

The Sunday of the Last Judgment

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

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Today, as we draw ever closer to the start of the Great Fast, the Church sets before us the image of the Second Coming of Christ, the end of the world, and the Dread and Final Judgment.

In today's Gospel reading the Lord tells us that when He will come again, He will not in meekness and humility as a young child born in a cave, but He will come in glory, surrounded by His angels, and He will sit upon the throne of judgment.

And as our Judge, He will separate us into two groups, as a shepherd divides his flock, those who chose to follow His divine commandments will be as sheep on His right side and those who chose otherwise will be as goats on His left.

Now, in the likening of the righteous to sheep and the unrighteous to goats we see something very instructive. For as it is characteristic of sheep to follow their shepherd in meekness and with gentleness, so too do the saints humbly follow the Lord into the eternal pastures of heaven.

And, on the other hand, as it is characteristic of goats to be disobedient and unruly, walking dangerously near the edges of cliffs, likewise, those who choose not to follow the Good Shepherd distinguish themselves by their stubbornness and willful character, disobediently passing their life on the edge of spiritual ruin.

And so the Lord divides all of mankind into two groups – those who hearing His gentle call choose to follow Him and those who turn away from His voice, stubbornly choosing their own way.

Yet as the Gospel account reveals, the division between sheep and goats is not based solely upon obedience and disobedience, but also upon whether or not we show mercy and compassion to our neighbor.

For in the Day of Judgment, the Lord who sees all and knows all, will reveal with perfect certitude the manner in which we have dealt with one another. Either we will have showed compassion and mercy – feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, taking in the stranger, and visiting those sick and in prison – or on the other hand we will have neglected these things, caring only for ourselves and our own welfare.

Even in this life, we have a sense of this forthcoming divine justice, for the Lord has planted deep within each of us a conscience, which demands that we follow His Gospel teachings and the Golden Rule, doing to others as we would have them do to us.

In the words of St. John Chrysostom, this God-given conscience serves as an impartial and just court within man's mind and heart, either convicting a man of sin or else proclaiming his innocence.

For this reason, St. Paul when writing to the Hebrews not only explained to them that he always strove to have a good conscience towards God and men, but he also even implored the Hebrews saying, "Pray for us; for we trust that we have a good conscience in all things willing to live honestly."

The conscience, therefore, enlightened by the grace of God and informed by the teachings of Christ, has the ability to reveal to man a sort of forecast of the judgment to come. And in a very real sense, man by virtue of his conscience already experiences a foretaste of his upcoming reward or punishment.

In St. John's First Epistle he writes "Beloved if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and we receive from Him whatever we ask, because we keep His commandments and do what pleases Him." Here St. John is explaining that the one who keeps the Law of God will acquire a clear conscience which gives him boldness before the Lord. This blameless conscience will allow him to experience even in this world the peace and joy of union with God.

While on the other hand, the man with a guilty conscience is plagued by the emotional disorders of pain, anxiety, and fear, and according to Chrysostom, such a man takes no pleasure in eating, nor in friendly conversation, and is not freed from this unrest even when asleep. St. John even goes on to say that the guilty man who lives in evil already experiences the punishments of hell in this life, being pierced by his own conscience.

And so, we see the conscience as a great gift but also a great responsibility:

A gift because the conscience can direct us to good works and the avoidance of evil, thereby saving us from the fate of the condemned at the Dread Judgment. Yet, also a responsibility in that our conscience if defiled will bring upon us much torment both in this life and in the next.

Yet, as we know, even if we have a guilty conscience there is no reason to despair for the Lord has given us repentance and confession as a means to change our ways and wash our consciences clean.

In fact, the Lord spoke of His Dread and Final Judgment for the very reason of spurring us on to repentance and confession, setting before us the hope of eternal joys and the fear of eternal torments.

And for this same reason, the Church placed this Gospel reading just one week before the Great Fast – the season of repentance – the season where we cleanse our souls and bodies, our minds and hearts, and our conscience from all stains so that we can receive with joy and peace the Lord's Pascha.

And so, brothers and sisters, let us not be neglectful of our repentance, nor turn a deaf ear to our conscience, but instead let us listen to the voice of our conscience as the gentle and meek voice of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, calling us, His sheep, to the greener pastures of His heavenly kingdom.

For by doing so, we will obtain not only peace and joy in this life, but also a favorable decision at His Dread and Final Judgment.

To Him be the glory, together with His eternal Father, and His all-holy, good, and life-creating Spirit, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.