

## What is the meaning of life?

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Sunday of St Gregory Palamas

15th March 2020

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

What is the meaning of life? What does it mean to be a human being? These questions, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, are fundamental to our existence: among all of humanity, whatever religious beliefs, we ask the questions, "Why am I here? What is the meaning of my life?"

How then are we to approach these questions? We look to our origins, our foundations. Some will look to a *Big Bang*, which led to a series of *causes and effects* which, in turn, led ultimately to you and to me: in other words all my achievements and failures are not the result of *me* but of the *cause and effect* of the universe. I can do nothing which has not been predefined by *fate* – an interesting concept in the age of secularism, science and reason. Yet this line of thinking leaves no room for the cause of the Big Bang, the Ultimate Cause, from which our universe is the effect.

The Church, in her love for us, offers us a different origin. The Church tells us there is an Ultimate Cause, who is not a force, a type of *fate*, but is a personal God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God created this universe and saw that "*it was good.*" And into this Creation God sets man. We, each one of us, are created "in his own image," with dignity and freedom.

My dear brothers and sisters, do you recognise the image of God in all you meet? Do I? Or do we reserve it for our friends and families? For the powerful and important? Do we recognise in the beggar, the sinful, the criminal, the hated, the despised, the downtrodden and the homeless the image of God? Or do we walk by on the other side?

Yes, the Church offers us a different understanding of where we come from, our origins, but she goes further. To understand what our purpose is – the meaning of life, the essence of humanity – we must know our target, our goal.

Our Church has an important message for the world: you are not the result of billions of years of cause and effect, you are *free* – even more so, you are created to become divine. And this destination, phrased by St Athanasius the Great as humans beings "becoming by grace what God is by nature," is of vital meaning to our world. So many within our society feel their lives have no meaning yet we are here calling out: "you are of infinite worth, you matter to us and you matter to God."

So, my dear brothers and sisters, to be a human is to desire to become divine. This is the truth the serpent in the Garden perverted, "you will be like God," but through cunning deceived, and continues to deceive, humanity. But we are not left alone to work out this journey by ourselves, the Church gives us a roadmap, a route to get to our destination.

At the end of the 13th century, a Gregory was born in Constantinople. He lived to become a monk on the Holy Mountain and was eventually elected to become Archbishop of Thessalonica. At the same time there was a teacher called Barlaam who said prayer is merely a mental exercise.

Is prayer a mental exercise in your life? Do you train your *mind* alone to focus on God? Is this practical?

This Gregory defended the practice of the Holy Mountain – and all monasticism – for St Gregory Palamas understood our Creation in the Garden as the formation of humanity being both soul and body. And it is both soul and body which must come into contact with the divine because it is our whole selves, soul and body, which must become divine. We do not believe our body is temporal whereas the soul immortal nor that our soul is liberated from the body in death. Death is against nature, it is profoundly unnatural for the soul to be torn from the body. Yes, according to the Apostle, we *mourn* for the dead, but not “as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.” To St Gregory Palamas was traditioned, passed on, prayer as involving both soul and body and his defence has come to be celebrated on the Second Sunday of the Great Fast, today, as a second Sunday of Orthodoxy for it is a defence of our spiritual life, our prayer, which is integral to our Faith.

Prayer is central to our lives as Christians, for a Christian is one who prays. Prayer is our way of life, prayer is how we bring ourselves before the divine, prayer is our theology: “if you are a theologian,” says St Nilos of Sinai, “you will pray truly. And if you pray truly, you are a theologian.”

To pray we must calm ourselves and have sobriety: we must have control over ourselves – our souls and our bodies. For our bodies the Church offers to each of us the Fast, and St Ignatius Brianchaninov, a 19th century Russian bishop, tells us of the importance of the body in Fasting.

The head or chief of the virtues is prayer; their foundation is fasting. Fasting is constant moderation in food with prudent discernment in its use. Proud man! You think so much and so highly of your mind, while all the time it is in complete and constant dependence on your stomach. The law of fasting, though outwardly a law for the stomach, is essentially a law for the mind.

So our bodies have the Fast to bring us within the correct mindset, the correct body. Yet this is not all our bodies do, we stand in prayer, we look at the Cross, we hear the singing, we kiss the icons, we smell the incense – our whole body participates in the prayer. And our mind and our soul we bring into the presence of God, we focus on him. A practice of the monastics which is available to all of us is the *Jesus Prayer*, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me,” though there are variations in the wording. This prayer is easily memorised and offers us a way to pray without ceasing. This is not “vain repetitions” but what the Fathers term *monologia*, “one wordedness.” It is invoking the name of Christ repeatedly so that we are brought into constant communion with him, removing all other thoughts from our minds so that we may be totally focused on the Lord.

We have just heard of the power of prayer, of deliberately coming into contact with the divine. I would be most annoyed, to say the least, if four people carried a fifth person on top of my house and started dismantling my roof when I had many guests, yet the faithfulness of these friends led to two great miracles. How would you have responded?

The Lord responded, but not in the way many might expect. The Lord not only heard the prayer of these four men, he saw the prayer – for prayer is deliberately placing ourselves in the presence of God, bringing our entire being before him. The Evangelist does not record their words because their prayer has moved beyond words: they are keeping *hesychia* – “silence” or “stillness” – as St

Gregory Palamas would call it, and in that stillness they await with longing the voice of the Lord. "And when Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'" Notice, dear brothers and sisters, the subtlety of these words: he saw the faith of the four and because of this forgave the sins of the paralytic. By the intercessions of some, another was healed. By our prayers, too, the world can be healed: this is our vocation, our role, our place within the created order – to pray for the entire world.

The Lord first healed the paralytic spiritually and only later physically, yet the first was a greater miracle: for while physical suffering is part of life in this world – the only promise the Lord makes for his followers in this life is the Cross – spiritual healing is for eternity. And this great miracle is offered to each of us: forgiveness is given without question, without requirement, without prerequisite. The Lord has forgiven each of us our sins: ours is to accept this forgiveness, ours is to forgive others because God has forgiven us first, ours is to turn the other cheek, give even to the unworthy, go the extra mile, because God has done this for us.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, what is the meaning of life? What does it mean to be a human being? It means to become divine. And the Church has given us a means of doing this, by being prayerful, by subduing our body and soul and enthrone Christ in our hearts through fasting and stillness. Is this, brothers and sisters, *our* goal, *our* destination? Do *we* desire to be divine?

That we may glorify, by the prayers of our father among the saints, Gregory Palamas of Thessalonica, the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and come to the fullness of faith and holiness. Amen.