

**FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT
(ST. JOHN OF THE LADDER)
MARCH 5/18, 2007**

HEBREWS 6:13-20

ST. MARK 9:17-31

by

Fr. Dr. Photios+ (W)

Gospel: *And one of the multitude answered and said, Master, I have brought unto Thee my son, which hath a dumb spirit;*

And wheresoever he taketh him, he teareth him: and he foameth, and gnasheth with his teeth, and pineth away: and I spake to Thy disciples that they should cast him out; and they could not.

He answereth him, and saith, O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you? bring him unto Me.

And they brought him unto Him: and when He saw him, straightway the spirit tare him; and he fell on the ground, and wallowed foaming.

And He asked his father, How long is it ago since this came unto him? And he said, Of a child.

And ofttimes it hath cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him: but if Thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us.

Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth.

And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief.

When Jesus saw that the people came running together, He rebuked the foul spirit, saying unto him, Thou dumb and deaf spirit, I charge thee, come out of him, and enter no more into him.

And the spirit cried, and rent him sore, and came out of him: and he was as one dead; insomuch that many said, He is dead.

But Jesus took him by the hand, and lifted him up; and he arose.

And when He was come into the house, his disciples asked Him privately, Why could not we cast him out?

And He said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting.

And they departed thence, and passed through Galilee; and He would not that any man should know it.

For He taught His disciples, and said unto them, The Son of Man is delivered into the hands of men, and they shall kill Him; and after that He is killed, he shall rise on the third day.

...

St. John Climacus:

Cry out to God, Who has the strength to save you. Do not bother with elegant and clever words. Just speak humbly, beginning with, 'have mercy on me, for I am weak' (Ps. 6:3). And then you will come to experience the power of the Most High and with help from heaven you will drive off your invisible foes. The man who gets into the habit of waging war in this way will soon put his enemies to flight solely by means of spiritual resources, for this is the reward God likes to bestow on those who put up a good struggle, and rightly so.

[*The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, Paulist Press, New Jersey, copyright 1982, (paperback Edition) p. 184.]

...

Archbishop Averky:

A life of fasting, properly understood as general self-limitation and abstinence, to the annual practice of which the Church always calls us with the Great Lent, is really that bearing of the cross and self-crucifixion which is required of us by our calling as Christians. And anyone who stubbornly resists this, wanting to live a carefree, happy, and free life, is concerned for sensual pleasures and avoids sorrow and suffering – that person is *not* (emphasis supplied) a Christian.

Bearing one's cross is the natural way of every true Christian, without which there is no Christianity.

...

Truly never before has the cross of each person who wants to be a *true* (emphasis supplied) Christian been as heavy as it is in this time of the triumph of falsehood which we are experiencing.

[St. John the Baptist Parish, Canberra, Australia, Archbishop Averky, *On Prayer, Fasting and Bearing the Cross*, at <http://www.stjohnthebaptist.org/au/articles/index.html>.]

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Without Prayer Fasting Is But A Diet.

[*Fasting*, Orchid Land Publications, 2003, at <http://orlapubs.com/AR/R282.html>.]

Christ, Peter, James & John Return From the Transfiguration

Jesus took these three disciples to the mountain where they witnessed Christ's Transfiguration. Whilst coming down, He had commanded them not to say anything to anybody about what they had seen.¹ When the Lord came to the other nine, they were queried by the scribes (Pharisees). In Christ's absence, they were trying to turn the disciples away from Him. The throngs greeted Him as if He were a long-lost traveler. No doubt they were amazed at His countenance which "had become more beautiful from the light of the Transfiguration, and thus it drew the multitude towards Himself to greet Him".²

The Unbeliever, Really All the Jews

An unbeliever interjects an answer to the Lord's query of the Pharisees "What question ye with them?" He had brought his 'possessed' son to be healed and was upset the disciples could not cast it out. Now he complains against the disciples showing his unbelief. After all, he should have mentioned it privately, not before the entire forum.³ The unbeliever accused the disciples of lacking healing power, but our Saviour 'turns the tables' on him alluding to the truth, that it is the unbeliever's lack of faith that hinders his son's healing.⁴

The Lord, however, made it known that the disciples were hindered and thwarted by the man's lack of faith; He reproached him and clearly rebuked him before all, saying, Because thou lackest faith, it is *thy* (emphasis supplied) fault that thy son was not healed; the great doubt and disbelief in thy heart overcame the modest power of My disciples.⁵

When the Lord answers him "Oh faithless generation..." He is really addressing everybody. He reproaches "*all* (emphasis supplied) the Jews for their unbelief". His words convey His agony in living with them and their unbelief.⁶

He Heals Nevertheless

See that Christ does not just reproach them, He heals the son. He sets out the ‘condition precedent’ for his son’s curing: belief in the Lord:

If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth.

The father cried out, with tears “Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief”. His cry of faith was heeded.

Healing Humbly

The Lord doesn’t hog the glory, does He? No, He attributes the healing to “the man’s faith”:

Not for show or to please men does He heal the sufferer; rather, He does so with great humility, for He connects the healing with the faith of the father who came (to Him) and not with His own power alone.⁷

He rebuked the demon by commanding him to come out and not re-enter:⁸

... the fact that He said, Come out and enter no more into Him, shows even more clearly that it was *not* (emphasis supplied) a case of illness, but of demonic torment.⁹

Christ requires Us to help

The Lord lets the “spirit rend the son” so all assembled recognise the attack as one of a demon that would have been fatal *but for* the intervention of Christ. Jesus strengthened the father to act and when the man did so by pledging his belief and requesting help for his unbelief, He granted his plea for Divine assistance:¹⁰

But Jesus took him by the hand, and *lifted* (emphasis supplied) him up; and he arose.

