

THE UNBOUND WORD OF GOD

Protopresbyter-Stavrophor
Vasilije Tomic

Toronto

*With the blessing of His Grace Georgije
Bishop of Canada*

*From the Priests to their Flock
Book 8*

Protopresbyter Stavrophor Vasilije Tomic
THE UNBOUND WORD OF GOD

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P R E F A C E

The fruit of thirty-five years of ministering to the Church

Our contemporary homiletics has been enriched by a new collection of sermons inspired by apostolic readings in the yearly cycle of Sundays and Feast Days, beginning with the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee and ending with the Nativity.

During the course of the development of church homiletics in Serbia, the word *beseda* (homily) has been used among the first by St. Sava, who used the term “soul-edifying homilies.” The church sermon has also been called the “spiritual word” or the “word of truth,” as the monk Domentianus, hagiographer of St. Sava, called his homilies. A biographer of Serbian Patriarch Ephrem says that the Patriarch’s spiritual words were like “drops of honey.” And Archbishop Daniel II, who prepared for the ministry of preaching the word of God by “ceaselessly studying the teachings of the prophets and other divine words,” and having in him the fruit of life – the “words of spiritual teaching,” he gathered around himself all those who needed instruction for the edification of the soul. Two typicons of St. Sava, that of Hilandar and of Studenica, speak of the purpose of sermons which is to be found in the spiritual instruction in the Lord. With all this in mind, we can assume that the art of homiletics was on a very high

level during that time in Serbia.

Church homiletics in the era of the Nemanjic dynasty was firmly planted in the higher ranks of church hierarchy and lived on with a tradition of excellence as a good base for future spiritual guides and preachers of the word of God. Homiletics in this era had all the best characteristics of homiletics in the Church as a whole. St. Sava's divinely inspired homily "On the True Faith" at the Zhicha monastery is proof of this.

During the course of their long history, and because of their specific geographical position between East and West, the Serbian people were forced to defend their Orthodox faith which they confessed in a determined and unshakeable manner, as well as their national identity. Under these circumstances the old forms of Christian homilies acquired a new, patriotic component. The result was that the homilies of any preacher in the Serbian Orthodox Church, whether from the Metropolitanate of Karlovci or from Cetinje, from Dalmatia, Bosnia, Sumadija, or any other region pertaining to the Serbian lands, have a new religious and patriotic characteristic and are full of love and care for their Serbian flock. As such, the sermon was an important factor in forming the national and religious identity of the people and was an inspirational force in their lives. If it were not for the tireless and fruitful sermons of our spiritual elders, perhaps heresies and other erroneous beliefs and customs would have taken root and flourished in our midst; other tragic circumstances such as alienation and assimilation might have befallen us, and the Church would not have acquired the immense moral authority that helped maintain the Serbian national character during the centuries of enemy occupation.

The sermons of Father Vasilije carry across a very similar message. Although we live in very different times and historical circumstances, this comparison makes sense, because his sermons are addressed to the same people, a part of our living Serbian Orthodox Church in the Diaspora who, due to a diverse set of circumstances, found themselves disseminated all over

the planet. Only a powerful sermon supported by the truth of the Gospel, along with the fullness of the liturgical life and the undying memory of our forefathers, can keep us walking upright and make us Christ's followers.

The sermons of Protopresbyter-Stavrophore Vasilije Tomic on the apostolic readings are a part of his anthology of homilies, and they represent something new in the homiletic literature of our Serbian Orthodox Church. While there have been occasional sermons based on epistle readings, a complete cycle of sermons based on every single apostolic reading from the yearly cycle is certainly a novelty in our Church. As a priest with many years of experience and very knowledgeable in evangelical texts, Father Vasilije explains the reasons that led him to undertake this very complex work: "When we listen to the Gospel readings at every holy Liturgy, most of us experience them as complete entities. However, the readings of the Epistles often seem as though they have been pulled out of a wider context and we feel that an introduction is necessary for the sake of better understanding." This is a principle that Father Vasilije adheres to throughout his collection of sermons.

A successful sermon requires a certain theme or topic. All of Father Vasilije's sermons have a common denominator, the constant struggle to help his listeners become better persons and to get a foretaste of the Kingdom of Heaven even in this life. As an experienced spiritual guide, Father Vasilije instructs his flock, as well as all rational and believing people of the world, to preserve their faith in God and in His justice, even if this life brings nothing but misfortune and suffering. By quoting chosen verses from the Holy Scripture, he gives us reassuring answers to this dilemma. He begins methodically with the Old testament instructions of the "My son, if you desire to serve the Lord, prepare your soul for temptation" (Book of Sirach, 2:1). In these words Father Vasilije sees one of the many answers to the question why the righteous suffer (if, indeed, there is such a person or if it is at all possible for a righteous person even to exist). "They suffer in order to be tried

and tested, purified and that their faith become stronger. That is the reason why this sinful world cannot stand anyone who does not fit in. In short: suffering is the destiny of an honest person.”

