
JOURNEY TO PASCHA

No. 1

Sunday of the Last Judgment



“To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven...”

– Ecclesiastes Ch. 3:1

Christians have always continued mankind’s habit of marking the seasons with special ‘holy days’ and times. For us, these days celebrate Jesus Christ – our God – and His miraculous birth, life, and miracles, His life-saving death on the cross, resurrection and ascension into Heaven.

Of course, these are events worthy of celebration and feasting. But to truly appreciate the joy of these events, a time of reflection is also needed when we refrain from certain foods and eat less (fast), increase prayer and almsgiving, and generally prepare ourselves – physically and spiritually – for the feast. And so we fast before Christmas; we fast before the Dormition (Aug 15); and for Pascha (Easter), the greatest of all feasts when we celebrate the Resurrection of Christ, we have the Great Fast, or Lent.

The power of the fast should not be underestimated. Not only is it good before a feast, it is also useful *after* a feast too. After coming out of the Christmas period – stomach-stretching amounts of meat and cheese, chocolate at breakfast, and just-a-bit-too-much alcohol – the Great Fast before Pascha can help us recover from past over-indulgence. Ultimately Lent should not be about super-human feats of endurance, but instead about bringing us back to ‘normality’; restoring a correct relationship with food/the world and, more importantly, with God.

About the Great Fast

Lent is 40 days long, from 'Clean Monday' to the Friday before Palm Sunday, a week before Easter. The number 40 has a symbolic meaning: the Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness (Ex. 16:35); Elijah abstained from all food for 40 days as he travelled to Mt. Horeb (3 Kg. 19:8); and of course Christ fasted for 40 days and nights after His baptism (which we recently celebrated on 6th Jan). After Lent comes Holy Week, also a period of fasting, giving seven weeks of fasting in total. Originally, Lent was a period of preparation for people wanting to be Christian before their baptism at Pascha. Already baptized Christians used to only fast in the week before Pascha, but when they saw how helpful Lent was to those preparing for baptism they wanted to join in as well! So today Lent is a time of preparation for all the Church.

The word 'Lent' comes from the Old English meaning 'Springtime'; the Great Fast is not a dark, wintery time of starvation but a bright time of illumination and growth.

Great care needs to be taken in approaching this long period of abstinence so that it can be our 'springtime' of spiritual growth and not a cause of irritability, depression or worst of all: pride.

First, the 'rules': the fast of Lent means abstinence from meat, fish, dairy, eggs. Except at weekends, we also abstain from olive oil and 'wine' (i.e. alcohol); generally we should also eat less often. We don't need to worry about what someone is 'giving up for Lent' because we are all giving up the same things. The fast is often lessened for the elderly, ill, pregnant or young mothers and people with other infirmities. Talking to our priest or spiritual father a person can decide how to fast in a way that leads to spiritual growth. As a saying from the monasteries goes: *'keep your eyes on your own plate and not that of your brother'*. How we fast in Lent is a private matter.

Always remember, **the main aim of fasting is to remind us of our dependency on God**. We will feel hungry. We will feel discomfort in the beginning. This is not done so God rewards us but so that we realize our mortality and that without God we cannot do anything. This realization leads us to ask God for help – to pray. Fasting without prayer is just a diet and so both are needed to have a fruitful Lent. So as we reduce what we eat during Lent we must also increase our prayer. Reading the Bible aids us in this. Normally there is a Gospel and Epistle reading set for every weekday – two daily readings. In Lent, there are three: all of them from books of the Old Testament and covering important themes:

The Book of Genesis: describes the fall of man and his expulsion from paradise, and how fallen the world became. Later the readings cover the story of Joseph, who like Christ was ‘innocent’ in his sufferings.

The Prophet Isaiah: begins with a call for fasting and repentance before going on to promise Christ, Whose Resurrection we celebrate at Pascha.

The Book of Proverbs: gives us ethical instruction and reminds us that Lent is not just a time for ‘feelings’ or emotions of repentance, but practical moral effort.

As well as prayer and fasting, charity should also be increased during Lent. In the 2nd century writing *Shepherd of Hermas* we are taught that the money saved by eating less during Lent should be spent on the poor. Charity can also include giving time for someone in need or who is lonely. Making sure that no part of the ‘trinity’ of fasting, prayer and charity is neglected is the best way to ensure our Great Fast is profitable.

Finally, we must remember that Lent is a time for **joy** and not gloom. This is emphasized many, many times in the hymns of Lent. This is because, as St John Chrysostom said: “*Shame comes after sin, but **boldness and joy** comes after repentance.*” Repentance is the aim of the Great Fast. Yes, our actions and weaknesses may make us sad, but when it leads to a change in our life and a better relationship with God, how can we be sad?

All mortal life is but one day, so it is said, to those who labour with love.

There are forty days in the Fast: Let us keep them all with joy.

(Matins on the first Monday of Lent)

So remember: the fast is there to help you; do not neglect prayer and charity; and be joyful!

The springtime of the Fast has dawned,

The flower of repentance has begun to open.

O brothers and sisters, let us cleanse ourselves from all impurity

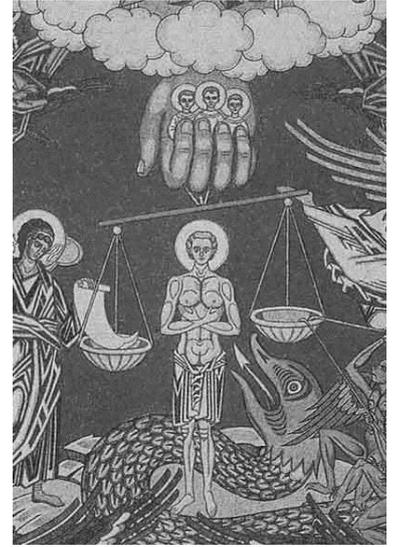
And sing to the Giver of Light:

Glory be to Thee, who alone loves mankind.

The Last Judgement | It's later than you think!

On the second Sunday before Lent begins, we remember the Second Coming of Christ, the end of the world, and the Last Judgement (Matt 25:31-46). We are reminded that although God's love is limitless and He patiently awaits any sinner who turns back to Him, *He does not forgive those who don't repent.*

The world will end, and Jesus Christ will return as a judge. 'Behold the goodness and *severity* of God' (Rom 11:22). This is the message of Lent to all of us: turn back while there is still time. We don't know when the End will come, only that it will be too late to repent after it comes. In the words of the Great Canon of St Andrew used during Lent:



'The end draws near, my soul, the end draws near;

Yet thou dost not care or make ready.

The time grows short, rise up: the Judge is at the door.

The days of our life pass swiftly, as a dream, as a flower.'

The Eight Deadly Passions

Sin is a time when we 'fall short' of what God expects and we need to be forgiven. Yet behind all our mistakes, poor choices and bad habits lies a spiritual sickness that makes us more likely to do these things. The purpose of our Christian life is, with God's help, to be *healed* of our illnesses. First, we need to recognize exactly what our illness is. The monastics who lived in the wilderness had a keen understanding of human nature and one monk, Evagrius of Pontus, identified eight 'tendencies' that lead to all manner of sins and unhappiness. These are called *Passions*, which comes from the Greek word meaning 'suffering' (as in the Passion of Christ). In future issues we will look at each of the passions, how to recognize them in ourselves, and how to fight them with God's help (always with God's help). The eight passions are:

Gluttony | Lust | Anger | Greed | Sorrow | Despondency | Vainglory | Pride

Note: the '7 deadly sins' are derived from the 8 passions, but we will look mainly at the original 'classification.'