

# The Scroll whereon the Finger of God Inscribed His Word.

Thank you Father and Brothers for inviting me to speak this evening. When Phil asked me to give this talk two topics came into my head. Ultimately though, I decided against the title *Exploring the Dog-Headed Icon of St Christopher* as it would probably appeal to too small a niche, especially for those not named Christopher.

Now, at these dinners, as you know, Father Gabriel has a custom where he asks us all to answer a particular question. I suppose if the question were asked of me, “What is your favorite Marian title?” (And this is why asking icebreaking questions is better left to Father than me.) But if someone were to ask me that, after demurring a bit and quoting the words of the Archangel Gabriel from the hymn (*Awed by the Beauty*), “By what name shall I call her? I am lost and bewildered.” I would probably tell you *The Scroll whereon the Finger of God Inscribed His Word*.

These words come from the Friday Lenten service. In the 7th Ode of the Akathist Canon we hear:

The ends of the earth do praise and bless thee, and cry out unto thee: Hail, pure Maiden, scroll on which the finger of God did inscribe His Word; do thou now implore Him, O Theotokos, to write down thy servants in the Book of Life.

When I first heard these words, they struck me profoundly, and I’ve meditated upon them since. Now, as an aside, I have to tell this story about ‘meditation’. Some years ago I was working as a claims adjuster for an auto insurance company. If you called in to report a claim on your car, I was the first person you talked to (assuming you properly navigated through the labyrinthine voice prompts). At one point I was working second shift, and many of the calls that came in after 9 o’clock in the evening were rather

interesting. One night, a young man called in who seemed a bit spaced out. He reported that he found his car was broken into and his backpack was missing. I inquired about the value of the backpack and contents and he told me. "I don't know, I told the police maybe \$100." After a pause, "Y'know if I think about it, maybe \$200." A little while later in the call as I was collecting other information, he circled back to the value of the stolen contents. "Man, that bag's possibly worth over \$300, if I meditate upon it." At this I was all ears; I wanted him to teach me the secret of this meditation where I could triple the value of my possessions. Alas, for him those valuables were gone. But for us, we have such a wealth in the hymns and services of the Church that we can easily triple their value to us if we spend some time in meditation upon them.

In the Church, everything we say about the Virgin Mary is in relation to her Son, Jesus. Indeed the first praise of the Theotokos was by St Elizabeth who pronounced "blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" and called her "the mother of my Lord" (Lk 1.42-43). Our icons show her pointing to Christ and our Theotokia (hymns to the Blessed Virgin) sing about Christ.

For example, from the Theotokia for the Resurrection, in the Vespers service:

Tone 4

David the Prophet who became through thee, O Theotokos, the grandparent of God, before time sang of thee in praise, and shouted to Him who worked wonders through thee, saying, The queen did rise on Thy right; for God hath shown thee to be a Mother bringing forth life, in that He was willing to appear incarnate from thee without father, **renewing the creation of His likeness**, corrupt with suffering, in order to find the sheep lost in the hills, and carry it on His shoulders, and offer it to the Father, and **add it, through His will, to the heavenly hosts**, and to save the whole world; for He is the reigning Christ, Possessor of rich and Great Mercy.

#### Tone 6

Who shall not beatify thee, most holy Virgin? Who shall not praise thy birth-giving, free of travailing and pain? For the only Son rising timelessly from the Father, Himself did become **incarnate from thee** in an inexplicable way. He, Who while God by nature, became for our sakes Man by nature, not divided into two persons, but known by two natures without mixture or confusion. To Him, O noble and most blessed one, plead for the salvation of our souls.

#### Tone 8

Verily, the King of heaven, for His love to mankind, did appear on earth; and with men did He deal; for **He took unto Himself a body from the pure Virgin**. And from her did He issue in the adopted body, He being one Son, dual in Nature, not dual in Person. Wherefore, do we confess, preaching the truth that Christ our God is perfect God and perfect Man. Therefore, O Mother who hast no groom, beseech thou Him to have mercy upon our souls.

Let us now consider the Scroll. What were scrolls made from?

Parchment, and where does parchment come from?

Animal skins, which brings to mind the garments of skin God gave Adam and Eve when he expelled them from Paradise. As with every Biblical theme, this one begins in Genesis. Some of the Fathers (St Gregory of Nyssa) explain the garments of skin as our mortality. Humanity was expelled from Paradise lest we eat of the Tree of Life, and be like the demons confirmed in death, unable to repent. This mortal flesh, God the Son took in the incarnation, the enfleshing, from the Virgin. For, as the Letter to the Hebrews tells us, the Son was made like us in every respect, in order to become a merciful and faithful high priest (Heb 2.17).

Yet parchment is not merely an animal skin; it must be transformed in order to receive writing. Before cellphones were common, many of us remember making notes on our hands, which was prone to smearing and even in the best of circumstances washed away in a few days. In antiquity, making parchment from skins was a long involved process. The skins were soaked in fermented vegetable solutions to remove the hair from the pelt; this took a few days and the skins would need be frequently agitated or stirred so the solution would fully penetrate the pelts. Then the material was stretched out in a frame and worked over with a sharp knife to remove any remaining imperfections such as spots with hair or oil that might impeded the absorption of the ink. In this process, the structure of the material is changed from animal skin to parchment which allows it to receive and bond with the ink.

