

## **Sunday of Saint John of the Ladder**

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

Glory to Jesus Christ!

On each Sunday of the Great Fast, the Church sets before us a different image or speaks to us of a different theme which can help us on our journey to Pascha.

Already we've seen that to experience the joy of the resurrection in our own personal lives, we need to be refashioned and restored to the image and likeness of God, shining forth with divine radiance as the holy icons whose restoration we celebrated on the first Sunday.

We've seen through the example and teaching of St. Gregory Palamas that for this to happen, for us to be recreated after the image of Christ, we need to enter into the stillness and quietude of the Lenten season. We need to enter into the desert of our own hearts, where we can encounter the Lord who dwells within us through His baptismal grace.

And last Sunday, we've seen that not only do we need to meet the Lord in our own hearts but we must also deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow Him – follow Him through the sufferings of Golgotha and into His Heavenly Kingdom.

Now today, on this fourth Sunday of Great Lent, the Church sets before us another image and another theme. The image is that of a ladder, a spiritual ladder, and the theme is that of an ascent, a divine ascent.

The image comes from the book, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, written in the 6<sup>th</sup> century by a monk of Mount Sinai Monastery named John. In this book, Saint John sets forth in a series of 30 steps, or rungs of a ladder, the ascent of the Christian to God.

Throughout the centuries *The Ladder* has been one of the most influential books ever written on the spiritual life, as it was read not only by monks and nuns living in remote monasteries like the one in which St. John struggled at the base of Mount Sinai but also by single and married people living in the world, in the cities and villages throughout the East and West.

Now, as we have said there are thirty steps or rungs on the Ladder of Divine Ascent but today we will focus on just one – the first rung, what Saint John refers to as renunciation or renunciation of the world.

Renunciation of the world, as we know, is the very beginning of Christian life, without which one cannot make an ascent to God, for how can one's mind and heart ascend to heaven if one's thoughts and desires have not left the earth.

We recall that when our Lord began His preaching, He did not immediately speak of lofty spiritual things, such as the joys of Paradise, nor even the power of love and forgiveness – those things which are found at the higher end of the ladder, but He Himself began speaking about this first rung of the ladder – renunciation. The Lord's first words when He began His public ministry were, "Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!"

Now in English the word "repent" often carries negative overtones, as we sometimes think that repentance means extended groveling before God, or excessive sorrowing as we beat ourselves up for our sins. But in Greek, the word "repent" means simply a change of mind – a willingness to learn and adopt the ways of salvation – a willingness to leave behind, to turn away from, and to renounce once and for all the ways of sin, the ways of the world.

This is why in the Baptismal Service, before one is united to Christ with the triple immersion, which incorporates one into Christ's death, burial and resurrection, the candidate first renounces three times the devil and all his angels and all his works and all his pride. This is a clear witness to the fact that one cannot be united to Christ if he does not first separate himself from the devil.

And so, not only does the Lord begin His public ministry with the call to renounce the ways of the world so that we can enter into Heaven, and not only does the Christian renounce Satan and all his angels and all his works and all his pride before uniting himself to Christ and His Kingdom, but Saint John of the Ladder also begins his treatise on spiritual ascent with a call to renunciation for how can one, he writes, who is bound with the shackles of this world – that is the love of pleasure, power, and pride – even lift his foot high enough off the ground to place it on the first step of the ladder leading to God?

And so, we find renunciation at the very beginning of the Christian life – as the first step on the Ladder of Divine Ascent.

Yet we would be mistaken if we thought that renunciation is something which is made just once. How wonderful it would be if we could renounce all the temptations of sin, the devil, and the world in a once and for all manner? But as we all know from our own experience our renunciation is often less than perfect.

And of course we are not alone in this, for we see this in the Holy Scriptures too:

One only needs to remember Lot's wife and how she was turned into a pillar of salt because she turned back to the city of Sodom and Gomorrah – a city on which God reigned down fire and brimstone from heaven because of the inhabitants' love for pleasure and immorality?

And did not a whole generation of Israelites perish in the wilderness of Sinai because they turned back in their minds and hearts to the ways of Egypt, creating for themselves a golden calf, when Moses ascended the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments?

Did not Judas Iscariot betray the Lord after having first followed Him and after hearing his teaching and witnessing His miracles? And did not even the Apostle Peter deny the Lord, and did not all the disciples, except St. John the Theologian, flee from His side, after having first been witnesses to His power and divinity?

This is why in his book, St. John warns us that no matter how far we have ascended to heaven, the moment we turn back to the earth and its ways, we run the risk of falling to the ground.

And so, we can see that the virtue of renunciation, which is the first step on the ascent to God, must accompany us as we seek to climb the other 29 rungs of the spiritual ladder.

As for the other 29 steps which lead to the Kingdom of God, they are described in great detail in this wonderful book, and can be read by whoever wishes to make the ascent to God.

In steps two through four, St. John describes the role of the spiritual father in guiding the Christian in his ascent to God, likening him to Moses who guided the Israelite people out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and to the Promised Land.

In steps five through seventeen, St. John explains how suffering endured with patience can lead to true joy, and how vices can be rooted out and virtues planted in their stead.

In steps eighteen through twenty-nine, he gives instruction on how to avoid laziness, pride, and spiritual complacency while acquiring the higher virtues of stillness, inner peace, prayer, and dispassion.

And in the thirtieth and final step, St. John speaks of the perfecting union of faith, hope, and love – which is the union with God Himself.

Now, while each step on the ladder to God is different, there is one common theme throughout – one common prerequisite to spiritually taking the next step – and that theme is renunciation – the need to break the shackles of the earth to climb up higher and higher to heaven.

How does one break the shackles of the earth? By repentance, by a change of mind, by renouncing vice in favor of virtue, by renouncing the ways of the world in favor of the ways of God.

Practically, how does this play out for us? Well, it's quite simple:

If one wishes to climb to the step of honesty, one needs to renounce lying, the twisting of words, and the practice of being two-faced.

If one wishes to ascend to chastity, one needs to renounce those things which lead to unchastity – overeating, drunkenness, the wandering eye, pleasure-seeking, and pride.

If one wishes to reach the heights of humility, one needs to come to despise vainglory and the praise of others.

If one wishes to be able to discern the will of God, then one needs to first learn to cut off one's own will through obedience to one's spiritual father and the ways of the Church.

And so, in order to climb the spiritual ladder the Christian must be prepared to renounce the ways of sin, to leave behind the world once and for all, not turning back, not looking down, and not returning to the earth as one unfit for heaven.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, the message for us today as we near the end of the Lenten Season and draw ever closer to the celebration of Pascha, is to keep tearing our minds and hearts away from the things of the world, to keep breaking those spiritual shackles which hold us back, and to keep making the ascent to the Kingdom of Heaven.

For this ascent we can find support in one another, direction from the Church, strength from the Lord Himself, and encouragement from Saint John, who at the very end of his book writes,

“Ascend, brothers, ascend eagerly and be resolved in your hearts to ascend... Run, I beseech you, with him who said: Let us hasten until we attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of God, unto a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, who, when He was baptized in the thirtieth year of His visible age, fulfilled the thirtieth step in the spiritual ladder – that of divine love; since God is indeed love; and to Him who is and was and will be the cause of all goodness throughout endless ages be praise, dominion, and power. Amen.”

Glory to Jesus Christ!