He adds to this the message and the instruction from New Testament pedagogy gleaned from the teachings of the followers of Christ, His Holy Apostles, and quotes the words of St. Peter: “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy” (1 Pet. 4:12-13). “But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter” (1 Pet. 4:15-16).

To all these quotes from the Old and New Testament, Father Vasilije adds his own fatherly words: “All the holy and righteous people of God were plagued by the same thoughts and dilemmas. People are usually distracted, not unlike little children who become so engrossed in their play that they forget about the whole world. In the same way sinners, in their world of darkness, forget that there is Someone more powerful up there, Someone who watches their every step and move. And when others see them in their passing glory, they may be tempted to say, in the words of the Psalmist, “And they say, ‘How does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?’ Behold, these are the ungodly, who are always at ease; they increase in riches. Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain and washed my hands in innocence. For all day I have been plagued and chastened every morning” (Ps. 73:11-14).

Often his parishioners come to him and ask, “why doesn’t God, as we would like Him to do, smite an evildoer instantly? Why doesn’t He strike him across the mouth the minute blasphemous words come out of his mouth?” Father Vasilije answers first with the wise old proverb “God is slow to deal

justice,” and then supports this with the words of the Wise Solomon: “Behold, the righteous shall be recompensed in the earth: much more the wicked and the sinner (Prov. 11:31). Finally, Father Vasilije brings the words of St. Peter to all those who are plagued by thoughts of injustice in the world: “The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).

By analyzing all the sermons in this book and by placing them in the context of the principles of the modern theory of homiletics, we may conclude that in this collection most of the sermons belong to the so-called moral-instructive type. This kind of sermon is made possible only by the speaker’s deep knowledge of the holy Scriptures and his extensive experience as a preacher of the Word of God. Sermons of this kind are typically short and are always illustrated with practical moral instructions. In today’s world of fast living, when there is so little time for anything, including prayer, this style of sermon has been proven as the most effective.

This collection of church sermons is a significant contribution to our theological homiletic literature. There may be doubts and perhaps suspicions that the reputable Protopresbyter-Stavrophore Vasilije Tomic has been the first to compile a work of this kind. The entire collection of sermons on apostolic readings has been written as a single composition. The language is clear and simple and the presentation is concise, which allows for easy reading. This collection of sermons is part of a larger anthology of church sermons made up of four parts. Although this collection of sermons is not intended to be used as teaching material, it will be a valuable educational tool for both seminary and university students in sermon writing.

This Anthology of Modern Church Homiletics, as we have named it, is the fruit of Father Vasilije’s thirty-five years of ministering to the Church as a priest. I have been honored to know Father Vasilije personally since his days as a parish priest

in the Church of St. Mark the Apostle and Evangelist. Having listened to his sermons on many occasions, I am sure that no one who has ever heard Father Vasilije speak will be surprised at the appearance of this book, which is the work of a priest, spiritual elder and intellectual.

Protodeacon
Stanimir Spasovic

THE WEEK OF THE PHARISEE AND THE PUBLICAN

(2 Tim. 3 : 10 – 15)

All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution

When we listen to the Gospel readings at every holy Liturgy, dear brothers and sisters, most of us experience them as complete entities. However, the readings of the Epistles often seem as though they have been pulled out of a wider context and we feel that an introduction is necessary for the sake of better understanding. This is the case with today's reading of the holy Epistle, which begins with St. Paul's account of Timothy, his disciple to whom this Epistle is addressed and who, unlike others (and we shall soon discover who these "others" were) carefully followed his "doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions" (2 Tim. 3:10-11).

The question arises immediately: who are these "others" who are exempt from all the tribulations that befell the holy Apostle Paul and his disciple Timothy? "But know this," the Apostle himself explains, "that in the last days perilous times will come. For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of

good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power” (2 Tim. 3:1-5).

These are, then, the “others” who have given up and abandoned the path of suffering on which both Apostle Paul and his disciple Timothy walked. For, as the Apostle reminds us, “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12). His words are directed at Timothy and at all of us: the choice is ours. “If you wish to live an honest life, you must pay the price of longsuffering; do not grumble and complain about the Lord.” “But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise for the salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim 3:14-15).

