

Episcopal Sermons at the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation, Middlesbrough

In the years of the Lord 2024–2025

Archbishop Nikitas: On the Great and Holy Lent

Sunday, 10 March 2024.



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

In the Gospel today we have one of the stories that Jesus told to instruct the people who came to hear His word. It is also a story that instructs us even today as we prepare in just one week or so to enter Great and Holy Lent.

It is a Gospel passage that is here to remind us that Lent and the tradi-

tion of fasting is not about food. For food saves no one. Jesus Christ came into the world to save us all. And through His word and through His life, He taught and continues to teach us what is necessary and proper. And this morning's Gospel passage indeed emphasises what is necessary for us to do as Christians.

Jesus gives the example of a shepherd, of someone who is going to separate the sheep from the goats. And He means those people who have acted properly in life and those who have not, those who ministered to those in need and those who did not.

Life, my dear sisters and brothers, is not about what we have or what we gain. Rather, it is about how we live and what we do, especially with what God gives us. The Gospel does not emphasise material gains or goods. It talks about comfort, giving comfort to those who suffer.

It speaks of visiting those who are in need and those who are ill.

It talks about sharing love, which we so often forget to do.

It talks about our lives and our humanity and how we relate to others.

There is a story of a monk on Mount Athos who once said: "I fear the day of judgement, for when it comes and all things are called into account what will happen to me?" And then he said, "more than I fear the day of judgement I fear the moment when the Lord will summon me before him. But more than that, I fear the voice of Christ who will ask me to give an account for my life. But more than that, I am afraid of the response that I will hear."

Too often in our lives we look at things subjectively, and we need to look at things objectively. We need to look at our lives and at how we are called to live as Christians and as the people of God.

We need to think about the other who may be alone and isolated, the individual who is poor and suffering, those people who have not yet come to know the joy and the love of Jesus Christ.

And if we do not reach out and comfort these people, then we've failed. And we should ask ourselves, what will we say in that moment of judgement, in the final days when we will come to stand before Jesus Christ?

There was an elderly priest in the United States whose name was Father Evagoras Konstandinidis and he told people: during the Lenten season, take a coin, a dollar, whatever you have, and each day, put it aside. And at the end of the Lenten season, take that money and give it to the poor. Give it to those in need.

Because Lent is not about what we eat and what we don't eat. It's about our relationship with God. It's

about our relationship with others. It's about our relationship with ourselves.

We need to examine our lives, just as St. Paul did and the Disciples, the Church Fathers and those great ascetics. But even more so, I would say, like the simple people of God who fill His churches and come in faith.

As we move toward the Lenten season, don't worry about olive oil and vegetable oil. Don't worry about coffee made with, powdered milk and liquid milk and dairy products. Worry more about how we live as people, how we relate to others. Have we shown them the joy of the resurrection? And have we given them Jesus Christ? For He is the solution. He's the answer. He's everything in life that we need. For without Him, we have nothing in our lives.

I pray that you will continue to grow and flourish with the wonderful guiding hand and leadership of Father Nikita. This church, this community is coming back to life. And we're going to stand by you and with you. You see, the world needs the church. This land needs Orthodoxy, and we need you. The church isn't the priest, the deacon, the psaltis or choir and the bishop. The church is the people of God who come together. And we come together from different parts of the world. You can hear my poor American accent! We all come from different parts of the world but we become one through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. And may He guide you and lead you through these days to the glory of the resurrection, when we shall see His light and be glorified in Him. Amen.

Bishop Raphael: On Fr John Faitland Moir

Sunday, 21 January 2024.



In Edinburgh, we had a spiritual father, Fr John Maitland Moir. His life was prayer—an offering of love, unconditional love to all people. Fr John’s life was a continuous prayer. I believe even when he spoke, worked, and did other practical things, it was still the Name—the Name of Jesus—that was on his lips and in his mind. Except for the liturgical prayers, his usual prayer was: Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy. He said it in this way so as not to exclude anyone from the prayer.

