
JOURNEY TO PASCHA

No. VIII

Sunday of John Climacus



“The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.” (Matt 11:12)

On this Sunday we remember **St John Climacus** (i.e. ‘of the Ladder’). In the 600’s he was abbot of the still existent St Catherine monastery on Mt Sinai, Egypt. St John is named after his most famous work, *‘The Ladder of Divine Ascent’*, a step-by-step guide on the spiritual life. St John is clear that, though written for monks, the principles put forth in his book are for everyone and it is recommended reading during Lent. St John is also celebrated on his feast-day of March 30th.

The Beatitudes: A miniature ladder of divine ascent

At 30 steps, St John’s *‘Ladder’* can be an overwhelming read. A number of saints (Simon the New, Ignatius Brianchaninov, Gregory of Nyssa) also likened the beatitudes (Matt 5:3-10) to steps on a ladder, with each having their own reward and leading on to the next, ultimately to salvation.

1. **Spiritual poverty.** Like St John’s *‘the Ladder’*, the 1st step is the realization of our **need for God** and our inability to do anything by ourselves. We then naturally turn to God and become ‘spiritual beggars’ towards Him, thus already gaining “the Kingdom of Heaven.”
2. **Mourning.** Seeing our need for God, we begin to be sad at all the things that keep us from Him, i.e. **our sins**. Mourning over our state is the beginning of repentance. And if we’re sad about this, instead of earthly cares, then Jesus promises we “will be comforted.”

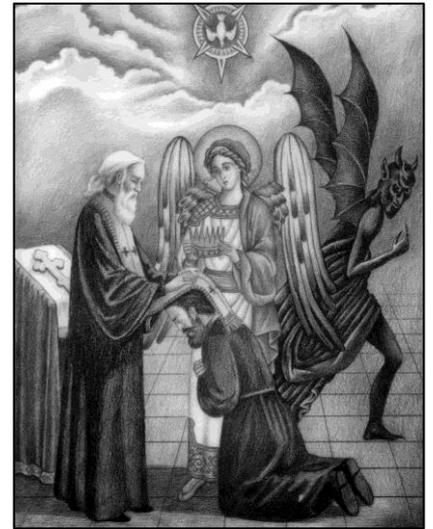
3. **Meekness.** As we continue to repent of our mistakes, bad habits and sins we start to lose any anger towards other people. It is the beginning of humility, which makes us fearless towards anything opposing repentance. Insults, flattery, riches, intimidation or death: nothing can conquer humility and so if we persevere with meekness we “inherit the earth”.
4. **Thirsting after righteousness.** In humility, we will start to desire righteousness **in our own life**. Much frustration comes from ‘thirsting after righteousness’ in worldly affairs, especially if we haven’t first trod the first three steps. With meekness, we will care for anyone who’s suffering, without seeking earthly righteousness, which leaves us unfulfilled.
5. **Mercy.** St Seraphim of Sarov said: *“When we gaze at our own failings, we see such a swamp that nothing in another can equal it. That is why we turn away, and make much of the faults of others.”* If we’ve ascended the first four steps we are ‘thirsting’ after our own righteousness and are so occupied with this we don’t have time to turn away and judge others. We are merciful, and Jesus promises that if we forgive others we ourselves will “obtain mercy” (Matt 6:14).
6. **Purity of heart.** Free of hatred and judging others, we become innocent like *little children* (Matt 18:3). Jesus says we must be this way if we are to enter Heaven and thus “see God”.
7. **Being a peacemaker.** This means more than just being diplomatic. In the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30), Jesus compares the grace of God – the Holy Spirit – to money that must be ‘invested’ in order to gain any return. In all of the above steps, we are using the free gift God has given us to come to this point: the acquisition of the spirit of peace. St Seraphim said: *“Acquire the Spirit of Peace and a thousand souls around you will be saved.”* Living by Jesus’ commandments without hypocrisy leads to us being called “children of God.”
8. **Being persecuted.** Anyone can suffer unfair persecution for all sorts of reasons. Jesus makes clear that it is persecution for **being a Christian** (i.e. following the other 7 steps) that leads to “the kingdom of Heaven.”

This is not meant to be a rigid ‘how-to’ for salvation. It is enough to see that the beatitudes do not describe different ‘types’ of Christian, but that **all** of us should strive for **all** the beatitudes. It also shows how seemingly unobtainable blessings are possible when we first strive to see our own weaknesses, turn to Jesus and begin on the path of repentance.

