

## **God is in Control and the Modern Witness of St. Paisios**

### **Fr. Hector Firoglanis – Sunday, July 12, 2020**

Today's Gospel reading shows the power of our Lord Jesus Christ in the ongoing struggle of good versus evil. Today is also the Feast Day of St. Paisios, the beloved modern saint of our times whose life shows us how to tap into that power of our Lord to overcome the evil in our world.

We are reminded today that no matter how bad things might look in the world, God is always in control and will have the last word.

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Our Gospel reading begins with a terrible and frightening scene. In the country of the Gergesenes, there were two men possessed by demons who lived in the tombs – far away from the village. (Matthew 8:28-34).

Matthew the Evangelist writes that they were so fierce no one would pass that way.

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What a scary scene that must have been. Imagine passing by one of the cemeteries on the way to church, knowing that two such demonically possessed men lived there and tormented whoever dared to approach.

And yet, there are pockets of evil – just like in today's story – all over the world.

During our current worldwide pandemic, evil does not take a break but rather intensifies as community support structures weaken and collapse. The coronavirus has made people around the world – especially children and the poor – more vulnerable to hunger, homelessness, and exploitation by traffickers. Just as the night is dark, evil and rebellion against God's laws have been present in the world since the Fall of mankind.

This past Friday we all read in the news that Turkish authorities decided to revert the great Church of Hagia Sophia to a mosque, after being classified as a museum since 1935. The fateful decision, met with resistance from the world community, made me reflect on the significant historical role of the Hagia Sophia and the terrible events surrounding this great church during the Fall of Constantinople in 1453.

Saint Olga, whose memory the Church commemorated just yesterday, helped to bring about the Orthodox conversion of the Russia people by planting the seed of faith in her grandson,

Prince Vladimir. Seeking a religion to unify the pagan peoples of the vast Russian lands, Vladimir sent emissaries to study the religions of the neighboring nations.

The emissaries rejected Judaism for various reasons, reported a lack of joy in the Muslim religion and worship, and saw a lack of beauty in the gloomy churches of the Germans.

But at Hagia Sophia, they encountered God in the resplendent beauty of the Divine Liturgy and reported to the Russian Prince: *"We no longer knew whether we were in heaven or on earth; nor have we seen before such beauty, and we know not how to describe it."* This heavenly encounter at the Hagia Sofia helped bring about the conversion of the Slavic peoples to Orthodox Christianity in the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

Such stories of the historical splendor of Hagia Sophia make the fall of Constantinople in 1453 that much more painful to process. When Constantinople fell to the Ottoman armies, the great doors of Hagia Sophia were forced open, and hordes of Islamic soldiers rushed in upon the unfortunate worshippers. Pillaging and killing in the holy place went on for hours. Similar was the fate of worshippers in most churches in the city. Icons were destroyed, precious manuscripts were lost forever. Thousands of civilians were enslaved, soldiers fought over young boys and young women. Death and enslavement did not distinguish among social classes. Nobles and peasants were treated with equal ruthlessness.

Reading history – and the daily news – it is difficult to comprehend the terror and heartache experienced by so many throughout history and throughout our world today.

It is easy to see the Turks as the enemy, the Atheists, the racists, the left, or the right... but we must never forget that underneath it all our true enemy is the devil and his demonic armies who use our sins to separate us from God and turn us away from our fellow man – causing us to dehumanize our neighbor over time... and opening the door to unspeakable atrocities.

When we see and experience such atrocities and hatred in the world, it becomes easy to cry out in despair: **"Where is God?"**

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But in today's Gospel reading we are reminded that – despite the apparent triumph of evil in the world – God continues to be in control. Confronted by the two demoniacs, our Lord displays his power and authority over evil with just one word.

He says, **"Go:"** and the demons immediately – and fearfully – depart to the herd of swine where they had sought permission to go.

Christ shows us through this encounter that God is in total and utter control, even during the darkest and seemingly hopeless circumstances of life – just as He displayed on the Cross his

hidden victory over evil and death during the world's darkest hour, a victory which was made manifest on his glorious third day Resurrection.

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To learn how to harness this power of God in our own lives, we can look to the life of St. Paisios, whose memory we celebrate today, and who was able to accomplish so much and benefit so many people throughout the world – even though he was a humble, reclusive, and uneducated monk who lived most of his life in prayerful isolation on Mt. Athos until his departure from this life on July 12, 1994.

In his younger years, he would do thousands of prostrations each day, repeating the Jesus Prayer: **“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God have mercy on me, a sinner.”** During his time of Mt. Athos, as his fame spread all across the world, he would spend his days in prayer and assisting his visitors, resting for only 2-3 hours each night.

Leaning on his experience as a soldier who served as a radio operator during the Greek Civil War, before he became a monk, he would say that prayer is the heavy artillery against the devil.

Even though he was a monk on Mt. Athos, Elder Paisios was acutely aware of the pain, exploitation, and wars of mankind. Instead of sleeping at night, he would pray for consecutive hours for those suffering from cancer, for orphans, for marriages that were failing, for those about to be in an accident, and for different categories of suffering endured by humans all over the world.

Bishop Athanasios of Limassol (also known as Fr. Maximos in the book “The Mountain of Silence”), was a spiritual child of St. Paisios and had the following words to share about his elder:

**“The Troparion of St. Anthony says, *“He supported the whole inhabited world by his prayers.”* It is my personal opinion, but when I saw Elder Paisios praying in church I thought: If there is some person who holds the helm of the whole world, it isn’t the President of the United States, it isn’t a communist, it isn’t any political leader of this world—it’s Elder Paisios. He is able to steer the rudder of the whole world with his prayers.”**

As Christians we must never forget that our ultimate purpose in this life — as displayed in the life of St. Paisios — is union with Christ and to save our souls through repentance, prayer, and sacrificing for our neighbor.

One great saint during the times of the Turkish Occupation of Greece, St. Cosmas of Aetolia, used to say to the enslaved Greeks, **“If the Turks want your money, give it to them. If they**

**need your houses, give them your houses. If they want your cattle or your fields, give them all of this. Give them everything that they want. Only do not give them your soul... You need your soul and Christ. Even if the whole world were to fall apart, no one can take these two things away from you against your will. Guard these two, and don't lose them."**

As Orthodox Christians, we must never live with anxiety and fear about the future. Rather, we must continuously trust in God, and we must teach our children to do the same.

Right before the wicked Empress Evdokia was about to exile St. John Chrysostom for having rebuked her in a sermon when he was serving as the Patriarch of Constantinople, his deacons came to him and said, **"The Empress is looking for you, in order to send you into exile."** The holy patriarch began to laugh and answered, **"Don't fear – no one can cause harm to John except John himself."**

We have nothing to fear if we have Christ, and as St. John died in exile, his last words were: **"Glory to God for all things."**

As St. John said, the only person capable of doing us harm is ourselves. We are called, therefore, to keep our faith in Christ, to repent continuously, to be obedient to the Church, to endure patiently through our trials, to sacrifice for our neighbor, and to have courage knowing that God is with us – even if it appears that evil in the world temporarily has the upper hand.

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Today's Gospel reading is a reminder that that Light always drives away darkness, that Truth outlasts the father of lies, that Love conquers hate, and that God is always in control.

I will conclude today's message with the memorable words of St. Paisios that I pray will always give us courage: **"What I see around me [in the world] would drive me insane, if I did not know that no matter what happens, God will have the last word."**

To Him be all glory, honor, and worship: to the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.