

Saint John the Merciful And the Good Samaritan

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

Glory to Jesus Christ!

These past two Sundays we saw how for us to ascend from earth to heaven, we need to redirect our desires from the things of the world to the things of God. And we saw how the soul cannot make this ascent to heaven without first breaking the bonds which tie it down to the earth through fasting and self-denial.

Yet, we know that just as a bird, who has been freed from its cage, cannot fly into the clouds without flapping its wings, so too the Christian, who has been freed from the desires of the flesh through fasting, can not ascend to the heights of heaven without prayer and almsgiving.

This is why whenever the Fathers speak of fasting, they always speak of prayer and almsgiving as well, for Christ came not only to free us from our passions but also to unite us to His Heavenly Father through prayer and to each other through acts of love and mercy.

It is fitting then, as we enter in on the Nativity fast in just a few days, that today the Church celebrates the memory of St. John the Merciful, a man whose life exemplified not only mercy for which he was named, but also prayer and fasting.

This great seventh century saint, was at first a married man who lived in piety with his wife who bore him several children. But when through God's providence, his family passed on the next life at an early age, he became a monk and applied himself more diligently to prayer and fasting. In a short time, because of his rare virtue, St. John was chosen to be Patriarch of Alexandria, the third largest city of the empire, behind only Rome and Constantinople.

On the very day of his consecration, St. John ordered that a list be compiled of all the poor and downtrodden people of Alexandria and that these people be provided for each day out the treasury of the Church.

Because the list exceeded 7,500 names, St. John was ridiculed by many of this contemporaries, who feared that in only a short time the treasury of the Church would be depleted.

Yet, he endured their complaints, reminding his accusers that as God has unlimited resources, He would care for both the poor and the Church. And in turn he posed the question to his accusers, who would win a contest of generosity: we who provide for the poor, the benefactors who provide for the Church, or the Lord who provides for both?

Such examples of St. John's generosity and care for the poor abound, but we will mention just a few more today.

On one occasion, one of his clergy who was appointed to distribute alms, gave a rich man fallen on hard times only a third of the sum that St. John had instructed him to give because he thought it unreasonable to empty the treasury for one person. But very soon afterwards he was put to shame when St. John revealed to him that a noblewoman who had meant to make a huge gift to the Church, gave in the end, only a third of the amount which she had first intended.

On another occasion, a rich man gave the Patriarch a luxurious bed-cover as a gift. That night St. John was unable to sleep. He was up all night blaming himself for laying in luxury, while there were poor, cold, and hungry people outside his door. So the next day, he sold the bed-cover and gave the money to the poor. However, when his benefactor came across the bed-cover at the market, he immediately bought it back and again gave it to the Saint, who in turn sold it and gave the money to the poor. This continued many times over as neither would give in. And in this way St. John indirectly prevailed upon the rich man to give away a great fortune to the poor.

At another time, a poor man who had already received alms, came to St. John twice more under different disguises asking for money. When it was pointed out to the Saint he ordered that the man be given twice as much, saying, "Maybe he is Jesus my Savior who has come on purpose to put me to the test."

Throughout the life of St. John we see the same thing, as the Church increased Her almsgiving, so too did God increase the Church's treasury. This of course not only strengthened the people's trust in their holy Patriarch, but also and more importantly it strengthened their faith in Christ who said, "Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, not about your body, what you shall put on... but seek first the Kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

When one looks at the life of St. John, one cannot help but wonder how this man acquired such great faith to show such mercy to the poor without worrying about his own estate or that of the Church. How did he ascend to such heights of virtue? How was he able to so intensely and steadfastly seek the Kingdom of God and its righteousness without worrying about worldly cares?

Of course, the answer is simple: St. John applied himself diligently to the Christian life, that is to prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

Through fasting and self-denial, he broke the chains which tie men down to earthly living: the desire for eating, drinking, and making merry; for money, property, and possessions; and for praise, status, and the esteem of others.

And then no longer being shackled by these things he ascended to heaven through ceaseless prayer and innumerable works of mercy.

When we look at the lesson of today's Gospel and the parable of the Good Samaritan, we see perhaps the most famous and illustrative story of mercy and compassion. For even in secular circles, we here of so-and-so being called a Good Samaritan for his or her generosity and kindness.

Yet, at the same time, in the persons of the priest and the Levite, we see the most horrific examples of self-love and lack of compassion.

What was it that led these men to disregard the plight of their neighbor who lay on the side of the road beaten and left for dead? After all one of them was a priest and the other a Levite – these were two people who without a doubt knew the commandment to love and care for one's neighbor. So what was it that kept them from fulfilling the Lord's command?

Here too the answer is simple: they were bound by the shackles of earthly thinking and worldly cares. They said within themselves, if we weren't on the road traveling, if we weren't going someplace, then maybe we could help him, but unfortunately we have our own concerns and problems to take care of, let him be, some else will attend to him.

Of course, what the priest the Levite did not know, is that to fulfill the commandment of God: to love Him with all one's whole heart, soul, mind, and strengthen and to love one's neighbor as oneself, one has to be willing to give up not only one's wants and desires, but also one's entire life – one has to be willing to exchange one's love for one's self, for love of God and one's neighbor.

And so what the priest and the Levite could not do because they were bound by their own selfish cares, St. John the Merciful did with exceptional success – that is he denied himself and followed Christ, caring for those in need, whether the necessity was of the soul or the body.

Brothers and sisters, as we enter the fast, let us remember two things.

First, let us remember that to inherit eternal life, we must love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strengthen, and our neighbor as our self.

And second, let us remember that the only way to this blessed state is through fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. Through fasting our souls can be freed from passionate attachments to the earth, through prayer our soul can ascend to the love of God, and through almsgiving we can learn to love our neighbor as our self.

We have heard the parable of Good Samaritan. And we have seen how St. John the Merciful fulfilled this teaching in his own life. Let us also take heed to the Lord's words and "Go and do likewise!"

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

Glory to Jesus Christ!