Fr John didn’t mind even risking his own reputation. Once, he even begged for money. And people—some people—thought it was for himself. He didn’t explain why he was asking for money. It was for people who were in need. He didn’t mind what people would think of him, as long as he was

doing what pleased the Lord.

Fr John suffered a great deal in his life. Who doesn’t? Who follows the Lord and doesn’t suffer? That’s a sign—a verification—of calling. Fathers of the Church, like St Sophrony, say: If you suffer, not only should you not despair or be discouraged, but give thanks to God. Because suffering in Christ, and for His holy name, is a sign of special visitation. You are being visited—being especially, personally elected—when temptations and trials come to you. Don’t feel that you are neglected by God. You are chosen by God when you go through suffering. That’s how Fr John also taught us. He used to tell us: Nothing happens to us unless it is either God’s will or God permits it. If God permits it, or if it is His will—either way—we should thankfully accept what comes to us.

But at the end of his life, Fr John’s prayer changed. I heard him one night saying not the usual, Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy!, but in the bed of suffering—his deathbed, almost—he said, almost throughout the night: Lord Jesus Christ, thank You! Lord Jesus Christ, thank You!

A life full of fruits, full of offerings, full of love, was drawing to an end—thankfully, gratefully, without any complaint. That’s why we trusted Fr John. We loved him, and we considered him a treasure. We never heard a word of judgment from his mouth. Never! He never shared a grievance, a pain, or a complaint against anyone. We thought that everyone was good—because for him, they were good.

This is what we are reminded of also in today's reading from the Gospel. When we say, Lord, Master, have mercy on me, we must not forget to say, Thank You, Lord! Just like the Samaritan did—one of the ten lepers—who, having been healed by the Lord, remembered to come back and give thanks to God.

Saint Paisios of the Holy Mountain once said: To pray with the words "Glory to You, O God!" at the time of suffering equals thousands of "Lord, have mercy" at a time when we don't suffer.

Let us then make our life a thanksgiving—a life of gratefulness. Give thanks to God, and remember to give thanks to people as well, to those who have helped us. Remembering to ring someone up and saying, Thank you for what you did for me fifteen years ago, makes a lot of difference to our lives and to the lives of other people.

Fr Zacharias of Essex Monastery says: If you don't have time to do anything else in the morning, just say these words as soon as you wake up and stand up. Turn to the icon of the Saviour and say, "Lord Jesus, thank You for everything."

One saintly father on the Holy Mountain told me about our elder in Scotland, Fr John. Since he completed the course of his life giving thanks to God, the Athonite father said to me: Don't be surprised if you see signs of sanctity, if he is holy, if his relics give off myrrh.

If someone reaches the point of giving thanks to God continuously, then he's very high in the spiritual life—in the life in Christ. The highest form of prayer, this holy father on the Holy Mountain told me, is giving thanks. Let us not forget to do it—at least

once a day! And I will give you a tip: if you forget to say, "Lord, thank You for everything!" when you wake up, then when you open the door to leave the house—to go to work or school or wherever else—give thanks then.

That's a useful tip. Do not forget to give thanks, at least once a day. Your life will be sweetened by this "Eucharist".

I thank, first of all, our God, for the blessing that He gave us to be here together to serve the Eucharist—in Greek, Eucharistia, thanksgiving.

I also want to give thanks to all of you for coming—and especially to Father Nikita, who has taken the ministry to look after you spiritually, to offer the unbloody sacrifice on your behalf, and to minister to God and to you with all his love and all his strength. Please give thanks to God for that, and support him. Support him with all your love.

We clergymen appear strong, but we're not as strong as we seem to be. We need you. We need—most of all—your prayers and your moral support. Who does not flourish if someone tells you how well you did today?

Also, I want to thank Fr Paul of this church, who so kindly has hosted us here for many years. He did not lose hope in us, and he kept this chapel for us to return—so kindly, so warmly, so brotherly, in such a Christian spirit. Thank you very much, Father Paul, and may God bless your own ministry, your work, and your people. We are very grateful to you.

This is a new beginning. We want everyone to come. Tell your friends and neighbors that there is an Orthodox Church here, which is open to all.

Bishop Raphael: Veneration of the Holy Cross

Sunday, 7th April 2024.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit!

