

## **Sunday Sermon – 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Great Lent – St. Gregory Palamas – 2015/03/08**

Living in Two Worlds by Fr. Demetri Tsigas, St. Katherine, Melbourne, FL

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

Living as Orthodox Christians here in America means that we are living in two very different worlds. On the one hand, we are living in an increasingly secular world as a result of rationalism and scholasticism in the West. On the other, we are living in the mystical, experiential world of Orthodox Christianity. Today our church celebrates the life of St. Gregory Palamas who also struggled with these two worlds.

He was born to Byzantine aristocracy in 1296 A.D. when the Orthodox East was still recovering from the Fourth Crusade in 1204 A.D. where Roman Catholic Knights came through Constantinople, killing, raping and pillaging our spiritual capital, then setting up Catholic bishops and priests in order to take over the Byzantine Empire both politically and spiritually. It was not until 1224 A.D. that the King of Thessalonica restored Constantinople to the Orthodox Byzantines.

Though he was a very well educated and capable student, after his father's death, Gregory, his mom, two brothers and two sisters all became monastics. He went on to become an abbot on Mt. Athos and a great spiritual leader in Thessalonica where he was later made Archbishop. Then an educated Catholic monk from Calabria in Italy named Barlaam comes to Thessalonica.

Trained in rationalism and scholasticism, Barlaam told the monks they were wasting their time in prayer and meditation, that only through study could they come to know God. Gregory Palamas lead the charge against Barlaam arguing that though God is unknowable in His Essence, we could experience a knowledge of God in His Energies. Gregory used the analogy of the Sun (S-U-N, the star at the center of our solar system). We cannot know the sun directly. We know today that we would be vaporized by direct contact with the sun, but we can see the light of the sun and be warmed by its rays. Likewise Gregory argued, through prayer, meditation, fasting and the spiritual exercises of Orthodox Christianity one could come to know God through His Energies and even experience the uncreated Light of God.

This argument raged in Thessalonica. Those influenced by and trained in the West took sides with Barlaam. Those influenced and trained in the East took the side of Gregory. Several great councils were called. Collectively they are referred to by some in the Orthodox world

as composing the Eighth Ecumenical Council. Eventually, after being jailed for four years by a hostile Byzantine Emperor, the Orthodox view of St. Gregory Palamas won out.

There's more to the story. The other great threat to Orthodoxy came from further in the East. Muslim pirates and marauders were a constant threat. While traveling to Constantinople, Gregory was captured by Muslim pirates who took him prisoner and held him for ransom. (Sound familiar?) Even as a prisoner, Gregory encouraged and taught other Christian prisoners and won the respect and admiration of his captors. He died on November 14, 1359 and was declared a saint nine years later. Today his relics remain incorrupt in the church of St. Gregory Palamas in Thessalonica and he is honored today, the second Sunday of Great Lent and on November 14.

I realized in writing this sermon, that if that was all I offered to you today, I would be guilty of rationalism and scholasticism. The meditative prayer used by St. Gregory Palamas and millions of Orthodox monks, clergy and lay people is the Jesus Prayer. We have been using it for nearly 2000 years to know and experience the Light of God. I want to lead you all in a meditation on the Jesus Prayer today.

Sit comfortably, upright and relaxed. Close your eyes and focus just on your breathing. There are longer and shorter forms of the Jesus Prayer. Today we will use these words: "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior, Have mercy on me, a sinner." As I say these words, repeat them silently with me with your lips. Turn your attention away from any other thoughts and let your mind focus on only the words.

"Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior, Have mercy on me, a sinner." (25x)

Orthodox monastics, priests and lay people have used this prayer to instill in themselves unceasing prayer. It begins with the mouth, moves through the mind and into the heart and soul, the nous, the spiritual mind. We should all learn all that we can about God through study, but then use prayer, especially the meditative prayer of the Jesus Prayer as well as fasting and other spiritual disciplines to come to a full mystical and rational knowledge and experience of the Unknowable God.

To God be the glory, now and forever, and to the ages of ages, Amen.