

Bible Study – 10 March 2015

# Biblical & Theological Themes of the Second Sunday of Lent

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Commemorating St. Gregory Palamas  
A “Second Triumph of Orthodoxy”  
Deification as Orthodox Doctrine



Gregory Palamas  
Γρηγόριος Παλαμάς

1296–1359

A hesychast Monk on  
Mount Athos

Archbishop of  
Thessaloniki, from 1347

Dying words: “To the  
heights! To the  
heights!”

Canonized in 1368

# From Vespers

- What hymns of praise shall we sing in honor of the holy bishop? He is the trumpet of theology, the herald of the fire of grace, the honored vessel of the Spirit, the unshaken pillar of the church, the great joy of the inhabited earth, the river of wisdom, the candlestick of the light, the shining star that makes glorious the whole creation.
- ... He is the fervent protector of the Faith, the well-tuned harp of the Spirit, the golden tongue... the herald of the light of God, the initiate of the heavenly mysteries of the Trinity... the glory of Thessalonica...

# Kontakion & Ikos of St. Gregory

- Holy and divine instrument of wisdom, joyful trumpet of theology, with one voice we sing your praises, O Gregory inspired by God. But since you stand now in mind and spirit before the Original Mind, (ώς νοῦς Νοῦς τῷ πρώτῳ) guide our minds to Him, O holy saint, that we may praise with you. Rejoice, O preacher of grace!
- O holy Gregory, you appeared on earth as an angelic messenger, proclaiming to mortal humans the mysteries of God. Endowed with human mind and flesh, yet you spoke with the voice of the bodiless angels and filled us with amazement. O saint inspired by God:  
Rejoice, for the darkness is dispelled.  
Rejoice, for the light has returned.  
Rejoice, messenger who speaks to us of God's nature.  
Rejoice, teacher who speaks to us of God's energies.  
Rejoice, for you have rightly proclaimed God's glory.  
Rejoice, torch that shows us the Sun.  
Rejoice, for through you the truth of God has shone forth.  
Rejoice, O preacher of grace!

# Why such praise on this Gregory?

- His teachings were considered so important that he was canonized only 9 years after his death, and the Second Sunday of Lent was dedicated to him for the simple reason that his victory over adversaries was considered a second triumph of Orthodoxy, to follow the First Sunday of Lent (Sunday of Orthodoxy).
- Palamas' primary theological achievement was to define the distinction between **God's essence and energies**. This distinction leads directly to the doctrine of **deification (*theosis*)**, which was already established in Orthodox theology since 4<sup>th</sup> century.

# Origins of the doctrine of Theosis

- St. Athanasius of Alexandria (296-373) wrote in his most famous work, **On the Incarnation of the Word**: "He was incarnate that we might be made god" (Αὐτὸς γὰρ ἐνηνθρώπησεν, ἵνα ἡμεῖς θεοποιηθῶμεν)
- St. Maximus the Confessor (580-662) developed the doctrine significantly. "The incarnation of God makes man God to the same degree as God Himself became man ... Let us become the image of the one God, bearing nothing earthly in ourselves, so that we may consort with God and become gods... For it is clear that He Who became man will divinize human nature without changing it into the Divine Nature..."

