JULY 3, 2016

ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

"THE LORD'S PRAYER---PART 1, 'OUR FATHER….'"

One of our most recent Orthodox Saints is St. Porphyrios of Greece. He fell asleep in the Lord maybe about 15 years ago and was canonized just about 3 years ago. He was a very holy man of prayer who helped many by his prayers for them and by godly guidance. St. Porphyrios had a pet parrot. And the parrot heard so many prayers that its favorite words to say were "Lord, have mercy." It uttered those words a lot! Sometimes when visitors would come to St. Porphyrios and hear the parrot squawk out, "Lord, have mercy", they would say to the holy man---"Father, what a holy room you live in! Even your pet bird is always praying!" The Saint would then correct his visitors---"The parrot isn't really praying. He's just saying the words with no understanding or intent---and that is not real prayer." (in The Guru, The Young Man, and Elder Paisios, Dionysius Farasiotis, St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2009, p. 285)

It is possible for us to be like that parrot---to mouth the words of prayers but perhaps with no real attention or understanding of what we're saying. And that perhaps is most likely of all with the greatest prayer of all---the Lord's Prayer given to us by Jesus Himself.

We see why it's the greatest prayer right in its name. It's the ***Lord's*** Prayer, taught to us by the Lord, and you can't get a more perfect prayer that that! And so we pray it a lot, in almost every church service and in our own daily prayers.

But perhaps because we pray it so often, we can become like the Saint's parrot. We can get a bad habit of just rattling off the words and not paying attention to what we're saying. And perhaps sometimes we don't even understand what the words of the prayer mean.

Actually, perhaps priests face the greatest challenge here. Priests really pray this prayer a lot! First of all, like the rest of you, we pray it in the public church services and in our personal daily prayers. But we pray it again every time we pray for someone as their priest or have any kind of ceremony or blessing. If a priest has a busy day where he visits several shut-ins, someone in the hospital, and maybe a houseblessing, too----he is praying the Lord's Prayer at every stop. And if he's not careful and attentive, he can end up just like St. Porphyrios' bird---and then should perhaps be called Father Parrot….

So priests and parishioners alike---we should pray this prayer over and over. After all, it's the *Lord's* Prayer. But we must pay attention to what we are praying. And understanding the words of the prayer can help a lot with that.

Thus, the sermon today---and the next several weeks. As you may remember, many summers I do a series of sermons on something that just can't be covered well on one Sunday. And I'm going to do that, starting today, on the Lord's Prayer. Over the upcoming weeks, we will look at it line by line---so we get to understand it better than the Saint's parrot understood its prayers!

You all know well the first line---"Our Father who art in heaven….." Christ began His prayer in the right way, with the focus on the Heavenly Father. "Our Father" is a very good place to start because everything does start with Him. Our Father in heaven is the origin of

all things. He is the source of all that exists. If it weren't for God the Father, there would be nothing. The Church Fathers often called the Father "the fountainhead" from which all things come.

God exists in three Persons, the Holy Trinity. Within the Godhead, along with the Father are the Son and the Holy Spirit. They are co-equal and co-eternal with the Father and co-worthy of our worship. But the Son and Spirit are not self-originate. They derive their being from the Father.

From all eternity, the Son has been begotten of the Father. From all eternity, the Spirit has proceeded from the Father. There was never a time when they didn't exist, but they do come from the Father. To understand such matters is beyond our little minds. But this much we do know-----the Father is the source, the eternal source, of the Son and Spirit who are equally divine with Him.

The Father is the source of the entire universe. He is the source of all life, including ourselves. And if there is life anywhere else, He is the source of that, too. He is the source of all there is. Every stone, every plant, every star, every bug flying around your outside light at night-----our Father made them all. They only exist because of God the Father.

This world, this universe, wasn't always here. God made it. He is its Father.

To quote Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer in "The Sound of Music", "nothing comes from nothing; nothing ever could." Everything has to come from something. To be more exact, from Someone-----from the Father.

Some time back, there was a public debate in England about the existence of God. It was between Dr. John Haldane, a non-believing scientist, and Father Ronald Knox, a well-known Roman Catholic priest. Knox said the existence of life showed there had to be a God to make it. Haldane argued against any need to believe in God's existence in this way: There are millions of stars and at least thousands and thousands of planets. Surely, just by chance, just by the odds, life would just happen to appear and develop on one of them. So no need for God….. Father Knox responded in this way: "Sir, imagine the police found a dead body in your house. They suspected you of murder and interrogated you. Would you tell them, 'there are millions of houses in the world. Surely, just by chance, just by the odds, a dead body will just happen to appear in a house sometimes.' The police won't accept that! In the same way, someone had to put life here-----it couldn't just appear by chance." (in "Pulpit Helps", March, 1980, p. 5)

Going back to that line from "The Sound of Music"----"Nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever could." This world, and life itself, including us, didn't just happen. "Our Father Who art in heaven" made it all.

So our Lord starts His prayer by reminding us of a huge point, the greatest truth of all---there is a heavenly Father. He made everything, including us.

But term "Father" means more than just that God the Father made everything. It also means that He is a loving Father who cares for us, His children that He has made.

The world is very big. Sometimes it can seem like a lonely universe. How wonderful to know we are not alone! We have a Father in heaven who loves us.

Some very dark, clear night, go out to the country and get away from the Cleveland area lights. Take a look at the stars in the sky above. Lots of them! It's a big, big world—

infinitely big. Then think about the fact that there is a Someone—our Father---who made it all---each and every star. And who holds the whole universe together. Our Father is that infinitely big and powerful! It's a moving experience to think that all through on a clear night under the stars.

And then go a step farther. Think of another fact----This infinitely big and powerful Someone knows *you* by name. He loves you as an individual. He sent His Son to our little speck of a planet to die for you so you can live forever with Him. Thinking all that through is an even more moving experience!

"Our Father Who art in heaven"…..That Father is certainly powerful and almighty, and He is also a loving Father who know each of us and cares about each of us. How good that is to know-----that the One who is control of everything is also our loving Father. He is great, but He also lowers Himself to be concerned about us.

Back around 1700, a British man named Anthony Collins became well known for his denial of traditional Christian beliefs. One of the early Deists, his teachings were influential in the early phases of our modern world's wandering away from faith. One Sunday morning, Collins was out for a walk on a country road. He came upon a peasant walking down the road. Collins asked the farmer, "Where are you headed off to this morning?" The farmer replied, "Sir, I am going to church." "Why do you go to church?" "To worship God," answered the farmer. Collins then arrogantly asked, "What kind of God do you worship? Is He big or is He small?" The farmer said, "Sir, my God is so big He made the whole world. But He is so small He lives in my heart." A wise man, that farmer….wiser than the supposedly brilliant Anthony Collins. (Spiro Zodhiates, "How Can God Be Known", in "Pulpit Helps", September, 1980, p. 4)

Our Father…great and majestic and ruling the whole universe. Yet, He is right with us, living in our hearts.

Our Father….He made it all. He rules it all. And He loves us. Each and every one of us, including you.

We are not products of chance who just happen to exist. We are not orphans all alone in a big world. We have a Father who made us and is with us. What a wonderful Father He is. Let us each day, and every hour, give thanks to our Father in heaven.