

The Nativity Fast / Galatians 2:16-20

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Last Sunday we heard the Gospel account of how the Lord cleansed a man who lived in the tombs by the Sea of Galilee and was possessed by a legion of demons.

And we heard how the people of that region, the Gaderenes, were greatly afraid and were unwilling to receive Christ into their midst because they knew that by doing so they would have to change their ways; they knew that Christ would cast out their demons and cleanse them from their passions, and this they could not bear.

And we saw how we too often resemble the Gaderenes, when we prefer the passing things of this world, whether they be good, bad, or neutral, to the eternal things of heaven, to a life of holiness in God.

Finally, we saw that for us to enter heaven, that is for us to reach a state of being where we love to be in God's presence, we need to change, we need to repent, we need to elevate our desires from good things to godly things, from the creation to the Creator.

In ten days we will be entering the Nativity Fast or as it is sometimes called, the season of Advent; a forty day period of preparation for the celebration of the coming of Christ in the flesh, His Incarnation of the Holy Virgin Mary.

When the Fathers speaking about this Fast, and fasting in general, they tell us many things. They tell us how fasting strengthens the will, purifies the body, frees the mind, and softens the heart. How it makes us less sluggish and more willing to pray, how it teaches us compassion by sharing in the sufferings of the poor, and how it reveals to us our own weaknesses making us more aware of our need for God.

And the Fathers give us many images to help us understand how fasting can help us reach the goal of our Christian life, that is, how fasting can help us truly desire life with God. Today we'll speak of just one.

St. Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain writes, "When a king plans to easily subdue an enemy city that is fortified by strong walls, he cuts off the food supplies to those people in the city and thus causes them such hardships that they in time decide to surrender themselves."

The Christian, he writes, uses the same strategy in gaining control over his passions; little by little, depriving himself of bodily pleasures, no longer permitting his mind to dwell excessively on earthly desires, and by so doing in a short time he brings his passions to submission.

But, as St. Nicodemus explains, while the body and mind fast, they cannot remain idle. Instead they must seek spiritual nourishment through the reading of Sacred Scripture, the acquirement of the virtues, the practicing of the Lord's commandments, the contemplation of the meaning of life, and most importantly through the practice of prayer.

When this twofold strategy is employed the fast becomes profitable and we easily take the kingdom which resides within us. But without pursuing spiritual nourishment, our own army, that is our resolve, will become weak and will not have the strength to subdue the enemies forces. Then we will see the fast as not only unprofitable but also contemptible; something which does not bring joy but rather frustration.

The message of this illustration is very clear: without proper fasting we will not take the kingdom of God within us.

Of course this message from St. Nicodemus is no different from what the other Fathers have said. St. Seraphim of Sarov even went so far as to say that if one does not fast then he or she cannot call themselves an Orthodox Christian. Now this may sound shocking, but if we think about it, what is an Orthodox Christian except one who rightly follows Christ.

We know that Christ Himself fasted and prayed not only for forty days after His baptism in the Jordan River, but also through His earthly ministry. We know that Christ taught His disciples about fasting, saying

“And when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, of a sad face. For they disfigure their faces so that they may appear to men to fast. Truly I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to fast, but to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret shall reward you openly.”

And of the necessity of fasting, Christ taught His disciples that some demons and some passions could come out by nothing but prayer and fasting.

Brothers and sisters, if last week we emphasized that when the Lord said, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”, He was calling us not so much to an external change in the way we live our lives, but more so to an internal change in what we live our lives for, this week let us emphasize the Lord's words, “the Kingdom of heaven is taken by violence, and the violent take it by force!”

In today's Epistle, the Apostle Paul tells us that “he has been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer he who lives but Christ who lives in him.”

In this one short statement we see everything we need to know about the Christian life. We see the goal: Christ living within man. And we see the way: crucifixion with Him.

No one will deny that crucifixion is a horrible and bloody ordeal. Nor will anyone deny that the war on the flesh which we undertake especially during in the fasting seasons is difficult. Yet at the same time we know that no victory is possible without struggle and no resurrection is to be had with Christ unless we first undergo crucifixion with Him.

As we look ahead to the Feast of our Lord's Nativity, to Christmas, and as we see on our horizon all the preparations, the shopping, the decorations, the invitations, and everything else which goes into the festivities, let us not forget that the one thing that takes the longest to prepare and the one thing which requires the most effort to prepare is our own heart.

The Church gives us forty days and we need each and every one of them. Let us plan out our attack now, ahead of time, and as an army sends out spies before the battle, let us look into our hearts to see what within us needs to be crucified with Christ.

And through a regiment of daily study, reflection, the fulfilling of the commandments, the acquiring of the virtues, and the practice of prayer, let us strengthen our resolve and increase our desire to take hold of the kingdom within us.

Brothers and sisters, the only way to enter the kingdom of God is to change our desires, to start loving God above all else. Christ Himself tells us, and the Saints bear witness, that this is not possible without fasting.

Let us firmly resolve to apply ourselves to the Fast and thereby seize the Kingdom of God which awaits us within.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!