

Forgiveness Sunday

March 9, 2008

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Last night's vigil service gave us many reminders of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise and therefore, the need to attune our hearts and lives in such a manner that we might return from exile to our true home. We are reminded of the Lord's reassurance to His disciples when he told them, "Henceforth I call you friends, for all things that I have received from my Father, I have made known to you." As the disciples were called "friends" in their intimate friendship with God, and their obedience even unto martyrdom, so too, we are, as members of the Church. We are called to receive the immense love, grace and forgiveness of God. The Lord calls His disciples friends on many occasions. He refers to Lazarus in his death, as "our friend who sleepeth". And to Judas, he says, "Friend, wherefore art thou come?" Like our forefather Adam, Judas was allowed to walk with God, but turned from God in his pride.

Now on this Sunday, the very beginning of Great Lent, we are given the opportunity to deepen our friendship with God and each other as Christians. Like the disciples, we need God's grace to accomplish this wondrous activity. The disciples wanted to learn to pray and asked the Lord to instruct them. At the end of that prayer, which we now refer to simply as the "Our Father", the Lord gives us this three-fold remedy for our sickness and estrangement from God. This remedy should be seen in the context of fervent prayer. First we are told if we don't forgive our neighbors who trespass against us, neither will we be forgiven our trespasses against God, our sins. So the very first thing we are called upon to do is to forgive. We are reminded that there is very little value in abstaining from certain foods without abstaining from the usual blame-placing games, and returning insult for insult. The Lord gives us this wondrous prayer the "Our Father" and allows us our own free choice to forgive or not. And each one of us knows from the depth of our heart when this real forgiveness comes.

In a few hours, we have our Forgiveness Vespers. It is our endeavor to enter into this door of forgiveness in an ever widening and ever deepening manner the whole of Lent. The Lord will not violate our freedom or force us to forgive, but shows us by His own example on the cross, the extreme depth of His forgiveness. In speaking of His persecutors, he says, "Abba, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do". Christianity is brought into being by the forgiveness of our Lord, by His example and by His instruction. But it does not end there. We are forgiven all of our sins as we are baptized, as we confess. But we are also obligated, as the Lord's friends, to forgive each other. Therefore, let us tear down the walls of enmity, indifference, hatred, the walls that destroy our happiness, isolate, and bring to us strains of great loneliness. These walls are tougher than titanium, and yet these are the walls that melt in the presence of forgiveness.

The second part of the three-fold remedy that Christ gives us in today's gospel, is that when you fast, "Anoint your head, wash thy face, that your fasting may not be seen by man, but by your Father who sees in secret. And your Father who sees in secret, will reward you." The meaning here is very clear for us. We are not fasting to show to people around us our spirituality, how good we are, how faithful we are. But rather, we are fasting out of love for God and real concern for the salvation of our souls. What is important here is that God sees us, knows us, and he reads inwardly, from our very hearts, And as God sees us in our striving, like the Prodigal Son, sees us turning from the muck and mire of the world and our own personal sins, He comes to us and embraces us. Our fasting is also a reminder of the spiritual state that Adam and Eve enjoyed in paradise, before the disobedience. The Church reminds us as well, we should save money by our fasting, and find ways to give the food or money we have saved to those who are hungry. As Isaiah 58, v. 6-7: "Is not this the fast that I chose? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless, poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him?" When our fasting helps to open our eyes and to see, without judgment, the needs of our neighbors, that we know is pleasing to God. The Triodion says, "The Lenten spring is come. The light of repentance. Let us receive the announcement of Lent with joy! For if our forefather, Adam, had kept the fast, we would not be deprived of paradise'

Finally, in this Gospel, we see the third element of the remedy that God gives us. The gospel tells us that there is a treasure, a reward for which we can strive. Not an earthly, but a heavenly treasure. St. Nikolai instructs us, "We are always in company with our treasures, whether on earth or in heaven. Our thoughts are with our treasures, our hearts are with our treasures, and so is our will - whether on earth or in heaven. We are tied to our treasures as a river is to its channel - whether on earth or in heaven. If we lay up for ourselves treasures upon earth, we shall be rich for a time, but poor for all eternity; if though, we lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven, we shall be poor for a time, but rich through all eternity."

Throughout all the centuries of the Church, our brothers and sisters have fought to give up their earthly treasures that they might have the greatest treasure to gain Christ Let us use this Lent to strengthen our relationship, our intimacy, our friendship with God. And our obedient love to the One Who fashioned and made us and by His incarnation, death and resurrection, saves us. To know Christ, to love Christ, is to receive the greatest treasure that there is.