30 am
	Vigil Service	6:00 pm