It is evident that the sufferings that befell the holy Apostle and his disciple were common and that the young bishop Timothy was truly surrounded by a “cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1) consisting of fellow Christians and co-sufferers. Just as our Vladika Njegosh teaches us that “our destiny is to bear the cross,” so, too, does the Apostle Paul remind Timothy, and through him, us as well, that for Christians suffering is unavoidable, it is their lot.

Apostle Paul instructs Timothy to remember the fate of all those before him who had accepted the Law and the Will of God as their guidepost through life: “From childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith (2 Tim. 3:15). For what else could Timothy have found in the Scriptures if not a myriad of testimonies about the ordeals and sufferings of God’s people? As the righteous Job puts it, “man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7).

These words on the persecutions of “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim 3:12) still sound somewhat foreign and abstract to many of us today. It is as though they were not directed at us at all. Our ancestors’ faith and their ability to bear afflictions was often put to the test in the past. Our generations, however,

fortunately or unfortunately, have been spared these fiery trials and tribulations. This means that we are either not who we think we are – real Christians, or that the Lord, knowing our weakness, is letting us stand on the side. But, dear brothers and sisters, this cannot go on forever. All that has been said in the Holy Scriptures has either come to pass or will come to pass. For all our spiritual slowness we cannot help but notice that an evil net is being spun around us and our lives. Only a few years back we enjoyed a certain degree of personal freedom. No amount of paper was large enough to accommodate all of our personal information. Only the lives of few “chosen ones” were observed and their information collected and put into files. However, with the onset of the new technical innovations such as computers and microchip technology, all of us have been “honored” by the attention of those who seem to know about us more than we do ourselves. Let anyone try to change their insurance company to avoid paying endless fines for a traffic offense: he will soon feel like a bird trapped in a cage. More and more of our personal information is collected and stored, more and more experiments are being conducted with us, all with the aim of further limiting our freedom. This will continue until the prophecy of St. John the Evangelist comes true about the numbers and the seals on our right hands and foreheads by which they will be able to trace our movements to the most secluded places of the planet.

Therefore, even though we have been spared drastic trials and ordeals, if we belong to Christ, then we must not allow ourselves to be lulled into sleep. We must react to the few tribulations we are faced with. Today we are not led before wild beasts and are not nailed to crosses, but that does not mean that there are no opportunities for us to sacrifice something for the sake of our faith. In this day and age, for example, when the awareness of Christian fasting has all but faded away, it is an act of a certain form of courage to say, while everyone else is feasting on rich and fatty foods, “Thank you, but I am an Orthodox Christian and I am fasting at this time.” How many similar opportunities have we missed to encourage others to change their way of thinking. It is these and similar situations that true followers

of God knew how to stand up for their faith and defend it. “Many are my persecutors and my enemies, yet I do not turn away from Your testimonies,” says the prophet David (Ps. 119:157).

It is human to feel afraid before the prospect of affliction and pain. Better men than we have shown fear in the face of sufferings. “I am afraid of all my sorrows,” admits the long-suffering Job (Job 9:28). However, as the Holy Scriptures teach us, sorrow and suffering carry a deep meaning: their aim is to strengthen and purify us and make us better. “Before I was afflicted I went astray but now I keep Your word” (Ps. 119:67) confesses David.

This is precisely what afflictions are for, as the holy Apostle Peter tells us: “that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:7). The same idea is carried across by the old saying “no pain, no gain.” The holy Apostle Peter gives us the answer to the question about unjust sufferings, when an innocent person is subjected to torment and affliction. “For this is commendable,” he says, “if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow his steps (1 Pet. 2:19-21).

Finally, “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18). “And may the God of all grace, who called us to his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.” (1 Pet. 5:10-11).

THE WEEK OF THE PUBLICAN AND THE PHARISEE

(2 Tim. 3 : 10 – 15)

The godly suffer persecution while evil men and impostors progress

(2 Tim. 3 : 12)

“All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution”

We often wonder, brothers and sisters, where God’s justice is, since human justice is clearly missing in the world. The reason for this is that we often see criminals and impostors, evildoers of every kind, seemingly living a peaceful and easy life and showered with endless attention and respect. On the other hand, we find honest and poor people fighting affliction upon affliction, suffering and leading a hard life, with just about everyone adding to their misery.

In everyone’s life there comes a time when our strength fails us and when it is hard to go on living an honest life. One feels tempted to give up on honesty and honor and to take the wide and comfortable road to wealth, power and success.