# But is there a Biblical Basis?

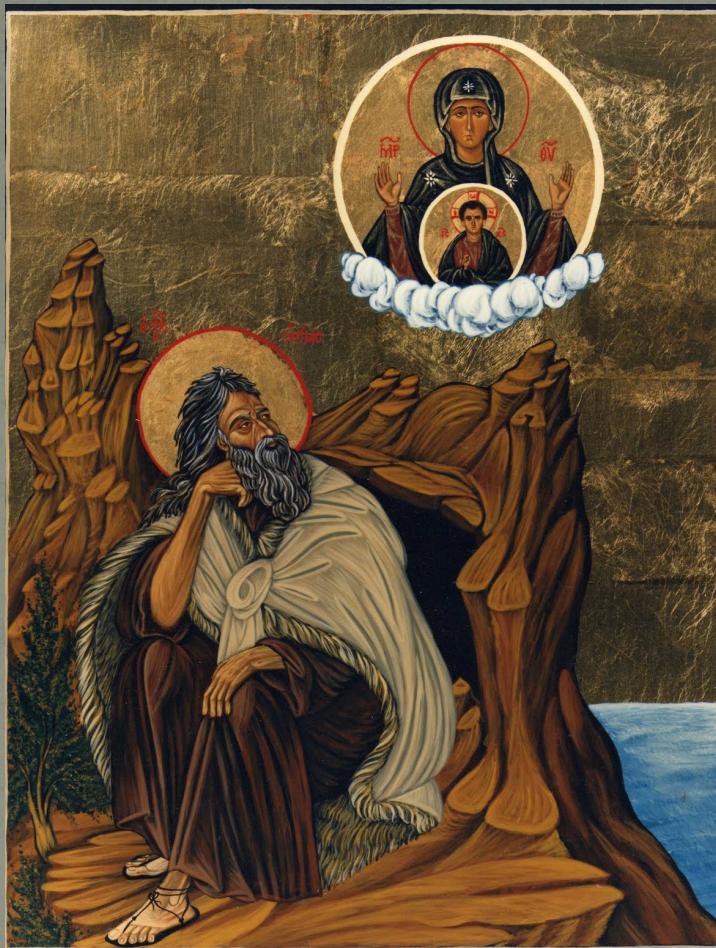
- 2 Peter 1:4 and verses 16-18 refer to Transfiguration.
- John 17:22-24 Jesus speaks of his glory being ours.
- Romans 8:18-23 Bodily glory of our redemption.
- 1 Corinthians 15:47-49 Complex imagery here that bypasses Genesis 1:27.
- Colossians 3:1-4 & 9-11 Baptism renews the image.
- Mark 9:2-8; Matthew 17:1-8; Luke 9:28-36 The Transfiguration of Christ on the Mountain.

# Central images behind the interpretation of Bible passages





Exodus 3:1-6



1 Kings  
**19:9-12**

## THE CREATION OF ADAM



Genesis 2:7

# Main Opponents of Palamas

- Barlaam of Calabria
- Gregory Akindynos (Γρηγόριος Ἀκίνδυνος)
- Nicephorus Gregoras (Νικηφόρος Γρηγορᾶς)
- Prochoros Kydones (Πρόχορος Κυδώνης)

Palamas prevailed against the attacks of all of these opponents and was backed up by several councils held in Constantinople between 1341 and 1351.

# Reality of Theosis

- Palamas engaged in theological controversy with men who saw theosis as only an eternal ideal that is never attained. For Palamas and the monks of Athos, deification was an objective reality, something that is attainable in earthly time, not just in eternity, because of the **deified humanity of Christ**.
- Palamas brought into **synthesis** the entire patristic teaching on redemption. “The doctrine of deification is for Palamas a direct consequence of the historical work of Christ; without him, divine life would have remained inaccessible to man” (John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, p. 159)

# Light, the Central Symbol of Theosis

- Light is the central symbol in Palamas' description of the deified life. The ability given us by the Holy Spirit to see God becomes itself light and grows like that which it sees. "If it looks at itself, it sees the light; if it looks at the object of its vision, that again is light, and if it looks at the means it employs in seeing, that too is light. It is there that there is union; all that is one, so that he who sees can distinguish neither the means, nor the end, nor the essence, but is only conscious of being light, and of seeing a light distinct from any created thing." (*Triads II, 3.36*)
- Note Matthew 6:22-23

# Essence-Energies Distinction

- The major achievement of Palamas in his teaching.
- Palamas was a committed follower of ‘Dionysius the Areopagite’ and his *apophatic* concept of theology. That is, God is ultimately unknowable in his essence. Human beings can never know the divine essence or participate in the divine essence. God is the great Beyond, the great Unknowable.
- But human beings can know God and *participate in the uncreated energies of God*. This participation in the energies *is* the source of deification.

# Essence and Energies in Icons



# Essence and Energies in Icons



# Essence-Energies Distinction

- In his **essence** (*ousia*) God was totally beyond, but in his operations or **energies** (*energai*) God came into an intimate relationship with those who are worthy to receive a vision of the divine light. The contemplation of the divine light is the contemplation of God's glory. This glory is not the essence of God but it is nevertheless divine. For it transforms the body as well as the soul, communicating its own splendor to it. This leads directly to the orthodox doctrine of deification.

# Essence & Energies Manifested



# Two Competing Visions of Man

- Barlaam claimed that the light that the monks see is not divine; it is a created symbol of divinity. It is therefore grace, not God, that is experienced. What the hesychasts call deifying grace is the perfection of human beings as rational creatures. Deification is virtue and wisdom; that is to say, it is created and natural.
- Against this Palamas maintains that the deifying light is real, not symbolic, but is not itself the essence of God. The grace that is experienced by those who see this light is not a thing but a relationship. At the same time it goes beyond relationship. Deification therefore goes beyond natural perfection. It refers to the transformation of our nature by divine action.