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

All Orthodox icons of our Lord have the usual halo, which we also see around the heads of holy people, but uniquely on the icon of our Lord we see the cross. Inscribed, there is a cross. Because not only the cross was the pinnacle of the manifestation of his love for us but also the cross has been in the mind of Christ from all eternity.

In the Book of Revelation it is said that the Lamb of God was slaughtered from the very beginning (ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου, Rev. 13.8). So even before his crucifixion, in some way—because he loved the world, he loved everyone so much—the Lord was already exhibiting crucified love.

The cross is the way the Lord relates to us. The Holy Fathers say that it is also the way the three persons of the Holy Trinity relate to one another. And if we can dare speak about the life of God—the Holy Fathers can, we cannot, we simply follow them—we say that the love of God the Father for the Son and for the Holy Spirit, and also the love of the Son and of the Holy Spirit for the Father and for one another, is a love that seeks not its own end.

They love one another, coming out of themselves and offering themselves to one another. And in the same way, following the same pattern, God relates to us, to his creation, with a love that does not seek its own, with a perfect love, which is ready—in the case of Christ, who became a human being—to die for us, to endure death.

This is what the Lord wants us to have as an attitude towards him and towards every human being. This is why the church has asked us to place the cross in the middle of the nave, halfway through the period of Lent, so that we know where we are going to. So that we reassess ourselves in case we have gone the wrong way. In case we think that simply praying—if we do pray, which is indispensable, or coming to church or reading spiritual books—is sufficient. It's not sufficient! The saints say that unless we have the desire to and try to make sacrifices for our brethren, for our brothers and sisters, we have done very little, if anything. Without sacrifice, spiritual life does not blossom.

We need to be ready to make sacrifices for our brothers and sisters, not only material, but also sacrifices from our heart: with a pain for sharing, to share in their grief, in their sorrow, in their loneliness.

You know the famous story with St. Paisios and the elderly monk who was living next to him? The elderly monk constantly was asking St. Paisios to do things for him: to bring him a cup of tea one time, another time a little rusk to eat, another time to go and prepare for him a warm blanket. And St. Paisios did it all with great love. But another monk said to him: "Look, Father, if you go on like that, you will never pray. You will never fulfill your rule of prayer. You will never fulfill your monastic duties. Just leave the old man. He's very demanding. He keeps asking for things. Just stay on your course and

attend to your spiritual discipline and really don't waste your time on the old man."

In response, Saint Paisios said to his fellow monk: "My brother, I'm sorry for you. Because you think that if you say hundreds of Jesus prayers, you will reach God. But I can tell you that of course you should pray, of course. But bringing a cup of tea to the old man, offering him a warm blanket, obeying him in his need—this will equal thousands of Jesus prayers and will bring you closer to God than many vigils and standing in prayer, which of course are all necessary."

So this is the attitude we should all aim to have. And this is what the cross reminds us of. If we do not acquire this attitude towards our brothers and sisters, we will be very poor. The church teaches us, according to the Book of Revelation, that no one will enter the city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem, unless they are purified. Unless we are purified, for nothing impure will enter there. And the way to purify ourselves is the way of the cross.

How do we purify ourselves? By keeping the commandments of Christ—and that is taking up our cross.

How do we purify ourselves? By showing sacrificial love for our brothers and sisters—and that is taking up our cross.

How do we purify ourselves? When we accept whatever cross the Lord has sent us—and all of us have one—with gratitude, with giving glory to God and without blaming anyone.

That is how the cross, that little cross that we have been given—be that illness, be that injustice, be that

slander, or other things—will turn into the cross of Christ. It will not be torture, but it will be a cross.

There is a difference between suffering and being crucified like Christ. Those who simply suffer will be crushed. Those who suffer by not blaming anyone, especially God, but give thanks and accept what has been given to us as a means for purification, will be glorified. Their pain will be eased.

Saint Ephraim of Katounakia, a contemporary saint, said that most people ask God to remove their crosses from them, and that this is wrong.

St. Sophrony says that we do not come down from our cross, but that we are taken down when the time comes.

