
JOURNEY TO PASCHA

No. IV

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 sun 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', this Sunday 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 at matins on Thursday of the 5th week of Lent. 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 – of both 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 – **Avarice (Greed)**

The love of wealth would seem to be the least likely of passions for Christians to have: Jesus talks at length about the burden of material wealth, encouraged His disciples to give up worldly things and lived in poverty Himself. St. Paul even warns us that love of money is the ‘root of all kinds of evil’ (1 Tim 6:9-11)! Yet Jesus and the Saints dwell so much on fighting avarice precisely because we are so susceptible to it. And because *‘where your treasure is, there your heart is also’* (Matt 6:21), acquiring wealth can become an idol: something we devote ourselves to instead of God.

Signs of avarice: love of money, property or possessions; desire to become richer or imagining future wealth. Look out also for the more subtle signs: fear of old age, sudden poverty or sickness; preoccupation with current affairs. Leads to: miserliness, cruelty to the poor, envy, theft, usury, and forgetfulness or lack of faith in God’s providence. **Ultimately we can detect avarice not by how much we own but how we feel when we lose it:** *“Dispossession, then, reveals whether a man's inner state is dispassionate or dominated by passion”* (Maximus the Confessor).

How to combat avarice: the mental health benefits of being charitable are recognized today. Making the giving of money, possessions and time to others a habit will reap extra benefits in seeing the true (un)importance of possessions. Read the Epistle of James and the lives of the Saints to see positive examples of non-acquisitiveness and that status is not linked to wealth. Don’t take out loans on unnecessary consumer goods. Sometimes memories of poverty or debt can lead to avarice later in life, through fear of living like that again; however I have seen others who went through extreme poverty and came out the least avaricious of all. At the time in desperation, they put their lot in with God and He delivered them so that afterwards they knew God would deal with their material needs. Whatever our history, we can all attain such faith through regular prayer, reading of the Bible, and putting into practice Christ’s commandments, all of which brings us closer to God. Focusing our ‘acquisitiveness’ on Him alone, material things lose their attraction and avarice loses its power.

“Behold, now is the accepted time: behold, now is the season of repentance. Let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light, that having sailed across the great sea of the Fast, we may reach the third-day Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour of our souls.” (Aposticha from Sunday evening before Lent)