

10th Sunday of Pentecost

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

Glory to Jesus Christ!

In today's Gospel reading we heard the Lord say that certain kinds of demons can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting. Now we as Orthodox Christians know that prayer and fasting are two things which we are called to do more than almost anything else.

We know that there are appointed times of prayer: in the mornings and evenings, at mealtimes, before and after taking a trip, when undertake a difficult task, undergo a medical procedure, or study the Scriptures – just to name a few.

And we know that we are to pray really at all other times of our life, whether we be in times of sickness or sorrow, or health or happiness, for St. Paul tells us to pray unceasingly always giving thanks to God and rejoicing in Him.

And with regards to fasting, it seems that the Church always has us fasting, whether it be during the weeks before Pascha, Christmas, the Feast of Ss. Peter & Paul, or Dormition, or else on Wednesdays and Fridays throughout the year. In fact if one were to count up the fasting days, those pink days on the calendar, one would see that they outnumber the days when we don't fast.

And sometimes all this prayer and fasting seems a bit overwhelming or frustrating to us. But if we sometimes feel this way we shouldn't be discouraged because this struggle to pray and fast is a normal part of the spiritual life, and as we know where there is struggle there is an opportunity for spiritual advancement and growth.

And so the Lord, wanting us to capitalize on these opportunities, gives us an important lesson in today's Gospel reading. He shows us not only the benefits of prayer and fasting but He also reveals to us how our prayer and fasting can be empowered – how we can see results from our prayer and fasting.

In the Gospel account the Lord said that certain types of demons can come out by nothing by prayer and fasting. But He also told his disciples that they could not cast the demon out because of their unbelief, because they lacked faith. Here are the two parts of the Lord's lesson: the first part is prayer and fasting, and the second part is to have faith.

Now it is this link between prayer, fasting, and faith, which will bring results to our spiritual struggle for it will allow the Lord can act in our lives just as He did in the lives of His followers so many years ago.

What kind of faith do we need? The kind of faith that is demonstrated by a firm and steady trust in God, by a willingness to let God take over, by a desire to have the Lord's will be done – not matter what it is. It is this type of faith which makes our spiritual

struggle not only pleasing to God but also beneficial for us because when we trust the Lord and ask Him to do what He knows is best for us, He will do it and we will reap the benefits.

What does this mean practically? How do we arrive at this firm trust in God that His way is best? There are two things we need.

First, we need to remember that as God, the Lord knows all things. He knows the past and He can foresee the future. He knows not only what can harm us but also what can help us. In God, we have the perfect advisor, the perfect counselor to direct our lives and lead us where we should go.

But in order for us to follow the Lord guidance we need to be able to lay aside our own thoughts and ideas. And this is the second thing we need, we need to be able to give up our own imperfect plans in order to receive the perfect plan from our perfect advisor, from God Himself.

It's like going to a stock broker who knows exactly what is going to happen with the market. The more we take his advice the more we will profit. The more we rely on our own hunches the greater chance we will lose out. Now of course stock brokers don't always know where we should invest our resources they only make educated guesses, but God doesn't guess, He knows, and all we have to do is trust Him and our spiritual stock will go up.

And this is the importance of faith in prayer. When the Lord tells us to pray with faith, He's telling us to lay aside our own thoughts and judgments and to trust Him and His ways, to believe that He can do something for us which is better than we ourselves wanted in the first place. But in order for Him to be able to help us we have to be willing to allow Him to act because the Lord respects our freedom and He won't force Himself upon us.

And this is where fasting comes in. Fasting, as we know, is nothing other than a discipline by which we learn to lay aside something that we want in order to pursue what the Lord wants for us.

We fast from certain types of food so that we can fast from certain types of thoughts. And we fast from certain types of thoughts because we know that they lead to certain types of actions – that is we fast from food so that we can fast from the thoughts that lead to sin. This is because when we develop the ability to say "no" to meat or dairy products we are also spiritually developing the ability to say "no" to thoughts which come from the devil. The Fathers tell us that through fasting we learn to say "no" first to physical things and then to spiritual things.

And with the Lord's help, eventually we learn to say "no" not only to food and those thoughts which come from the devil, but also even to those thoughts which come from ourselves – those thoughts and ideas which may not be evil but are still of this world. And when we learn to fast, even from our own worldly thoughts and judgments, then we

open ourselves up not only to the Lord's will but also to His miraculous and extraordinary action in our lives.

In the last three weeks, the Lord performed three miracles, in response to three great acts of faith. Three miracles which followed upon people believing that the Lord could do something extraordinary for them.

The disciples believed that the Lord could feed more than five thousand men, women, and children, with just five loaves and two fish. If they had not believed then they would have sent the crowds away like they had originally intended. St. Peter believed that the Lord could give him the power to walk on water, otherwise he would not have gotten out of the boat. And the man in today's Gospel believed that the Lord could heal his son even though the disciples could not.

In each case, the Lord acted based upon the faith of the people. How different would the Gospels be had the disciples decided based upon their "better" judgment to send the crowds away to the villages to buy food for themselves. Or what if St. Peter decided that it was safer to stay in the boat with the other disciples? Or what if the man in today's Gospel took his son away in disappointment when the disciples could not cast out the demon who possessed him?

Clearly everything would have been different. And it would have been different, not because the Lord wasn't willing to work the miracles – it would have been different because the Lord's followers weren't willing to give up their own ideas, thoughts, and fears, so that the Lord could act for them. It would have been different because through lack of faith they would have restricted the Lord's action in their lives.

But the fact of the matter was that they were faithful, they were willing to allow the Lord to act. And they were willing based upon their conversation with the Lord. Now prayer as we know is nothing other than a conversation with God. And through this conversation, through this prayer, Christ told the disciples not to send the crowds away but instead to command them to sit down to be fed. Christ told St. Peter to get out of the boat and to come to Him on the water. Christ told the man to bring his tormented boy to Him so that he could be healed.

In each case, the Lord entered into a prayerful conversation with His people, and His people laid aside their own thoughts, they fasted from their own limited judgments and they trusted that Christ could do something for them which was better than they themselves imagined. And in each case, the Lord did it, He performed the miracle – He multiplied the loaves, St. Peter walked on the water, and the man's son was freed from the demon.

And this is why Christ tells us to have faith when we pray and fast because when we do these things He can act in our lives. This is why the Church continually calls us to pray unceasingly, and this is why we fast more than we feast because when we do these things in faith our lives change and they change for the better.

Our initial frustrations start to fade away just like those evil thoughts from which we fast, and our hearts begin to be filled with a true sense of joy and peace – a joy and peace known only to the one who is able to turn everything over to the Lord, one's thoughts and ideas, one's desires and dreams, everything, one's whole life.

Brother and sisters, if we are willing to do this, in our personal lives and in our life together as the Church of Christ, if we are able to pray with trust in the Lord and fast with a willingness to give up not only food but also those thoughts which restrict the Lord's action in our lives, then we will see our spiritual stock rise because the Lord will be able perform His miracles in our midst, He will be able give us more than we ever expected, He will be able to give us His Heavenly Kingdom, both now and in the age to come. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!