



Evangelion

A Bulletin of Orthodox Christian Faith

5 February 2017

A Model of Repentance

Today marks the beginning of the period of preparation for Great Lent, when we start using the liturgical texts of the *Triodion*. And today, on the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee, we hear Jesus' parable contrasting the self-righteousness of the Pharisee with the humble penitence of the Publican. It is no accident that the Church chooses this Gospel to set the tone for the coming season. Not only does it warn us of the dangers of fasting, but it also points us to the true aim of our Lenten discipline.

Lent is a period in which we are called to intensify our Christian life, and to focus on disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. It is a time for repenting, turning away from sinful or distracting behaviour, re-orientating ourselves, and focusing our gaze on Jesus Christ. But, in telling this parable, Jesus warns us of the dangers of such religious activities. If they lead us to arrogance and self-righteousness, then our ascetical efforts are missing the point, for, as Saint Cyril of Alexandria tells us, "arrogance is accursed and hated by God."



In choosing this Gospel with which to start this season, the Church holds up the Publican as a model of repentance, and in him we see the true goal of this fasting season. He has come to true self-knowledge, recognises his total dependence on God, and can only cry out, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" Arriving at such humility is often the work of a lifetime, for true humility cannot be imitated, but is usually learnt through a long and painful struggle.

The truly humble person is no longer concerned with comparing themselves to those around them, or seeking to justify themselves. Instead, they are only aware of their own immense need for God's mercy. Let us pray, as we move towards this holy season, that God will help us to grow in such humility.

He who seeks forgiveness of his sins loves humility, but if he condemns another he seals his own wickedness. Just as water and fire cannot be combined, so self-justification and humility exclude one another.

Saint Mark the Ascetic



**5 February is the
Sunday of the Publican & the Pharisee**

Matins Gospel: John 21:14-25

Epistle: 2 Timothy 3:10-15

Gospel: Luke 18:10-14

Resurrectional Apolytikion:

From on high didst Thou descend, O Compassionate One; to burial of three days hast Thou submitted that Thou mightest free us from our passions. O our Life and Resurrection, Lord, glory be to Thee.

Seasonal Kontakion:

Your birth sanctified a Virgin's womb and properly blessed the hands of Symeon. Having now come and saved us O Christ our God, give peace to Your commonwealth in troubled times and strengthen those in authority, whom You love, as only the loving One.

When Abba Macarius was returning from the marsh to his cell one day carrying some palm-leaves, he met the devil on the road with a scythe. The latter struck at him as much as he pleased, but in vain, and he said to him, "What is your power, Macarius, that makes me powerless against you? All that you do, I do, too; you fast, so do I; you keep vigil, and I do not sleep at all; in one thing only do you beat me." Abba Macarius asked what that was. He said, "Your humility. Because of that I can do nothing against you."

From the Sayings
of the Desert Fathers

Readings and saints for this week:

Monday, 6 February: John 10:1-9; Hebrews 7:26-28; 8:1-2; John 10:9-16
Photius, Pat. of Constantinople; Bucolus, Bp. of Smyrna

Tuesday, 7 February: 2 Peter 2:9-22; Mark 13:14-23
Tuesday of Prodigal Son; Parthenius, Bishop of Lampsacus; Luke the Righteous

Wednesday, 8 February: Ephesians 2:4-10; Matthew 10:16-22
Great Martyr Theodore Stratelates; Prophet Zacharias

Thursday, 9 February: 1 John 1:8-10; 2:1-6; Mark 13:31-37; 14:1-2
Thursday of Prodigal Son; Apodosis of the Presentation; Martyr Nicephoros

Friday, 10 February: 2 Timothy 2:1-10; John 15:17-27; 16:1-2
Hieromartyr Haralambos; Anastasios, Patriarch of Jerusalem

Saturday, 11 February: Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:1-6; Matthew 10:1, 5-8
Hieromartyr Blaise; Empress Theodora

Death, Dying, and Eternal Life

A Series on the Orthodox Understanding of the Life of the Age to Come

We live in an age that has in many ways lost contact with the reality of death. Whereas it was common in previous generations for people to die at home, and for their bodies to be lovingly prepared for burial by family members, deaths now frequently occur in institutions and the preparation for burial is almost always in the hands of funeral parlours. Yet, in another way, the modern media inundates us with news of deaths around the world – so much so that we become insensitive to it.

Similarly, many Orthodox Christians are confused about the Church's teachings on what happens at and after death. Many Protestants around us appear to teach that death is the end and refuse to pray for the departed, while beliefs on reincarnation that originate in the religions of the Far East have also seeped into western consciousness and increasingly influence the funeral practices of our society. In this context, it is important to not only know what the Orthodox Church teaches, but also to understand what her teaching is based on.



Death is Not Part of God's Original Intention

The Scriptures and the Fathers are clear that God did not create us for death, but for life. We were created to share in God's own life and death was not part of God's original intention for humankind. Rather, it was the result of the entrance of sin into the world with the fall. In the book of Genesis we read:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.' (2: 15-17)

This does *not* say that death is a punishment for sin, but rather that it is a consequence of it. By exercising their freedom, the first human beings chose a way that led to corruption, sickness, and death. As a result, the whole of creation is "groaning in travail," to use Saint Paul's words (cf. Romans 8: 19-23); it is in need of salvation because it is otherwise on the road to death and destruction.

If we are honest with ourselves, then we know in the depths of our being that death is wrong – it is somehow absurd. We are created for life and most of us instinctively rebel against the idea of being totally annihilated. We need to be saved from death. And this is what Jesus Christ came to do.

This, then, was the plight of men. God had not only made them out of nothing, but had also graciously bestowed on them His own life by the grace of the Word. Then, turning from eternal things to corruptible, by counsel of the devil, they had become the cause of their own corruption in death.

Saint Athanasius the Great

Open to Me the Gates of Repentance...

Today, as we begin our preparation for Great Lent, the Church sings this hymn at Matins that will accompany us throughout Lent. We can see this Sunday as the gate through which we enter into this season of repentance, a sacred season which will lead us on to the joy of Easter.

This is a season in which we are called to repent. Repentance does not simply mean feeling bad about the things that we have done wrong; rather, it involves taking concrete action to turn our lives around. But it is also about more than simply outward actions. The Church encourages to pray and to fast, to give alms and to care for others. But more important than the outward actions is the changing of our hearts. We are called to be renewed in our innermost being.

We often try to avoid facing what is in our hearts, and we have become adept at covering them up and presenting a good facade to the world. Indeed, we may even have come to confuse the image that we have of ourselves with the reality which is much murkier. This time of repentance, with its fasting disciplines and the services of the Church, is there to help us be honest about who we really are before God.

Genuine repentance is a gift from God. We cannot manufacture it but we need to pray to God for the gift of true repentance. For it is only God who can enable us to see ourselves as we truly are. And as we see the depth of our need, we also see the depths of His great mercy. Repentance is therefore not about being gloomy; instead we come to experience a strange but powerful joy as we open ourselves to experiencing the depths of God's love for us.



*Open to me the gates of repentance, O Giver of Life,
For my spirit rises early to pray towards thy holy temple.
Bearing the temple of my body all defiled;
But in Thy compassion, purify me by the loving kindness of Thy mercy.*

*Lead me on the paths of salvation, O Mother of God,
For I have profaned my soul with shameful sins,
and have wasted my life in laziness.
But by your intercessions, deliver me from all impurity.*

*When I think of the many evil things I have done, wretch that I am,
I tremble at the fearful day of judgement.
But trusting in Thy living kindness, like David I cry to Thee:
Have mercy on me, O God, according to Thy great mercy.*