St Ephraim also says that the best thing is to pray with these words: "Lord, give me strength to carry the cross that you have given me" and then to pray and act as if you have been benefited, as if you have been given the greatest gift.

And if you do this, St Ephraim said, there will be a moment when your prayer will change. And you will not say, "God, give me strength to bear my cross or take it away, if it is your will," but you will say, "Lord, do not take away my cross from me because I'm becoming richer in my suffering."

With these thoughts in mind, we venerate the cross today and we ask the Lord to give us strength, for we are all weak, and to be able to say with the Optina Fathers, "Lord, whatever comes my way this day and every day, help me to see that it has been permitted by you, and to give thanks to you for everything."

Amen.

Bishop Raphael: On the “Golden Rule”

Sunday 29th September 2024.

Bishop Raphael preached at the Divine Liturgy that marked the 25th anniversary of the opening of our present chapel, inaugurated on 29th September 1999 by the late Archbishop Gregorios of Thyateira and Great Britain.

"As you wish that men would do to you, do so to them" (Lk. 6:31).

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The command which Christ gives in our reading from the Gospel today has often been referred to as the Golden Rule of Christian life (or in Greek, ὁ χρυσὸς κανὼν). It shows how practical our life should be.

Fr. John in Edinburgh used to tell us:

"Christianity is a practical business. It's not enough to believe correctly—you have to act correctly. Orthodoxy is not enough. Orthopraxis is also required—the right praxis, the right action. A Christian who believes in theory, in his mind or even in his heart, but does not translate this into acts—acts of love, acts of charity—is not a Christian."

The philosophers of ancient Greece used to say something similar, and yet different: "Do not do to others what you do not want others to do to you." This was a negative teaching—a teaching to avoid doing what you do not like for yourself. But all this did not

involve love. Yes, you can avoid doing something to others that would cause them hardship. And such behaviour is, of course, a good thing—but it is not enough. You can still remain within your egotistic environment.

In the end, one would say, "I will still be able to do what I want, what I like, whether it is righteous or sinful. I will simply try not to bother others." This has become the rule in our own day: "Do what you like, do what pleases you." No one teaches what is harmful, what is inappropriate, what causes spiritual harm. As long as you do not harm and do not bother others, it is all allowed.

Such teaching is, from a Christian point of view, not only insufficient—it could be very detrimental, even harmful. One might engage in a very sinful life. A sinful life basically means life without love. That's what it means: no love for God and no love for others—as long as we don't bother each other. But the Lord goes further. The Lord demands all of our life. He demands all of our heart. He wants everything that we do to be perfect—or at least to aim to be perfect.

We are not perfect. None of us is. Only God is. But we should aim to reach perfection in God. We should be inspired by this thought. As the Gospel today says, to act with love: "Do to others what you would like others to do to you."

Some people might object: "Wait a minute, wait a moment. I might want harmful things. Do I wish that others do to me what I desire? Maybe my desires are not right. Maybe my de-

sires are corrupt. Is this really what the Lord is telling us—that we should do to others?”

No! Basically, I believe that every human being desires the best. That deep down in his or her soul, everyone desires purity. Deep down, everyone desires love—unconditional love. Deep down, under the surface and the dust and sinful life, everyone desires peace, eternal life. That everyone wants God, and everyone desires Christ.

There was an early Christian writer, Tertullian, who used to say that “the human soul is naturally Christian.” No matter where they are, what environment they have grown up in, human souls are by nature Christian.

This is why in today’s Gospel the Lord says: “As you desire—deep down in your heart—the purity of God, the purity of love, so do offer the same to others.” How wonderful this is! We are called to learn to love other people. Some people say, “I don’t know how to achieve it.” We will start with this: as you want the best for yourself, try to do the best for others. And before that, even try to understand others. Try to get into their shoes. Try to even imagine a little bit what they go through. Sometimes it’s not possible for us to understand this unless we have felt the pain—similar pain as the other feels. We don’t know what they go through, and we pass easy judgments.

That’s why the Lord permits pain to come into our lives—so that we become sympathetic and loving, and we know how to practise what He says.

