

February 17, 2008

Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee

The season of Nativity and its ensuing celebrations has been a time of celebration and appreciating the accomplishments of our church in so many ways. Friday night was our traditional Theophany talent show, where we shared the artistic fruitfulness of many members of our church community. We saw quilts, paintings, ceramics, miniature houses, knitting, woodworking, musical presentations. It truly capped, in a most delightful manner, the extended Nativity season, showing how sweet it is to dwell together in brotherhood and unity, and especially to appreciate the children and their many talents.

Now we see in the Triodion a turning to the sweet season of repentance of Lent, which challenges us to grow in the depths of humility and obedience, cultivating compunction and zeal for the interior life of prayer, fasting and alms giving. We hear the hymn of prayer, "Open unto me, oh Giver of Life, the gates of repentance." Now the Church calls us to see how much we are like the Pharisee and how much we need to become like this tax-collector. I've heard it said, over the years, that this tax-collector, who dares to not even raise his eyes to heaven, is the same Zaccheus, whom the Lord asked to come down from the tree, and took supper in his house. Therefore, this view of the tax-collector can be seen as an example of one who has repaid all those from whom he took wrongfully and whom he offended. He has fulfilled the initial stages of repentance, but now realizes how much he is dependent upon the mercy of God to be cleansed interiorly.

The Pharisee should remind us of ourselves when we say, "I'm basically alright. I've done most of the things the church prescribes," when we say to ourselves, "I feel justified." The Pharisee is a confident man. He really believes he has followed the Law and that he is righteous in the eyes of God. In the way he sees the world, other people have not sacrificed nearly as much as he has, and are certainly not pleasing to God as he believes himself to be. The Pharisee, like we are sometimes, believes he can pull himself up by the bootstraps, and reach to the throne of God. So, if there was a problem in the past, it is all straightened out now. This Pharisee did not move toward the Lord because he believed he had already arrived. He was self-satisfied and contented. In the words of Fr. Alexander Men, "He thanked God as if he was aware that this was by God's gift, but he took pride in it, as if he had achieved it himself."

It is interesting to see spatially in the Temple, where these two men would have been. In the historic architectural configuration of the church, the Pharisee would be standing in the front of the nave, close to the ambo. The Tax-collector would be standing almost outside the church, in the porches, with his head bowed, saying, "Lord, Jesus Christ,

have mercy on me, a sinner. So for all of you who like to stand in the back of the church, remember the model given to you in today's gospel of the tax collector and the prayer of his heart.

There is a touching story about a mother who pleads with Napoleon to spare her condemned son's life. The Emperor speaks to her and reminds her that her son's crime was heinous and that true justice demands his life. The mother, pleading on her knees, says to him, "Please, not justice, but mercy." Napoleon replied, "He doesn't deserve mercy." to which the mother replied, "Sir, if he deserved it, it would not be mercy." Looking at her with fresh eyes, softened by mother's love and tears, he said simply, "I will have mercy."

Continuously, in our life in the church, we ask for mercy. Our response to the litanies is usually "Lord have mercy." In morning and evening prayers, we beseech God to have mercy upon us and also our loved ones. We are told that we cannot buy God off by outwardly fulfilling the many observances of the church, as the Pharisee attempted to do. Rather we are reminded that "the sacrifice for God is a broken spirit", real compunction for our sins and a broken and contrite heart. This God will not despise.

The tax collector, with the words, "God be merciful to me, a sinner" turns away from the world and towards God, as the true Physician who will heal him. In so doing, he shows us the way to real prayer is through humility. St. Isaac of Syria writes, "Until a man achieves humility, he will receive no reward for his works. The reward is given, not for the works, but for humility." In the exterior view, the Pharisee is more advanced spiritually. But from the view of the heart, it is the Publican who has achieved the grace of God. The Lord says to us, "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other."

The Publican knows he is sick and seeks the Divine Healer, the Physician of our souls and receives healing. The Pharisee cannot be healed, because he cannot see that he is sick. The fervent prayer of a sinful, but repentant person leads not to eternal debasement, but to the restoration of his soul in paradise. Salvation comes not from the confidence we have in ourselves, but comes to us in our contrition as sinners, who stand before God. This interior state of contrition enters our heart, and as St. Dimitri of Rostov says, "The heart set on fire will warm the inner man, will enlighten and teach him, revealing to him all its unknown and hidden wisdom, making him like a flaming seraph always standing before God."

The Church in great wisdom, gives us this parable to prepare us as we begin the journey of Great Lent. By teaching us the ways in which we are like the Pharisee and how important it is for us to become like the Publican, we are reminded that he who exalts himself shall be humbled, and that he who humbles himself shall be exalted. This parable is not really so much about two men going to the temple to pray, but about

how God sees us and what are our true accomplishments and our true failings. To quote St. Ephraim the Syrian, "Man's repentance is God's celebration." Amen.