

**Reading Scripture
in the Orthodox Church
The Sunday Cycle**

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by Doru Costache

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Part One

Paschal Sundays

The First Paschal Sunday: Resurrection

ACTS 1:1–8 After his resurrection, Christ spent forty days with his disciples, revealing to them the mysteries of God’s kingdom. Their fellowship occasionally included simple meals (literally, “sharing the salt”). On one occasion, the disciples displayed a feeble understanding of his intention, enquiring about an earthly kingdom. Tactfully, the Lord did not mock their query, instead drawing their attention to what mattered—the core of his ministry—the bestowal of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

JOHN 1:1–17 The Logos of God, true God, who was initially turned towards God, made all things and was present in all. Through the incarnation, the Logos became that very creation without loss of divine glory. Although the Logos was present into the world as giver-of-life, not many recognised him. But to all who recognised him—like John the Baptist who, like us, believed in the Logos’ divine identity despite the humble aspect of his humanity—he gave the power to renew their existence, to become God’s children, inheritors of the fullness of grace.

WISDOM Today we celebrate the inauguration of the new life bestowed on us. As the hymn teaches, “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling

down death by death, and to those in the tombs he has granted life.” The two New Testament readings are from the beginning of John and Acts. They are not chosen because they speak about Christ’s resurrection; only the apostolic text depicts the days after it. They are chosen because the First Paschal Sunday, signifying our salvation, is when the Orthodox Church begins the annual cycle of public scriptural readings. This cycle commences with the gospel of the spiritually mature, John, and with Acts, the gospel of the ecclesial life. In so doing, the liturgical year takes for granted that the listeners already have a solid faith background. But these two particular readings are not arbitrarily associated; they share a common ground. Here is their message. The contemporaries of Christ’s earthly sojourn did not recognise him as God, Logos of God, creator and saviour. We are better positioned. In the light of our resurrectional experience with Jesus Christ glorified everything makes sense. We are with the disciples who, for forty days, received the Lord’s instruction about the mysteries of the kingdom. It is in this light that we contemplate his earthly sojourn. We do not seek the historical Jesus. We see the glory of the Only-begotten of the Father, through whom all things are created and saved. It is the beginning of the paschal revolution. Those of us who believe in him as God incarnate are transformed into children of God, inheritors of the kingdom’s grace. We do not need signs and wonders. We see with our very eyes the glory of our maker and saviour, richly attested, unquestionably so, by his Holy Spirit who graciously warms up our hearts. Let us rejoice, children of God!

MESSAGE As adopted children of God in the risen Christ we are able to see God’s glory.

KEYWORDS adoption, glory, kingdom, new life, sight

Part Two

Pentecost Sundays

The First Sunday after Pentecost: All Saints

HEBREWS 11:33–12:2 The saints of old have performed mighty deeds out of faith and hope. For these deeds of which the world was not worthy they were met with hatred, persecution, banishment, and violent death. Even so, God, who loved them, has included us in their reward, so that together we form one people, motivated by the same hope and upholding the same standards, which Christ embodied supremely.

MATTHEW 10:32–33,37–38; 19:27–30 Acknowledgment of Christ brings Christ's acknowledgment of us. One who witnesses for Christ receives Christ's endorsement. But true acknowledgment of Christ is to prioritise him above all. No prioritisation of Christ means no true acknowledgment of Christ. To prioritise Christ is far from easy, yet Peter points out that the disciples left all things behind to follow the Lord. Their reward, the Lord assures, is to sit on glorious thrones, being rewarded a hundredfold and inheriting eternal life.

WISDOM Characteristic for the experience of God's people is to correspond to Christ, to be consistent with him. Consistency is to live accordingly, a Christlike life. It is by living a Christlike life that Christians

witness to the world on behalf of Christ. We acknowledge Christ by following in his footsteps, not by declaration alone. And what is this way of life about? When he lived amongst us, the Lord did not prioritise his own self. He prioritised us, for whom he lived, died, resurrected, and ascended. For us and for our salvation, he left behind his own glory, his own human safety, his life. We must prioritise him because it is only by focusing on him, by following in his footsteps, that we can maintain the standard set by his example, that of loving selflessly. To follow Christ is never a matter of literally abandoning our own relatives. It is a matter of not listening to them when their example falls short from the standard of selfless love. The saints do just that: they abandon all things, all people, even their own lives, so that they might love them again in a Christ like fashion (Philippians 2:3–5). As Saint Maximus the Confessor taught, “it is impossible to reach the state of this [pure, selfless] love when one is attached to earthly things” (*Chapters on Love* 1.1). Acknowledging Christ by living a Christlike life means living like the saints, in selfless, dispassionate, and disinterested love. This is difficult to achieve firstly because, thinking we know better than Christ, we prioritise anyone and anything else but him, succumbing to the circle of selfishness. Secondly, it is difficult because of the reaction of those around us, which is often the opposite of love when they notice a different approach on our part. Selfish people will never be able to cope with selfless people. And so the saints are hated, persecuted, banished, and sometimes put to death, either literally or metaphorically. But take heart, little flock, your reward is great in heaven.