Guide to Confession (adapted from *Diary of a Russian Priest*)

The struggle with confession begins before we enter church:

“Have I prepared properly? Shouldn’t I put it off?” – these are the tempting thoughts that assault us. We must firmly resist these doubts remembering: *“if thou comest to serve the Lord, prepare thy soul for temptation”* (Ecc 2:1). For most of us, our parish priest is the person we confess to. He is enough. The power of the sacrament isn’t dependent upon the ‘holiness’ of the priest. When King



David arranged Uriah’s death after sleeping with his wife (2 Sam 11), the repentant king cried:

“against Thee O God, Thee only, have I sinned.” (Ps 50:4). All the truly repentant want is to confess their sins and feel relief; it doesn’t matter who hears them. How do we prepare for confession?

1) Searching the heart. We often don’t think we’ve done anything ‘particularly bad’ & struggle to think of things to confess. This is because our conscience has not been ‘fed’ with Christ’s teachings and so cannot ‘accuse’ us. Reading the Bible (esp. *Matt 5-7; Rom v 12; Eph 4 and Jam 3*), along with pre-communion prayers, will help ‘bring to mind’ our faults and the ways in which we have fallen short of godliness. Another good habit is to think about the things we’re often criticized for by others, especially our loved ones. The criticisms are almost always well-founded.

2) Feeling repentance. Recounting our sins often leads to heartfelt repentance, but not always. When there’re no strong feelings it is important to *confess anyway*. Sometimes tears over our sins will come during confession, and if not then we can confess the ‘insensibility’ itself. Lenten practices like prayer and fasting lessen our feeling of material comfort, encouraging repentance.

3) Oral confession. Speak boldly and precisely without using vague expressions (e.g. *“I broke the 7th commandment”*). Don’t bring up ‘extenuating circumstances’ or others who led you into sin – this is your confession, not theirs! Don’t be embarrassed if you cry, or discouraged if you don’t.

Our repentance isn’t complete until we make the firm resolve not to sin again. This may seem impossible, but experience of regular confession and communion shows the opposite. What is true is that confession doesn’t stop us sinning altogether. But, as St John Climacus says, *“Don’t be afraid, even though you fall every day, so long as you don’t depart from the ways of God; stand courageously and the angel who guards you will respect your patience.”*

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

Before John Climacus was celebrated, the 4th Sunday of Lent was dedicated to the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) – which can still be observed in the hymns for today (especially at Matins). We are probably familiar with the purely moral meaning of this story. But the Church Fathers also read the parable in a deeper way that speaks about us, our sin and our healing.

In the Lenten reading, the man is Adam – you & me – and he was travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho. Jerusalem is the heavenly abode (literally “*city of peace*”), which is safe, but a hard, rocky place. Jericho is in a fertile plain, a land of plenty, but a hot, stultifying place that is open to attack. The man **goes down** from the heavenly city in order to enjoy the material pleasures of Jericho; this is our life when we succumb to passions (gluttony, greed etc.) and follow worldly pursuits. And how does the world repay us? We “fall among thieves”, i.e. among sin:

“Robbed of my thoughts and scourged by my transgressions, O Saviour, I have ruined my life, and I have been stripped of Thy divine image...” (Ode 8, Canon at Matins)

The Priest and the Levite represent the Old Testament Law and Prophets. Good in themselves, they are simply unable to help us in our weakened state of spiritual sickness and injury:

“When the Levite saw me, injured and in pain, thinking my wounds incurable & unable to endure the sight of them, he passed by on the other side...” (Ode 7, Canon at Matins)

In such a state, who else can save us except our Lord Jesus Christ, the Good Samaritan?

“Thou hast come down upon earth, O Saviour, taking pity on me when I was wounded by sin... and Thou hast poured upon me the oil of Thy mercy.” (Ode 8, Canon at Matins)

Jesus Christ “binds our wounds”, giving us self-control and stopping the haemorrhage of sin. He provides the “oil of mercy” to soothe us. Jesus sets us upon His own beast, which represents the Incarnation – God coming to us, when we were prostrate, unable to even comprehend Who

He is. The inn is the Church, which is where we stay in order to be healed. “In the morning,” the Samaritan – Christ – left, as He left when He ascended to Heaven (Acts 1:9-11), but as in both the parable and reality, He left with a promise to return. Let us be healed when that day comes!

“Bind up, O Jesus, the wounds of my soul, as the Samaritan bound the wounds of him that fell among thieves, and heal me from my pain, I pray, O Christ.”