

**VIGILANCE - NEPSIS**

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The Lord Jesus Christ said: "...take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap; for it will come upon all who dwell upon the face of the earth... Watch, therefore, and pray at all times." (Luke 21:34-36) "Watch and pray, that you enter not into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Matthew 26:41)

We notice that Jesus mentions drunkenness (μέθη - methe). The opposite of drunkenness is soberness, sobriety, to be sober. And the Greek word for sobriety is nepsis (νήψις). And so nepsis can mean to be awake, to be watchful, to be alert, to be vigilant. And it is vigilance that we will talk about today.

This basic Christian idea of guarding the soul, is one of the main themes of the Philokalia. So much so, that all literature that is in the same vein as the Philokalia, is known as the Neptic Tradition - η νηπτική παράδοση.

When we visited the land of Mani, in the south of Greece, the first thing we noticed was that every house in every village used to be a mini-fortress. This was because, this peninsula, was exposed to constant attacks by pirates coming from the sea. Every, house, every family had to learn to defend itself against the pirates. Today, in an age where pirates are presented as lovable characters, romantic adventurers, we Christians are not fooled. We call a spade, a spade. Pirates were robbers, thieves, murderers. While others worked hard to produce food for their families, pirates would come periodically to take that away from good people.

In the Philokalia, the human being itself is understood as a fortress. This fortress, needs to be defended. Inside, it has valuable goods, treasure, the soul. Robbers and thieves are lurking outside, waiting for an opportunity to attack, to steal, to plunder. The robbers don't need to knock down any walls, or break down big gates to get in. They wait, they ponder, they study movements. They may knock on the door and be friendly, become friends with the householder, gain familiarity.. the householder has let the enemy in. Alternatively, the robbers wait... they see a window open... they get in. They see a door open... they get in. In reading the Philokalia, a big deal is made of the logismoi, thoughts. There are good logismoi and bad logismoi. Good thoughts and bad thoughts. Who is the householder? The intellect (το ηγεμονικόν - to hegemonikon). Which are the doors and the windows? Why, none other than the senses... sight, hearing, smelling, taste and touch.

During Lent- Sarakosti, we chant:

*Λησταις λογισμοίς περιπεσών ο Αδάμ,  
εκλάπη τον νούν,  
τραυματισθείς την ψυχήν  
και έκειτο γυμνός αντιλήψεως...*

*Bandit thoughts have befallen Adam,  
his mind has been robbed,  
his soul has been wounded  
and he lies naked, helpless...*

And that applies to all of us. Thoughts can be bandits, they can be an enemy. We need vigilance, we need alertness, we need **discernment** to know the difference between a good thought and a bad thought. And so this fortress, needs a guard, a sentry. "Who goes there?" "Συ, τίς εί;" "Who are you?"

*Θου Κύριε φυλακήν το στοματί μου  
και θύρας περιοχήν περί τα χείλη μου*

*Place a guard at my mouth O Lord,  
and keep watch around the door of my lips*

(Psalm 141:3)

Evagrius of Pontos warns us: "Be the door-keeper of your heart and do not let any thought come in without questioning it. Question each thought individually: 'Are you on our side, or the side of our enemies?' And if it is one of ours, it will fill you with tranquility." We read in the Philokalia, "Vigilance is a firm control of the mind. Post it at the door of the heart, so that it sees the marauding thoughts as they come, hears what they say; and knows what these robbers are up to ..."

Know what these robbers are up to, indeed! Neptic literature has a deep understanding of the process of sin. It is explained to us in five steps.

**Step 1 - Temptation.**

The mind receives a suggestion or stimulation. If the mind is vigilant and awake, it will notice the threat and will close the door on it.

**Step 2 - Assent.**

The mind will begin dialogue with the suggestion, entertains the idea and gives its assent to it. It lets it in the door.

**Step 3 - Surrender.**

There is a union or coupling with the thought in which the mind surrenders itself to the suggestion and begins to live with it.

**Step 4 - Captivity.**

The mind is captive to the thought, as it readily consents to it time and time again.

**Step 5 - Passion.**

We fall so completely under the power of the suggestion that we are no longer free to resist it. It becomes a passion, it brings us suffering. It becomes the master, we become it's slaves.

St Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain reminds us that the Temple of Solomon had finely woven nets to keep out bugs and insects. Our Byzantine ancestors also had what we would call fly-screens. And the advice of St Nikodemos, one of the compilers of the Philokalia, is that we need to keep out bad thoughts at the first instance, at step one. Zero tolerance.

This fortress, brothers and sisters, needs to be defended. We need *prosoche* and *proseuche*... attentiveness and prayer. It is no accident that one of the common phrases we hear in Orthodox Christian worship is *proschomen - let us be attentive*. Wake up! Pay attention!

What is the opposite of vigilance? Slumber, sloth, laziness, idleness, loitering, boredom. Going back to the Bible, in the Letter to the Thessalonikans, we hear the following words addressed to the Christians:

*For you are children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night nor of darkness. So then, let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.*

(1 Thessalonikans 5:5-8)

πάντες γὰρ ὑμεῖς υἱοὶ φωτός ἐστε καὶ υἱοὶ ἡμέρας. οὐκ ἐσμέν νυκτὸς οὐδὲ σκότους· ἄρα οὖν μὴ καθεύδωμεν ὡς οἱ λοιποὶ, ἀλλὰ γρηγορῶμεν καὶ νήφωμεν. οἱ γὰρ καθεύδοντες νυκτὸς καθεύδουσιν, καὶ οἱ μεθυσκόμενοι νυκτὸς μεθύουσιν· ἡμεῖς δὲ ἡμέρας ὄντες νήφωμεν, ἐνδυσάμενοι θώρακα πίστεως καὶ ἀγάπης καὶ περικεφαλαίαν ἐλπίδα σωτηρίας·

As you can see, brothers and sisters, the spiritual world is like the material world. There is unseen warfare, there are battles to be fought, weapons to be sharpened, armour to be polished, training to be done. And that is what we shall talk about next week... **askesis**, spiritual training.