

Forgiveness Sunday
“That All May Be One”

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

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Today, brothers and sisters, we find ourselves on the threshold of the Great and Holy Fast, the season of repentance and spiritual struggle in preparation for the Feast of Feasts, Pascha. And today we partake of dairy products for the last time as we give ourselves over to a more intensified period of prayer and fasting.

It would seem therefore that the Church’s primary instruction this Sunday should be ascetical in nature. However, as we have just heard in the Gospel, the Lord speaks to us first today about forgiveness, and only then about fasting.

On this Sunday, the Church also calls us to remember the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise, an expulsion due to the sin of disobedience, a sin which brought corruption and death not only to Adam and Eve but also to the entire human race. In remembering the Ancient Fall, we are reminded of the need to address the problems at hand – the problems which face the entire human race: sin, death, and the devil.

And how are we to address these problems?

In today’s Gospel reading we heard a call to keep a truly spiritual fast and to redirect our desires from the things of this world to the things of heaven. But, as we have said, this was not the primary message of the Gospel. For our Lord begins His instruction with a call to forgive one another so that we might receive forgiveness from our Heavenly Father. This is the most important message. Our Lord says,

“For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

Our Lord gives this instruction first because it is foundational to the Christian life – not just during Great Lent but at all times. Here our Lord is telling us that if we do not forgive our neighbor then all of our fasting, prayer, and ascetical efforts will be for naught.

For it is through this forgiveness that we can become one with Him and with our neighbor. Through forgiveness we can be reconciled to God and united to Him in love. And after all, is not this union what we were created for?

Let us remember the Fall in Paradise. Adam and Eve, through sin, separated themselves from God and each other. This separation, this gulf, between man and God widened as

the generations passed, each generation becoming more perverse and corrupt than the previous.

Man no longer lived as a communal being, as he had once done in Paradise. Instead he found himself at enmity with God and also with his fellow man, distrusting him, warring against him, despising him, and even killing him.

Though, as we know, the mercy and love of God could not allow this to continue forever.

He sent His Son into the world to grant reconciliation, forgiveness, and restoration to his creation which had been fractured by sin and self-love. Before going to His voluntary Passion, the Lord prayed for both His disciples and all who would believe in Him. He said:

“I do not pray for these alone [meaning the Disciples]; but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also, may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.”

Here in these few words lies the reason for the Incarnation and also the goal of the Christian life, that all may be one, as the Father is in the Son, and the Son is in the Father, and that all may be one in God.

Too often we lose sight of this goal and we see Great Lent, and the Christian Life in general, from the eyes of man fallen, fractured, and selfish. We hear the call to fast and we know that we must struggle intensely, applying ourselves to fasting and attending more church services, running the good race, fighting the good fight, grasping the eternal life for which we were created.

But at the same time, we sometimes fall into individualistic thinking, believing salvation a matter between us and God alone, having very little or even nothing to do with our neighbor. And when we think this way we often find ourselves running the good race against each other by fasting in competition, or fighting the good fight against a fellow Christian by attacking him with harsh words of judgment and criticism. Or even, God forbid, setting up stumbling blocks by provoking one another, that our brother might fall off the narrow path so that we could traverse it more easily alone.

And when we act this way, we reveal that we do not yet have the mind of Christ which desires that all may be one. Instead we are bound by the mindset of this age – the mindset which led to the fall of Adam and Eve and the mindset which still enslaves the world to sin and death.

And so, as we begin the Great Fast, let us seek to avoid two pitfalls which can undermine all our efforts.

The first is the desire to distinguish ourselves from our brothers, showing ourselves to be better Christians than they, by practicing greater asceticism and deprivation in a

spirit of arrogance or conceit. This type of fast is what the Fathers call the “Fast of the demons” because it is based on pride.

And the second pitfall which is just as dangerous, is the desire to separate ourselves from our brothers because we think them overzealous or too enthusiastic about the Fast. This type of attitude reveals not only judgment of our brother but also a lack of understanding about the importance of Great Lent.

In both cases, we isolate ourselves from our neighbor, thereby destroying the point of the Fast, which is to unite ourselves to God and each other – first through forgiveness and then through the common struggle of fasting, prayer, and charity.

After the Divine Liturgy today we will celebrate the Holy Rite of Forgiveness. We will ask one another to pardon our sins, shortcomings, and offences from the past year, and we will offer the same forgiveness to our neighbor that we ourselves hope to receive from God.

And if we have trouble doing so, let us remember just two things. Let us recall how our ancient Fall has separated us from God and each other, leading to not only brokenness and individualism, but also sin and death. And let us also remember with compunction and reverence what our God has suffered on the Cross in order that He might restore us to unity.

And so with forgiveness in our hearts and desire for repentance in our minds, let us resolve enter upon the great season of the Fast with the prayer of our Lord on our lips and in the depths of our souls: that all may be One, as He is in the Father and the Father in Him, that all may be One in the unity of God’s love.

To our One God in Trinity be the glory: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.