
JOURNEY TO PASCHA

No. 2

Forgiveness Sunday



“...If you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”

(Matt 5:23-24)

Making a ‘clean’ start to Lent

The first week of Lent is called ‘Clean Week’. There are a number of reasons why this is a good name. The fasting in Clean Week is often more rigorous, meaning the food we eat is simpler and this acts as a ‘detox’ from past indulgence. In some countries, Clean Week is a time for a Spring-clean of the house. And as we are told by Christ: *‘when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you’* (Matt 6).

Above all, however, Clean Week is a time for us to make our **conscience** clean. This begins at the evening service (vespers) on Sunday, the strict beginning of Lent. This service ends with the Ceremony of Mutual Forgiveness. Here, everyone at church – clergy and the people – bow down before each other and ask for forgiveness. Christ tells us that if we do not forgive others then our Father will not forgive us (Matt 6:15), so we should struggle to ‘not let the sin go down on our anger’ (Eph 4:26) and be quick to forgive. If others do not forgive us it is most likely their problem, but if we do not forgive then it is ours and God will not forgive us. The previous

Sunday of the Last Judgement gave us some perspective on what is important (Matt 25:31-46) and that the time is short. So let us be quick and eager to ask for forgiveness, forgive others, and so make a clean start to Great Lent – or at least the cleanest possible, praying to God to be better.

The Prayer of St Ephraim

During Lent, an extra prayer is added to our personal daily devotions and all weekday Church services: the prayer of St Ephraim. This short, but profound, prayer perfectly sums up the spirit of Lent. It is also accompanied by bows and prostrations, making the prayer not just a mental or verbal exercise, but an act that uses the whole of us – as all prayer should be. The prayer is:

Lord and Master of my life:

Grant me not a spirit of sloth, despondency, lust for power and idle talk

(prostration)

But give to me, Thy servant, a spirit of chastity, humility, patience and love*

(prostration)

Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own faults and not to condemn my brother,

For blessed art Thou unto the ages of ages. Amen.

(prostration)

O God, cleanse me a sinner

(12 times, followed by a bow each time)

(Then ‘O Lord and Master...’ all the way through with one prostration at the end)

* a more accurate translation for ‘chastity’ is ‘sober-mindedness’

A ‘prostration’ is to bow down on both knees and touch the forehead to the floor (similar to how Muslims pray today, though Christians were praying this way before Mohammad was born). A ‘bow’ means to bow down from the waist, keeping the legs straight, and touch the right hand to the floor. Let this prayer be a good and steady companion during our journey to Pascha!

The Canon of St Andrew | Our Story of Sin & Repentance

As well as being 'Forgiveness Sunday', the Sunday before Lent also commemorates the **Expulsion of Adam & Eve from Paradise** (Gen. 3). This event is the beginning point for humanity's, and our, need for repentance and salvation. It is also a major theme for the longest hymn in the Orthodox Church: St Andrew of Crete's Great Canon. The canon is read in four parts over the first four days of Lent as part of compline (service before bedtime), then again in its entirety on the Thursday before Pascha. St Andrew (d. 712) was a monk in Jerusalem from the age of 14, later archbishop of Crete, and wrote the canon towards the end of his long life.

The canon is written as a **dialogue between St Andrew and his soul**:

Come, wretched soul, with your flesh, confess to the Creator of all. In the future refrain from your former brutishness, and offer to God tears of repentance (Mon.1:2).

It therefore gives us an idea of **how to think about ourselves**:

Where shall I begin to lament the deeds of my wretched life? What first-fruit shall I offer, O Christ, for my present lamentation? But in Thy compassion grant me release from my falls (Mon.1:1).

The ongoing theme is **urgent exhortation to change one's life**.

The end is drawing near, my soul, is drawing near! But you neither care nor prepare. The time is growing short. Rise! The Judge is at the very doors. Like a dream, like a flower, the time of this life passes. Why do we bustle about in vain? (Mon.4:2)

Andrew uses literally hundreds of examples – good and bad – in the Old and New Testaments to 'convince himself' to repent, and to compare his own sinfulness to God's mercy:

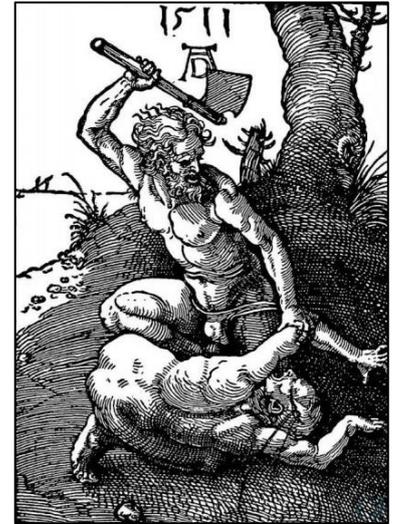
Do not be a pillar of salt, my soul, by turning back; but let the example of the Sodomites frighten you, and take refuge up in Zoar. (Gen 19:26) (Thu. 3:5)

The most important thing to know about the Great Canon is that it was written by a holy man to teach himself the right way to live. We can also benefit by reading the canon at home as part of compline or if not, then at least read the text of the canon standing in front of an icon. This way not only do we 'study' the canon, but make St Andrew's prayer our prayer too.

Look for: <http://stnektariosroc.org/2015/02/texts-of-the-great-canon-of-st-andrew-of-crete>

The Eight Deadly Passions – Anger

St. Nikolai Velimirovich likened humanity today as sheep being driven to slaughter. Pressed together we tread on and barge into each other and in anger we turn and bite our fellow sheep, together forgetting that we are all heading for death! Instead of fighting against this awful fate – which we all share – we instead concentrate on ‘small trespasses’ against each other. Our fight should be against our fall: ‘be angry and sin not’ (Eph 4:26); just as Jesus in sinless anger drove out the money-lenders in the Temple, we should drive out the sins in ourselves, the temple of God. Anger turns into a passion, or sickness of the soul, when it is misdirected or disproportionate. An athlete needs aggression to outrun his opponents and score a goal, but if the ‘red-mist’ descends then he will shoot wildly and ‘miss the target’ – the literal meaning of sin.



Signs of anger: irritability, remembering past wrongs and offences, harboring thoughts of revenge, wishing evil upon others. Leads to outbursts, arguments, judging others (‘rightly’ or wrongly), slander, hurtful words, cruelty, physical violence and even murder.

How to combat anger: the chief virtue that combats this vice is **meekness**. If we see our own faults, bear physical illness or discomfort with patience, and recognize that we all suffer from sin, then it becomes difficult to have anger against others. We can more easily forgive others when we see in them an illness that we also suffer from and want to be healed of. Just as we would help someone suffering from cancer despite them being irritable, let us ‘love those who hate us’, bearing in mind their illness. Remember the words of St Ambrose of Optina: ‘Kindness ... to your neighbors, and forgiveness of their shortcomings, **is the shortest path to salvation**’.

A good way of obtaining meekness is to pray the Jesus Prayer: ‘*O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on **me a sinner***’, with emphasis on ‘a sinner’. Before any act or conversation, say a short prayer like this and it can help to lessen anger, which is impulsive and cannot survive patience. Anger can flare up very quickly, so practice praying like this at all times, not only when we feel anger is close. This way meekness becomes a habit which covers the fiery habit of anger and, in time and with patience, extinguishes it.