

Matthew 14 (9th Sunday) & Acts for St. Stephan

Authentic prayer - the warmth that accompanies the Jesus Prayer, for it is Jesus who enkindles fire on the earth of our hearts (cf. Luke 12:49) - consumes the passions like thorns and fills the soul with delight and joyfulness. Such prayer comes neither from right or left, nor from above, but wells up in the heart like a spring of water from the life-quickenning Spirit. It is this prayer alone that you should aspire to realize and possess in your heart, always keeping your intellect free from images, concepts and thoughts. And do not be afraid, for He who says, "Take heart; it is I; be not afraid' (Matt. 14:27), is with us - He whom we seek and who protects us always. When we invoke God we must be neither timid nor hesitant. If some have gone astray and lost their mental balance, this is because they have in arrogance followed their own counsels. For when you seek God in obedience and humility, and with the guidance of a spiritual master, you will never come to any harm, by the grace of Christ who desires all to be saved (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4).

[V4] 285 St Gregory of Sinai On Prayer: Seven Texts On Delusion and Other Subjects

201. If Peter had not failed to catch anything during the night's fishing (cf. Luke 5:5), he would not have caught anything during the day. And if Paul had not suffered physical blindness (cf. Acts 9:8), he would not have been given spiritual sight. And if Stephen had not been slandered as a blasphemer, he would not have seen the heavens opened and have looked on God (cf. Acts 6:15; 7:56).

[V1] 143 St. Mark the Ascetic On Those who Think that They are Made Righteous by Works Two Hundred and Twenty-Six Texts

37. A man who has been assiduous in acquiring the fruits of love will not cease loving even if he suffers a thousand calamities. Let Stephen, the disciple of Christ, and others like him persuade you of the truth of this (cf. Acts 7:60). Our Lord Himself prayed for His murderers and asked the Father to forgive them because they did not know what they were doing (cf. Luke 23:34).

[V2] 57 St Maximos the Confessor Four Hundred Texts on Love First Century

“At that time Jesus constrained his disciples to get into a ship, and to go before him unto the other side, while he sent the multitudes away. And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray” (Matt. 14:22-23).” When did this happen? After He had fed five thousand men, besides women and children with five loaves and two fishes, and they

were filled, to the extent that the fragments that remained filled twelve baskets (Matt. 14:19-21), as we heard last Sunday in church.

You might wonder why He made the disciples go into the boat. It could be said that everything that happened subsequently was part of His divine plan, as He pressed on to complete what He came to earth to do. Personally, I should have been surprised if He had not constrained them to get into the boat. The Lord wished to give a practical example of every good work. To that end, He showed us how we must be with the multitudes for the benefit of their souls and bodies, but He still had to demonstrate that it was necessary for us to be with God by bringing Him our minds freed from all earthly cares. Being quietly on our own in a deserted place is highly conducive to this. The time had come to teach that withdrawal, peace and prayer, and solitude were good, so He had to go up to the mountain to pray on His own. The disciples, on the other hand, loved being with Him all the time and were reluctant to leave Him. How could He go up the mountain alone without constraining them to enter the boat and cross to the other side?

There is another significance in this as well. After the healing, teaching and feeding the crowds in an extraordinary manner, the Lord now sent them away, went up the mountain, and obliged His disciples to entrust themselves to the sea and the waves. In the same way, later on, when He had healed our human nature through His Incarnation, taught us and nourished us, He departed from us physically, ascended to heaven, and sent His disciple unto the whole world, that is to say, out into the bitter sea of the Gentiles, which was full of temptations, to face those trials as in the ship of the gospel, and in the Church founded upon it. He did not just send them: He made them go. Anyone who knows the story of John, Christ's beloved theologian, or knows why Stephen's suffering (Act 6:8ff), and the resulting persecution, were permitted (cf. Acts 8:1), will understand my words. The apostles did not want to leave Jerusalem, but when they had to because of the persecutions, they were scattered throughout the world, and so fulfilled their mission (cf. Matt. 28:19)/

Not only were they constrained to sail upon the sea of this world, where there is every affliction and all sorts of temptations, but also to cross to the other side, to triumph over temptations and go beyond them. Without Jesus, however, they could not do it. "The ship", it says, "was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with the waves: for the wind was contrary" (Matt. 14:24). If at that time the soulless wind was against them, later on Domitian, Trajan and Nero were more strongly opposed to them. Such men and their like are savage waves whipped up to threaten the Church, and the hostile wind which drives them on and stirs them up is the evil spirit, the devil, the relentless opponent of Christ's Church. "And in the fourth watch", it says, "of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea" (Matt. 14:25). That is to say, after the ninth hour of the night, because it was customary to divide the night into four consecutive watches,

and if the night is reckoned as twelve hours long, the fourth watch begins with the tenth hour.

He left them to be tormented this long by the waves to exercise them in patience, and make them able to bear hardship. Then when He appeared He allowed them to think He was a ghost and to be so frightened that they cried out in terror, even though He had come to save them (Matt. 14:26). You may be aware that He did the same with His people of old. Just at the time when He was about to part the sea miraculously to provide a way to safety, they seemed to be in the utmost danger, hemmed in by inescapable evils with enemies all round (Exod. 14:10ff). In this present case, too, before the Lord release them from the demons' oppression, those whom He had come to deliver were deeply troubled at His appearance. For this reason His acts of kindness are not only precious to those who benefit from them, but also unforgettable. As they were calling upon the god of all He appeared to them among the waves, showing that He is "the God who is over all" (Rom. 9:5), who stretches out His hand to help all who entreat Him. While the sea raged, He walked upon the waves, amply demonstrating that He is the one of whom it was foretold that He would walk on the sea as on dry land, to whom David had propheticallly addressed the words, "Thy way is in the sea, and thy path in the great waters" (Ps. 77:19), and "Thou rulest the raging of the sea: when the waves thereof arise, thou stillest them" (Ps. 89:9), just as the Lord later did. As soon as He saw that they were terrified because they did not recognize Him, for it was dark, He at once spoke to them, making Himself known by His voice and saying "It is I; be not afraid" (Matt. 14:27). St. Gregory Palamas