Our good Apostle Paul gives everyone who has been burdened with honesty the following advice: our Lord suffered, I myself have suffered and am suffering, and you, too – will suffer, for “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.” (2 Tim. 3:12).

Many of us, dear brothers and sisters, have the wrong idea about the life of a true Christian. We sometimes hear thoughts such as this: "I have such bad luck, my life is a series of failures, I think I'll get baptized and pray to God and perhaps things will turn out in my favor." But our long-suffering Lord is not the answer to these expectations. For it is only when one approaches the Lord from the heart, that the real trials and tribulations begin. In those places which are fully under the rule of the Evil One, in a gambling house for example, there is perfect order and a sense of decency and comfort. Should someone let out a cry of despair, he is quickly thrown out and order is restored. But once the demon is spat on and rejected, he will be there to try to make one's life miserable until the end of one's days, and even beyond. Did not the Lord say, "If the world hates you, you know that it hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: if they persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (Jn. 15:18-20).

"My son, if you desire to serve the Lord, prepare your soul for temptation" (Book of Sirach, 2:1).

This is one of the many answers as to why the righteous suffer (if, indeed, there is such a person or if it is at all possible for a righteous person even to exist). They suffer in order to be tried and tested, purified and that their faith become stronger. That is the reason why this sinful world cannot stand anyone who does not fit in. In short: suffering is the future of an honest person. He has made a choice between God and the devil, and he has chosen suffering. And as the holy Apostle Peter puts it, "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy (1 Pet. 4:12-13). "But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter (1 Pet. 4:15-16).

“But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived (2 Tim. 4:13).

And going back to what I said to you before, one looks at the godless tyrants of today practically mowing down the earth, destroying and poisoning it, sending millions of innocent souls to the depths of despair, and one cannot help but think that there is no end to their evil deeds and that no one will ever be able to stop them. And one is immediately tempted into giving up the honest and hard life and following the majority, consequently selling one’s soul to the devil.

Ever since the world began, all the holy and righteous people of God were plagued by the same thoughts and dilemmas. People are usually distracted, not unlike little children who become so engrossed in their play that they forget about the whole world. In the same way sinners, in their world of darkness, forget that there is Someone more powerful up there, Someone who watches their every step and move. And when others see them in their passing glory, they may be tempted to say, in the words of the Psalmist, “And they say, ‘How does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?’ Behold, these are the ungodly, who are always at ease; they increase in riches. Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain and washed my hands in innocence. For all day I have been plagued and chastened every morning” (Ps. 73:11-14). “When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me” (Ps. 73:16).

For as long as the wise King David racked his human brains and measured things with human measure, he did not come across any answers. “Thus my heart was grieved and I was vexed in my mind,” he admits. “I was so foolish and ignorant; I was like a beast before You (Ps. 73:21-22). But when he directed his thoughts to God, when he tried to see things and events with God’s eyes, then everything became clear to him: “Until I went into the sanctuary of God; there I understood their end. Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors. As a dream when one awakes, so Lord, when You awake, You shall despise their image” (Ps. 73:17-30).

There is the answer to our question, brothers and sisters. We cannot the future of any one of us, but God has permitted us to see and know should suffice for us to bear our troubles meekly and with joy. In the long run, when we compare the burdens and yokes on the backs of sinners, the yoke of the Lord is easy and His burden is light (Mt. 11:30).

“I have seen the wicked in great power and spreading himself like a native green tree, yet he passed away and behold, he was no more (Ps. 37:35-36 (Eccl. 8:12-13). “God is slow to deal justice,” says the old proverb, but to many He is not, and deals His justice right here and now, before our very eyes. “Behold, the righteous shall be recompensed in the earth: much more the wicked and the sinner (Prov. 11:31). Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him. But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow; because he feareth not before God (Eccl.8:12-13).

But why doesn't God, as we would like Him to do, smite an evildoer instantly why doesn't He strike him across the mouth the minute blasphemous words come out of his mouth? “The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). In the end, God's righteous, unsparing, terrible and final judgment awaits us all. If all accounts are settled here on earth, what would there be for God to do? Make no mistake, if those who suffer tremble at the thought of God's judgment, “what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God? Now if the righteous one is scarcely saved, where will the ungodly and the sinner appear? Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator” (1 Pet. 4:17-19).

As I said before, the Lord has the last word. “He who is unjust let him be unjust still; he who is filthy, let him be filthy still; he who is righteous, let him be righteous still, he who is

holy, let him be holy still. And behold, I am coming quickly, and my reward is with me, to give to every one according to his work.”

Toronto, January 24, 2004