# Human Cooperation

- The divine transformation of human nature was effected in principle by the Incarnation. Was this ‘not accomplished in Christ from the start, from the moment in which he assumed our nature’? Yes, it was. But it also needs to be appropriated and realized by the individual through **baptism**: the divine light is ‘the pledge of the future promise, the grace of adoption, the deifying gift of the Spirit.’ Although the vision of the divine light is crowned by its future fulfillment, it is the fruit of spiritual progress made in this life.

# Is theosis a heresy?

- Akindynos attacked the idea of deification as being like the fall of Lucifer and the temptation of Adam: the first apostate from God, though he was the morning star, became darkness, and he excited Adam with the hope of divinity ([Genesis 3:5](#)), and thus deprived him of immortality. Just as the present apostates do, who boast that they become uncreated gods without beginning...
- This is a caricature of what Palamas taught. He went out of his way to emphasize that the saints are gods simply ‘by participation’; for this purpose God made us, in order to make us **partakers of God’s own divinity** (cf. [2 Peter 1:4](#)).

# Theosis after Palamas

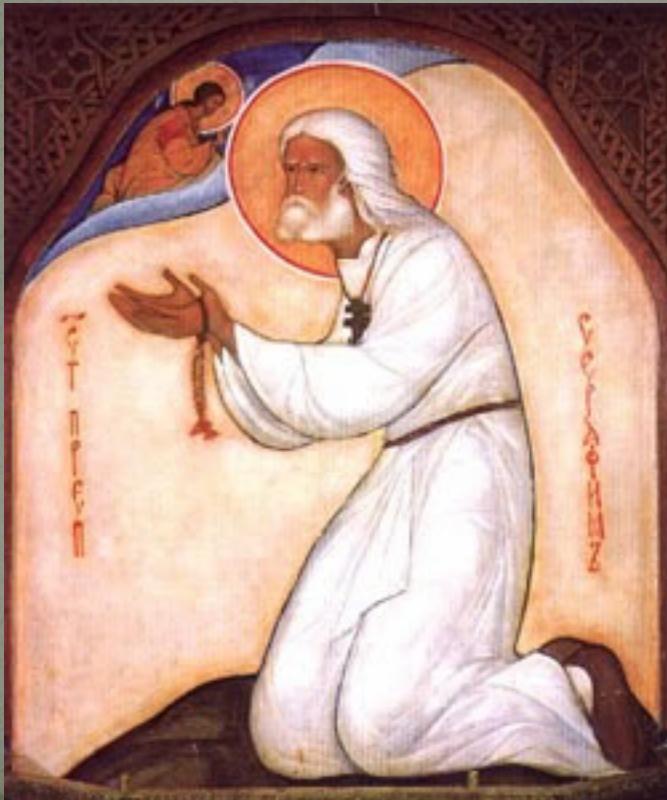
- Publication of the **Philokalia** (Φιλοκαλία των Ιερών Νηπτικών) in 1782 by the Athonite monk Nikodimos (a member of the 'Kolyvades' movement) was pivotal event in the modern rediscovery of theosis as a fundamentally Orthodox approach to salvation.
- The 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries saw major challenges to Orthodox theology. There was the growing encroachment of Western theology. In Greece there was the growing trend to look to the pre-Christian era for inspiration. The Philokalia served as a buttress against both these trends, in both Greece and Russia.

# Theosis after Palamas

- The most far-reaching impact of the **Philokalia** revival was not in Greece, but in Russia.
- The immensely popular book **The Way of the Pilgrim** is illustrative of the impact the hesychast movement had in Russia among ordinary people. It firmly established the “**Jesus Prayer**” as essential part of Orthodox spirituality. Ceaseless prayer, or ‘**prayer of the heart**,’ provided a tangible practice available to all, not just to monks. The Philokalia teaching on ceaseless prayer complemented the patristic foundations of the theology of deification. (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

# Theosis in Russia

- St. Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833), in whom the uncreated energies of God operated in very visible ways.



# Theosis in Russia

- N. A. Motovilov recorded his encounter with Seraphim. Father Seraphim took me very firmly by the shoulders and said: "We are both in the Spirit of God now, my son. Why don't you look at me?"

