

THE WORD OF GOD: Choosing Discipleship

REVIEW 5: The Annunciation/Life in the Kingdom/Red Sunday

For Students:

We often hear the word, 'economy' used today to refer to money, business, and finances. However, the word 'economy' is from a Greek word 'oikonomia' which means, 'putting a home in order'. In theology we often speak of God's divine economy, the act of putting creation back in order, when it was thrown into disorder because of Satan, sin, and death. Christ's economy is fulfilled at His crucifixion and through His resurrection. However, the process of putting everything back in order began with the Annunciation and the Archangel Gabriel bringing the good news to Mary and her willingness to accept this awesome responsibility.

1. **How is Mary different from Eve in the Garden of Eden?**
2. **What example can you learn from Mary when it comes to your own faith journey?**

Mary became the example we must all follow in our faith journeys with God. Yet, like we see with Mary, it is not an easy road to travel and there are many difficulties along the path. Sometimes it is difficult to believe and to follow the truth.

3. **John 3:16 is one of the most famous verses in the Bible. What does it mean to believe? How do we believe? Is there a wrong way to believe?**
4. **What is truth? Is truth relative?**

Truth is sometimes not easy to see, but it is there. One truth that we are called to believe and live is the reality that the resurrection is a real event and we too will be resurrected from the dead at Christ's Second Coming. We are reminded of this fact in all of our services, but most especially during the funeral service.

5. **The Gospel reading of John 5:19-30 is read at the burial service in the Armenian Church. Why do you think our Church Fathers decided this to be the reading? What comfort does it convey to those who are grieving?**
6. **What does it mean that the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live? (John 5:28-29)**

Choosing to be a disciple of Christ, as we have seen in our history and in our lives today, is not an easy task. The world we live in today is against the truth of Christ, the resurrection, and the Church. As disciples of Christ, we walk in the footsteps of many who have gone before us and have set themselves as examples of how to live, believe, and testify to the truth. Mary, the Mother of God is one examples, as are the Holy Martyrs of the Armenian Genocide. But another perfect example is St. Athanasius of the fourth century, who said, "If the world is against the Truth, then I am against the world." May each of us choose to be disciples of Christ, the Truth, and the resurrection.

For Teacher:

We often hear the word, 'economy' used today to refer to money, business, and finances. However, the word 'economy' is from a Greek word 'economia' which means, 'putting a home in order'. In theology we often speak of God's divine economy, the act of putting creation back in order, when it was thrown into disorder because of Satan, sin, and death. Christ's economy is fulfilled at His crucifixion and through His resurrection. However, the process of putting everything back in order began with the Annunciation and the Archangel Gabriel bringing the good news to Mary and her willingness to accept this awesome responsibility.

1. How is Mary different from Eve in the Garden of Eden?

Mary's faithful response is that of highest obedience to God. The Incarnation is not only the work of God, but it involves the free response of mankind in the person of Mary. Whereas Eve once disobeyed, Mary now obeys; whereas Eve closed herself to God, Mary opens to His will.

This is also seen and heard when Jesus calls His mother as "Woman" (John 2:4; 19:26). This is a reference to Mary as the new Eve, fulfilling that which the first Eve failed to do.

2. What example can you learn from Mary when it comes to your own faith journey?

For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed."(Luke 1:48)

For two thousand years the Church has preserved the memory of the Virgin Mary as the prototype of all Christians—the model of what we are to become in Christ. Mary was truly pure and unconditionally obedient to God. The tradition of the Church holds that Mary remained a virgin all her life. While lifelong celibacy is not a model for all Christians to follow, Mary's spiritual purity, her wholehearted devotion to God, is certainly to be emulated.

Mary is also our model in that she was the first person to receive Jesus Christ. As Mary bore Christ in her womb physically, all Christians now have the privilege of bearing God within them spiritually. By God's grace and mercy we are purified and empowered to become like Him.

The honor we give to Mary also signifies our view of who Jesus is. From early times the church has called her Mother of God (Gr. Theotokos, Arm. Աստուածածին/*Asdvadzadzeen* lit. "God-Bearer"), a title which implies that her Son is both fully man and fully God. As His Mother, Mary was the source of Jesus' human nature; yet the One she bore in her womb was also the eternal God.

Therefore, because of her character and especially because of her role in God's plan of salvation, Christians appropriately honor Mary as the first among the saints. The archangel Gabriel initiated this honor in his address to her: "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" (Lk 1:28). This salutation clearly indicates that God Himself had chosen to honor Mary. Her favored status was confirmed when she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who was then six months pregnant with St. John the Baptist. Elizabeth greeted Mary with these words: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Lk 1:42, 43). And Mary herself, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, predicted the honor that would be paid her throughout history: "For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed" (Lk 1:48).

The simple truth is that God does not depend on us for anything, but out of love which emanates from his very being, chose to cooperate with humanity, and his incarnation involved a young, faithful virgin dedicated to the Temple.