Christ lifting him up is “the Divine help” – “and he arose” – this is the man’s efforts to do good.¹¹

Why Couldn’t the Disciples Cast It Out?

After the healing and Christ comes into the house, the disciples ask Him privately why their efforts were unsuccessful. His reply is direct and simple:

This kind can come forth by nothing, but by *prayer and fasting* (emphasis supplied).

Prayer Coupled with Fasting

The disciples were concerned they had lost Christ's grant of grace, but the Lord answers that the "whole race of demons" won't come out unless one prays *with* fasting. Both the healer and the healed must pray and fast:

Both are necessary. Good sense dictates that the one suffering must fast. He must not only fast, but also pray; and he must not only pray, but also fast, for *true* (emphasis supplied) prayer is rendered when it is yoked to fasting. When the one who prays is not weighed down by the effects of food, his prayer is not burdened and ascends early:¹²

Real Fasting

Holy Hierarch Basil the Great:

There is both a physical and a spiritual fast. In the physical fast the body abstains from food and drink. In the spiritual fast, the faster abstains from evil intentions, words and deeds. One who truly fasts abstains from anger, rage, malice, and vengeance. One who truly fasts abstains from idle and foul talk, empty rhetoric, slander, condemnation, flattery, lying and all manner of spiteful talk. In a word, a *real faster* (emphasis supplied) is one who withdraws from all evil.

As much as you subtract from the body, so much will you add to the strength of the soul.¹³

Do We Fast?

St. John Chrysostom:

Do you fast? Give me proof of it by your works.

If you see a poor man, take pity on him.

If you see a friend being honoured, do not envy him.

Do not let only your mouth fast, but also the eye and the ear and the feet and the hands and all the members of our bodies.

Let the hands fast, by being free of avarice.

Let the feet fast, by ceasing to run after sin.

Let the eyes fast, by disciplining them not to glare at that which is sinful.

Let the ear fast, by not listening to evil talk and gossip.

Let the mouth fast from foul words and unjust criticism.

For what good is it if we abstain from birds and fishes, but bite and devour our brothers? (emphasis supplied)

May HE who came to the world to save sinners strengthen us to complete the fast with humility, have mercy on us and save us.¹⁴

Don't Bother if...

Venerable Ephraim the Syrian:

If thou, O man, dost not forgive everyone who has sinned against thee, then do not trouble thyself with fasting. If thou dost not forgive the debt of thy brother, with whom thou art angry for some reason, then thou dost fast in vain. God will not accept thee. Fasting will not help thee, *until* (emphasis supplied) thou wilt become accomplished in love and in the hope of faith. Whoever fasts and becomes angry, and harbors enmity in his heart, such a one hates God and salvation is far from him.¹⁵

Sorrow and Suffering Will Become Joy

At the close of today's Gospel, they leave and pass through Galilee, the Lord teaching His disciples of His upcoming Passion and Resurrection on the third day. When He spoke of His coming Passion, He would do miracles before and after such words to emphasise that His future suffering was not because He was powerless (rather, it was completely voluntary). When He expressed the truth that He would be killed, He offset this sad event with the *joyful* news of the Resurrection! This teaches us "that gladness always follows after grief, and that we should not anguish needlessly in our sorrows, but should hope for better things".¹⁶ The disciples did not fully understand, but they would in time.

Brethren all of us should learn from today's Gospel the importance of *real fasting*. During Great Lent, our fasting needs to be directly correlated with showing compassion for our neighbours, neighbours being all people. Our good works should be prefaced by prayer. Remember, we do not pray and fast to show others how spiritually superior we are to them. Couch our good works in as much anonymity as possible, be humble in doing them in other words. This is Christ's Way, the Way of the Royal Path.

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

¹ Bl. Theophylact's *Explanation of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Mark, Vol. II* in the series, Bl. Theophylact's *Explanation of the New Testament* (tr. from the original Greek by Fr. Christopher Stade), Chrysostom Press, House Springs, MO, 1997, p. 74.

² *id.*, pp. 75-76.

³ *id.*, p. 76.

⁴ *id.*

⁵ Hieromonk German Ciuba (tr. from the Slavonic into English; tr. from the original Greek into Slavonic in the year 6851, A.D. 1343), *The Gospel Commentary*, Russian Orthodox Church of the Nativity of Christ (Old Rite), Erie, PA, 2002, p. 106.

⁶ Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

⁷ Ciuba, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

⁸ Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-77.

⁹ Ciuba, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

¹⁰ Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

¹¹ *id.*

¹² *id.*

¹³ *Orthodox Advices, Fasting*, p. 1 at http://www.sfaturiortodoxe.ro/orthodox/orthodox_advices_fasting.htm.

¹⁴ The Russian Orthodox Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, *St. John Chrysostom on Fasting*, at <http://www.stjohndc.org/homilies/homfast.htm>.

¹⁵ *Orthodox Advices, Fasting, op. cit.*, p. 1-2.

¹⁶ Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-78.