When I was a layman, a very good spiritual father who lived outside of Athens surprised me when he told me:

“When you become a priest—not if, but when—I will give you one piece of advice. Before you give advice to other people, before you try to teach others, or what’s even more, before you attempt to correct them, try to get into their shoes first. Try somehow to examine, to find out how they feel, and try to share and sympathise with them. Then you might be able to give the right answer.”

If we start in this way, then we can proceed to the higher commandment, which again is non-negotiable—like everything that the Lord says: “Love your enemies.” He didn’t say, “Perhaps you might also have a go at it.” Love your enemies! This is a commandment. We have no option.

But how do we do that?

Again, Christianity is practical. Ask the Lord to help you, first of all. Second, if you find it difficult to love the other person—because it has not been granted to you, especially your enemies—you can do an act of love. Act as if you loved them.

That’s not hypocrisy. It’s a blessed hypocrisy. It’s a very blessed thing to do: act, and see if you love them. And what is the supreme act of love? To pray for them.

I’ve said it many times in Edinburgh, and I will say it here again as well. I know someone who had fallen out with a friend of his and had reached the point of cursing (in Greek, *κατάρα*)—cursing the one who was harassing him terribly often. Yet no one should do that. St. Paul says: “Bless, do not curse.”

But the man told me he had cursed the person. I told him: “What you did is against the Gospel. Confess it to God, confess it to your spiritual father. And tonight, as you stand to

pray, take your prayer rope and say at least three Jesus prayers for the person that you cursed today.” He said to me, “Impossible! I will have a heart attack. I will burst. I cannot even think of him, let alone utter his name, let alone pray for him!”

I said, “I will use a powerful weapon that the spiritual father has, which I use extremely rarely. It’s called obedience.”

The next day—or even the same night, I don’t remember—the man phoned me and said:

“Father, I had hardly said one Jesus prayer for this person and floods of tears started coming down, pouring down from my eyes. Tears of forgiveness for this person. Tears of blood.”

Here is a Christian revelation: not even one Jesus Prayer, and the Lord had already seen the willingness on his part—the movement and desire of his heart—and had granted him a wonderful gift: the grace to forgive and to

love, even someone that he had once considered an enemy.

St. Nicholas Velimirovich says something very beautiful. Having examined his life and gone back through all his sufferings and pains—and he suffered a lot, especially when he was taken from Serbia to a concentration camp in Nazi Germany—he said:

“I realised that all my sufferings were actually blessings.” And then he said: “I realised that the so-called enemies were not enemies. My enemies were not enemies.” He said: “I’d rather call them cruel friends.”

And so, if you see that you have enemies—bless them. Go against your feelings. Some people say, “Follow your feelings.” In this case, go against your feelings and bless these enemies of yours, and pray for them.

You will please the Lord, and you will receive His blessing. This is the way to put into action the command that He gives us in the Gospel of today: act with love, and love will be granted.

Amen.

Bishop Raphael: on Forgiveness before Lent

Sunday 2nd March 2025.

The Lord said: if you forgive the sins of others, you will be forgiven. If you don’t forgive the sins of other people, you will not be forgiven. It can’t be simpler than that! If we want to have our sins forgiven, if we want the Lord to forgive us—our many sins, known and unknown—we have to forgive the sins of other people first.

We say these words, hopefully, several times a day, at least once a day,

when we say the Lord’s Prayer.

Lord, we ask God the Father to forgive us our sins, our debts, our trespasses, as we have forgiven, as we forgive those who trespass against us. *As we have forgiven* means that we have already done it, and we continue to do it before we stand before God and ask him to forgive our own sins. You see, the Gospel makes it clear: we cannot go to God, we cannot be united

with him unless we go through our brethren, through our brothers and sisters. If we have something against them, that stops us from approaching and reaching God, that stops us from receiving his grace, we cannot pray! We know it ourselves from our daily experience: if we have something against our brother and sister, if we have not made amends, if we have not forgiven and received forgiveness, we cannot pray. It is difficult to pray.

The Greek word for “forgive” is the verb **synhoro**, which literally means to be in the same space, the same place with others. And of course, with those who have hurt us, those who have given us a difficult time.