As a result, the Virgin Mary is the exemplar, the representative of human cooperation and communion with God. So intimate is her communion with the Son of God, by way of her womb, as well as in her heart, in her actions, her *Let it be*, that all of us are called to be in such communion with him as she was, our daily, momentary prayer also being, “Let it be unto me according to Your Word.”

Mary became the example we must all follow in our faith journeys with God. Yet, like we see with Mary, it is not an easy road to travel and there are many difficulties along the path. Sometimes it is difficult to believe and to follow the truth.

3. John 3:16 is one of the most famous verses in the Bible. What does it mean to believe? How do we believe? Is there a wrong way to believe?

Believing is not a mental act, a psychological thought or a statement of faith, but a lifestyle to be lived. It is not just good enough to say we believe, but we must demonstrate our faith in everything we do. This is what believing means for Orthodox Christians. Just saying we believe is not good enough, but, as we say today, we must put our money where our mouth is. John 3:16 says whoever believes, or has *faith* in Jesus Christ, will not die but have eternal life. St. James the Just, the first bishop of Jerusalem in his New Testament letter, teaches us about the harmony of faith and works, that invisible faith is no faith at all, that faith without works is a dead faith and does *not* save. He further makes a distinction between faith that is alive, working itself out, and a false version of faith that only adheres to a creed or set of beliefs. He writes, “*You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.*” (James 2:19)

The wrong way to believe is just to think believing is a thought and not a way of living.

4. What is truth? Is truth relative?

Christ is truth (John 14:6) and truth is unchanging. Truth does not change according to what we believe, feel or want it to be, but is constant, throughout time and culture. The world today thinks everyone has their own truth. This is not truth, but an opinion. Everyone has their own opinions and thoughts, but one person’s truth cannot be different from another person’s truth because truth, by definition, is *a verified or indisputable fact, proposition or principle*. If we believe that Christ is truth, this means we must judge/ measure everything against Christ – we must compare what we see, do and learn with what Christ taught and how He lived.

Truth is sometimes not easy to see, but it is there. One truth that we are called to believe and live is the reality that the resurrection is a real event and we too will be resurrected from the dead at Christ’s Second Coming. We are reminded of this fact in all of our services, but most especially during the funeral service.

5. The Gospel reading of John 5:19-30 is read at the burial service in the Armenian Church. Why do you think our Church Fathers decided this to be the reading? What comfort does it convey to those who are grieving?

This Gospel teaches two important truths to the listeners. First, it reminds the listeners that Jesus is more than just His teachings. Many religions and individual beliefs around the world consider Jesus to be a prophet, a good teacher, and someone to respect, but Jesus is not just an enlightened teacher. Rather His *divine* teachings cannot be separated from who He *divinely* is – God. And as the Son of God, He calls us to follow Him as friends (see John 15:15). As friends, He wants to spend time with us. He wants our love in return, our entire being. He wants to *commune* with us in good times and in times of sorrow.

Second, the Gospel reading comforts the listeners with the truth that the dead will rise again and come out of the graves. This is not only comforting that the one who is being buried will come back

to life, but that we too, the listeners of the Gospel, will resurrect from the dead. However, at the same time, this reading is also a warning and reminder, that we will all rise from the dead, but some to everlasting life and some to eternal condemnation, depending on how we lived our lives.

6. What does it mean that the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live? (John 5:28-29)

The dead refers both to the spiritually dead, who will find life in Christ, and to the physically dead, who will rise in the general resurrection. Christ confirms this statement by raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:38-44) before going to His own death.

Many people do not realize that when Christ returns to earth at His Second Coming, which will be a physical return not a spiritual one, He will resurrect all the dead. That means everyone will come back to life. Unfortunately, in today's world, people are under the impression that when we die, our soul goes to heaven and we become angels or some spiritual being, living forever like that. Neither the Church nor Christ Himself ever taught this.

In fact, when we die, our souls fall into a slumber or sleeping state – this is why we in Armenian, call those who have died ննջեցեալ or հանգուցեալ (nunchetsyal or hankootsyal), one who sleeps/one who is at rest. This reaffirms the belief that when we die, we fall asleep and when Christ returns, we awaken, coming back to life in the new creation which Christ will make. Death is not eternal, but temporary and the beginning of eternal life.

Remember that we always talk about eternal life with the understanding that that life will be a physical life, not a spiritual one. Our bodies in this world can become old and decrepit, through sickness and sin, but when Christ returns and the dead (we) hear the voice of the Son of God, we will come out of the tombs and graves and our bodies will never be able to decay or fall sick again, but will be eternal.

Choosing to be a disciple of Christ, as we have seen in our history and in our lives today, is not an easy task. The world we live in today is against the truth of Christ, the resurrection, and the Church. As disciples of Christ, we walk in the footsteps of many who have gone before us and have set themselves as examples of how to live, believe, and testify to the truth. Mary, the Mother of God is one examples, as are the Holy Martyrs of the Armenian Genocide. But another perfect example is St. Athanasius of the fourth century, who said, "If the world is against the Truth, then I am against the world." May each of us choose to be disciples of Christ, the Truth, and the resurrection.