

SUNDAY OF THE PUBLICAN AND THE PHARISEE *St Luke 18:10-14*

Today's Gospel reading concerning the two men who go up to the temple to pray marks the beginning of the services which are contained in the service book called the Lenten Triodion. We will continue systematically through the book week by week during the pre-Lenten period and through the Great Fast itself and finish the book on the night of Pasha (Easter) when we move on to the service book called the Pentecostarion. I strongly recommend you to buy a copy of the Triodion if you do not have one. Like St Paul's letters, as St Peter says, there is much in them that is difficult to understand but conversely there is much of great spiritual value that we can take from it. Bishop Basil's little book of sermons are invaluable in clarifying the Sunday texts.

This story of the Publican who throws himself on the mercy of God rightly stands as the entry door to the Fast though which we must pass. In fact, we cannot make any progress unless we pass through it because it is a kind of spiritual precondition of our relationship with God. The prayer 'God be merciful to me a sinner' is at the very heart of Orthodox worship. It begins the morning prayers for each of us with three prostrations; it is recited several times in different forms secretly by the priest during the liturgy and it is contained in the Jesus Prayer, which we are told to pray as frequently as possible during the day in our work, rest and if possible in our sleep. There are many aspects to the prayer but the one I wish to look at today is that of the humility of the Publican. The word literally comes from the word for ground in Latin and it tells us that we are to consider ourselves as far from heaven as the earth and to be as open and receptive as the earth is to what is sent to us, accepting what God gives us; like the earth receives the elements in their very diverse forms, giving thanks for it whatever the circumstances and transforming it for good as far as is in our power, because it is in the will of God for each of us. But if we look at the letter of St Paul to the Philippians we see it is supremely the nature of God in Christ, who stripped himself (literally emptied himself) of his equality with God, not thinking it a thing to be grasped, and took the form of a servant. Now this taking the form of a servant is enjoined upon each of us in whatever way God calls us to serve him. But it is the spirit of humility which we are asked to learn in today's parable and carry it with us at all times as far as we can. What is the spirit which it is so vital for us to have and without which we cannot make any progress in the spiritual world? 'Blessed are those who see their own sins', the Fathers tell us. Repentance is truly a gift of God, which we are told to pray for earnestly.

One clue to the secret of humility is in the life of St Silouan of Mount Athos. Soon after his arrival from Russian on the mountain as a young novice he had an experience of the Holy Spirit which gave him an indescribable feeling of the love and beauty of God. He was utterly transported within and like most human beings he wanted the experience to stay forever. However, to his dismay he found it leaving him more and more as he became more and more preoccupied with the experience and grew in pride rather than simply living out the commandments as if nothing unusual had happened. Desperate not to lose the feeling he prayed God urgently and suddenly a message came to him from deep within: 'Keep your mind in hell and do not despair'. For the rest of his life this message became a rule by which he lived and which enabled him to pray deeply for

his own sins, for those of the world and particularly for his enemies. The feeling of God's love and sweetness returned very often as he humbled himself before God. This keeping the mind in hell is to remind ourselves constantly of our sinful nature; to see ourselves exactly as we are no different from other men, in fact much worse, the chief of sinners – if we really receive the grace of seeing our own weaknesses. And to see our sins clearly is a terrifying thing, requiring great courage and the gift of insight, which can sometimes lead because of our pride to despair, as it did in the case of Judas Iscariot. He could not like St Peter face the fact that he had betrayed Christ three times and had to reaffirm his love humbly three times on the shores of the sea of Tiberias, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' Hence the important reminder: 'and do not despair'.

As friends of the bridegroom we have confidence before God that he loved us, died for us and that his spirit is at work in us to draw us closer to him. We fall down many times but we are forgiven and lifted up. We are habitual sinners. Sometimes we have to be lifted up because we cannot get up ourselves. This power of God in weakness is another important aspect of humility. St Silouan says it is the most powerful spiritual force, which the devil cannot resist because in its essence it reflects the action of Christ in descending to man through being born as man. There is no act of love and humility greater than this and if we can reflect just an image of it, evil has no power against it. He also tells us of an incident in his cell when the devil appeared to him before an icon. Only when he prostrated himself on the floor and cried out to God in his utter helplessness did the demon disappear.

Now we too have demons that appear to us, not physically, that would be far too easy, but in subtle devious ways which ultimately draw us away from God to a greater or lesser degree. That is what sin is: moving from God's love be it ever so small. The Greek word for sin, hamartia, means exactly this, missing the mark. 'We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with us in our weakness,' we are told by the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews even though we commit the same sins again and again. You do not even have a parish priest, who is not bound to each of you through his awareness of sin. The sacrament of confession is as moving and as powerful for the priest as the penitent. It is only the consciousness of his own sin and solidarity with the penitent and the sense of God's power in seeming weakness that can inject the confession with meaning and forgiveness and with healing and new hope.

As we prepare ourselves for the Fast may God grant us all to know something of the depth of the Publican's repentance in today's Gospel that we too may experience the faithfulness and love of Christ for each one of us, which alone can inspire us to greater acts of service. Amen.

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