So for several thousand years, God worked with humanity's garments of skin by giving the Torah and the Prophets, appointing guardian angels, and leading us back to him by the works of the saints. Through God's work, in the fullness of time, he formed the Theotokos, the Scroll which could be inscribed with God's own Word. But the Blessed Virgin Mary is also our Great Example, for she shows us what we can become in Christ through Great Mercy. We also are to receive the Word of God; indeed St Paul calls us the body of Christ (1 Cor 12.27, Eph 4.12, etc.). Our Brotherhood is named after St Joseph of Arimathea who cared for the body of Christ. God is working within us so that we too would receive his Word. Remember also that our Lord elevated human nature in his Incarnation, particularly his Passion, where he was given vinegar to drink and stretched out upon the Cross.

Being transformed is admittedly, a long, rather difficult process. But there is no salvation without struggling against our passions. If anyone tells you of a shortcut to holiness, they are either clueless, dishonest, selling you something, or some combination of the three. When we ask God to bestow a virtue or remove a vice, he does not magically grant the virtue to us or

whisk the vice away from us, but gives us opportunities to learn. Met. Anthony Bloom tells the story of St Philip Neri. Philip was easily irritated and often quarreled with his brothers. One day he was distraught over this and went to church and fell down at the icon of Christ and implored him to remove his anger. With hope, he walked out of the church. But he immediately met one of his brothers, who had never angered him before, but this time said a cross word to Philip. Philip told him off, but the next person Philip met was another man who had always been kind to him and 'a source of consolation' to him. Yet even this man spoke gruffly to Philip. At this Philip ran back to the church agitated and cast himself before Christ and prayed 'O Lord, have I not asked you to free me from this anger?' And he heard the Lord answer, 'Yes, Philip, and for this reason I am multiplying the occasions for you to learn.'

Let us now turn to the phrase, 'The finger of God.' Where do we see that phrase in the Scriptures?

In Exodus, the Ten Commandments were written with God's own finger. The Prophets point to a new covenant which will be internal and not external to God's people. For example the Prophet Jeremiah says,

"Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people." (Jeremiah 31:31–33 ESV)

When we think of the handwriting on the wall in the Prophecy of Daniel, we think rightly of judgement. What is the purpose of judgement?

The Apostle gives a similar analogy of God as a Craftsman, when he discusses the Potter having the right to make the clay into what he desires: "But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?" (Rom 9.20-21). In this he references the several passages in the Prophet Isaiah and a rather lengthy one from Jeremiah.

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do.

Then the word of the LORD came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it. Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: 'Thus says the LORD, Behold, I am shaping disaster against you and devising a plan against you. Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds.'

"But they say, 'That is in vain! We will follow our own plans, and will every one act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart.'" (Jeremiah 18.1-12 ESV)

The analogy of the Potter making clay into pottery is not to teach some notion of predestination or so we can scrutinize the mind of God. (As if we do that as creatures!) No, in this passage we see that if the Lord shapes disaster or hardship against a people it is meant to lead them to repentance. If the people turn from their evil and repent, God will not bring them to destruction. God works all things for the salvation of those in Christ, leading us to repentance and life.

So let us now turn to the end of the stanza. What is the result of receiving, being written on with the Word of God? What do we ask the Blessed Theotokos for? We ask her to implore God to write us in the Book of Life. We are written on with God's Word to be written in the Book of Life. To be in the Book of Life, then, is to have the Word written upon us; it is nothing else than to be in Christ. In the flesh received from the Virgin, Christ renewed human nature, and he is still renewing it in his body today. As St Paul says,

From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5.16–21 ESV)

So then, how do we allow God to craft our garments of skin into parchment to receive his Word and be written in the Book of Life? In a word:

repentance. We need to be in the Scriptures. The Church provides us with readings for each day of the year. Likewise we need to be in prayer. And we need to be in the Church services. Our text tonight comes from the Friday Lenten service. And I don't know if you've peeked ahead at the next page on your calendars, but the Triodion starts on Feb 13. We have a great opportunity in Lent to become saturated in the Scriptures, prayer, and the services and thereby be stretched. By this we are being prepared to receive the Word of God. (As you know, Preparation is a major theme in the Church. We are given Lent to prepare for the Truth of Pascha. And we are given the Triodion to prepare for Lent. Likewise, to receive Christ in the Eucharist, we have Orthros before the Divine Liturgy, and Vespers the evening before that.) Furthermore, do these things with intention and meditate on the words you are reading, saying, and hearing. And lastly, in this light perform acts of mercy and almsgiving. For God has given us the riches of his grace in Christ, having lavished them upon us, in order to unite all in him, whether in heaven or on the earth (Eph 1.3-14). Let us lay aside all earthly care: that we may receive the King of all. Alleluia.