I replied: "I cannot look, Father, because your eyes are flashing like lightning. Your face has become brighter than the sun, and my eyes ache with pain."

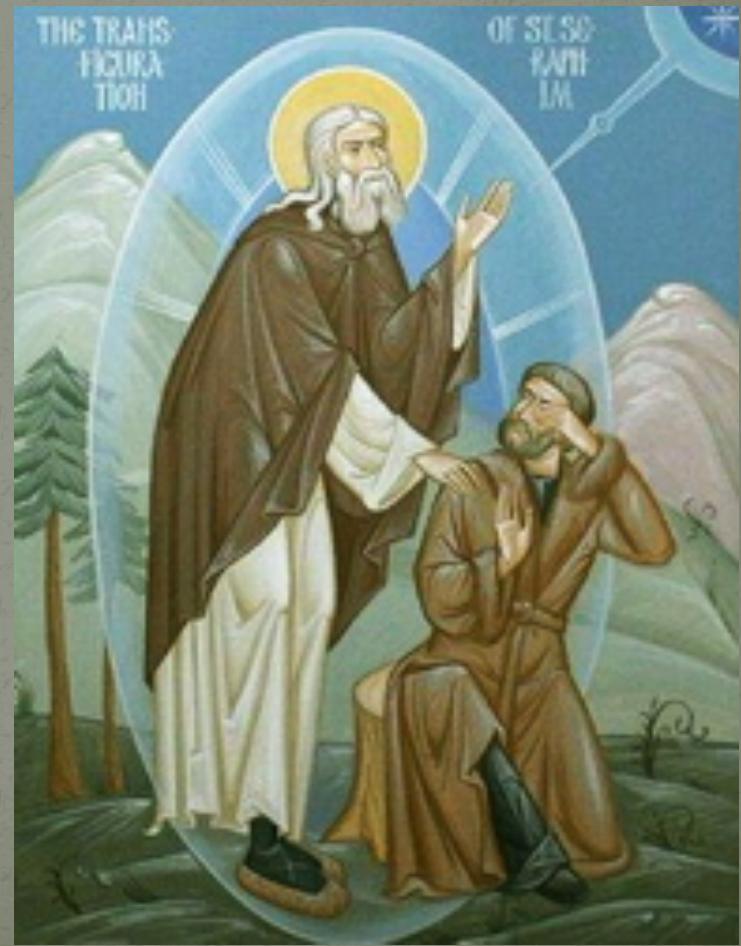
Father Seraphim said: "Don't be alarmed! Now you yourself have become as bright as I am. You are now in the fullness of the Spirit of God yourself; otherwise you would not be able to see me as I am."

Then, bending his head towards me, he whispered softly in my ear: "Just look, and don't be afraid! The Lord is with us!"

# Theosis in Russia

After these words I glanced at his face and there came over me an even greater reverent awe. Imagine in the center of the sun, in the dazzling light of its midday rays, the face of a man talking to you. You see the movement of his lips and the changing expression of his eyes, you hear his voice, you feel someone holding your shoulders; yet you do not see his hands, you do not even see yourself or his figure, but only a blinding light spreading far around for several yards and illuminating with its glaring sheen both the snow-blanket which covered the forest glade and the snow-flakes which besprinkled me and the great Elder. You can imagine the state I was in!

# Encounters in the Uncreated Light



# Liturgical Spirituality

The annual feasts celebrate the incarnation and redemptive work of Christ in the transformation and deification of humanity and all creation.

- On Holy Cross Day (Sept. 14), “the whole creation is set free from corruption.”
- On Christmas (Dec. 25), “God has come upon earth, and man gone up to heaven.”
- On Theophany (Jan. 6), Christ “opens the heavens, brings down the divine Spirit, and grants humans a share of incorruption.”
- On the feast of Transfiguration (Aug. 6), Christ “changed the darkened nature of Adam, filled it with brightness and made it godlike.”

# Deification for us?

- Deification is essential to theology: It draws out the full consequences of the Incarnation of Christ and his redemptive death and resurrection. Deification also depends on a strong understanding of the personalism of God! God is personal, not simply an other-worldly essence. God reaches out to creation, not only in unique events like the Incarnation, but through the continual presence of his energies.
- Deification helps us see salvation as something more significant than our own individual pass to heaven.
- It is a powerful metaphor for all God's work and our response to it. It's a metaphor for a reality!
- Deification is for all, not only for a monastic elite.