And I go a bit farther: it does not only mean to be in the same place, but also, I think, means to walk together. **Horo** is the root of the verb **prohoro**—to go forward, to walk together. That’s what we should aim at. But of course, it’s not always advisable, it’s not always the right thing to do to be in the same place with such people. But we can be in the place of God together. They are in God’s place. They are in God’s space.

We need to be in that space as well, by forgiving them. We can be contained in God’s love, in God’s bosom, together. Even though sometimes it’s better to keep distance from certain people who have hurt us, who have wounded us in our lives—it might not be the right thing to go and be with them again—but in Christ, we can be with them by forgiving them, by taking them spiritually, mentally, and placing them at the feet of Christ and asking Him to bless them and deal with them according to his love.

Some people say that they find it very difficult to forgive. When, as con-

fessors or as priests, we ask them, “Do you mean that you wish harm for these people?” they say, “No. I don’t want them to be harmed. It’s just that I cannot overcome the pain.” It’s usually the pain of past wounds that make us feel that we cannot reconcile with them.

But the Lord is not asking us to overcome this pain by our own strength immediately. He is not even asking us to love them all of a sudden. That’s unrealistic—although it happens to some people. But what he is asking us is to bless them. In other words, to ask Him to bless them, and not wish them any harm.

And how do you do that? The best way, the supreme way, is to pray for them. When we ask people, “Can you pray for your enemies—those who you think are your enemies?” they say, “Yes, I can pray for them.” And even those who think they cannot pray—once they try and go against their feelings and their wound—they see that the grace of God comes pouring down for them, and they reconcile with their brethren in their heart first, unexpectedly.

So let us make an effort, first of all, if possible, and if it’s practically advisable, to ask for forgiveness, to ask them to bless us, to forgive us.

The prayers before Communion say: if you have something against your brother, if someone has hurt you, then you go and ask for forgiveness (in Greek: $\omega \acute{\alpha} \tau \tilde{\upsilon}$ —first be reconciled with those who sadden you, those who cause sadness or sorrow to you. Not those to whom you have caused sorrow—that goes without saying—but also with those who have hurt you. Reconcile with them. Ask for forgiveness because very often we think that

we are right and the other person is wrong, and that their behavior is unreasonable—because we have a very high opinion of ourselves. It doesn't cross our mind that perhaps we have offended them with something, that we have hurt them, that our actions, our omissions, have caused distress to them. That's not the first thing that crosses our mind. The first thing that crosses our mind is that they are difficult or unfair, unjust people, whereas we are innocent.

So it does not really harm to ask for forgiveness for the sins that perhaps we don't know—first from the Lord, and then from our brothers and sisters. And amazingly, wonderfully, the Church asks us to do this always, but especially today—this evening. At Vespers, the Church—our Church—has ordained that, at the end of Vespers, we all come forward and ask for forgiveness from the Lord, from our spiritual father, the priest, and then from one another.

In some places, in some parishes, they follow an old practice of not simply asking general forgiveness, but they go to each one and prostrate before them to the ground (in Greek: μετάνοια, ἑδαφιαία!) and ask for forgiveness. And then they embrace and

forgive one another.

And that's the best way to start Lent—without unnecessary burden. We can say: we can walk this journey of Lent without the terrible, crashing burden of not having forgiven, not having asked for forgiveness.

Let us do that. We will do it ourselves after the end of Vespers before we receive antidoron. Will bow down—not necessarily to the ground—but we will at least bow down to each other. Not necessarily make the prostration, because it will be difficult practically, but we can bow down to each other and ask forgiveness to begin Lent in this way.

I wish you a very blessed, very fruitful Lent. Take advantage of these 40 days, which is one tenth, almost, of our year—but also represents the whole time of our life: a journey of return, a journey of return to Paradise, from where we were expelled because of our incontinence, because of our disobedience.

We are all called to enter Paradise again. Let us start this journey to enter gloriously. I wish to all a glorious and rich entry into Paradise. But listen and follow the instructions of the Church. There is no better therapy than this.