MESSAGE To be a Christian is to prioritise Christ by walking in his footsteps, regardless of personal costs.

KEYWORDS acknowledgment, consistency, love, selfishness, selflessness

Part Three

Lenten Sundays

The First Lenten Sunday

Hebrews 11:24–26, 32–40 The unrighteous always marginalise and persecute the elect. This is why the elect, of whom the evil society is unworthy, lead their life away from all, in the hiding. Moses and some of the judges, kings, and prophets withstood, by faith, adversity, persecution, and torture. They lived in the hope of receiving God’s promise. But they did not receive it immediately after their martyrdom. God decided to grant them their crowns only together with us, their descendants in the faith.

JOHN 1:43–51 While in Galilee, Jesus found Philip whom he called to become his disciple. Philip in turn shared the news about the Messiah with his friend Nathanael. The latter remained unimpressed at hearing that Jesus was from Nazareth, but still went with his friend to meet Jesus. Upon meeting the Lord who referred to a private event, Nathanael realised that he stood in the presence of the Son of God, whom he fittingly acknowledged. Jesus announced that much more will come, for his disciples will see the heavens open and the angels climbing up and down upon the Son of Man as though on a ladder.

WISDOM Today a new strand of ecclesial messages begins. On recent Sundays we learnt about the need to understand Lent in particular and asceticism more generally as presupposing a social dimension. Asceticism is a matter of defeating our passions and prejudice in order to love people truly. Beginning with today and to pave the way for the Paschal season, the Lenten Sundays focus on Christ's high priesthood and divine identity. Their message overlaps with and complements the Christmas cycle, however being conveyed differently. We shall soon discover that after this first Sunday, with the exception of the third Sunday of the Lenten season, the Church prescribes reflection on two evangelic passages as well as two apostolic ones. One pair of readings explicitly refers to Christ, whereas the other pair relates to several saintly heroes who illustrate the Lenten paradigm. Today's message is straightforward. In brief, the one long expected by the saints of the Old Israel has finally arrived and is visible to the saints of the New Israel. Jesus Christ thus connects both Israels, the old Jewish one and the new Gentile one. He bridges the gulfs of the historical continuum, uniting humankind in priestly fashion. This meaning is central to Saint Paul's statement that in Christ Jesus the Jews and the Gentiles are one (Galatians 3:27–28). But the Lord likewise represents a vertical bridge. He has opened up the line of communication from God to us, denoted by the descending angels, bearers of divine messages, and from us to God, denoted by the ascending angels, bearers of the prayers of the believers. In this symbolic manner, the cruciform priesthood of Christ becomes manifest as the meeting-point for the vertical and the horizontal axes. He is the sole mediator between God and humankind (1 Timothy 2:5). He tore down the dividing wall between people (Ephesians 2:13–16). He unified the visible and the invisible parts of the creation (Colossians 1:13–18). In symbolic fashion, the Gospel reading reveals Jesus as the intersection of the two axes of the cross. Nathanael called him "Son of God," denoting the vertical, whereas the Lord humbly called himself "Son of Man," denoting the horizontal. It is in this light that we can best understand the veneration of the icons, this Sunday's historical pretext. When we revere the icon of the Lord we see more and beyond history, the cruciform bridge of his priestly ministry.

MESSAGE Jesus Christ is the crossroads where the created and the uncreated meet, where divisions are abolished, in whom the entire creation retrieves unity.

KEYWORDS angels, axis, cross, message, revelation

The Second Lenten Sunday

For Sunday

HEBREWS 1:10–2:3 If the message delivered through God’s angels is to be heeded, how much more so the word of the Lord (Jesus)? The angels are no match for the Lord, whose word is powerful. Signs, miracles, and spiritual gifts accompany it.

MARK 2:1–12 People gathered to listen to Jesus. Since the room was overcrowded, four industrious men broke the roof in order to lower their paralysed friend. Jesus granted forgiveness to the man and healed him, thus confirming for those present that the Son of Man has the power to forgive.

WISDOM We have already seen that the lenten narrative focuses on the priesthood of Jesus Christ as Son of God and Son of Man. Today we learn that, against the doubts and concerns of some grammarians—soulless minions of a supposed orthodoxy—Jesus proved himself to be the Lord who forgives and heals. The outward expressions of his divine power, the miracles and the bodily healings, were but pointers to the only miracle that matters, a person’s inner healing. We have no doubts however. And since we know who he is, we must obey his word for our salvation. We must acknowledge him and answer his call by progressing in his healing grace.

For Saint Gregory Palamas