

Dearly beloved: Christ is among us!

Having traveled through the first week of Lent with stricter fasting, more prayer, more almsgiving, on this first Sunday of Lent rather than the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, we celebrate the Liturgy of St. Basil the Great. We will serve his Liturgy on all the Sundays of Lent. Also, during the weekdays of Lent we do not serve the Divine Liturgy, rather we serve it only on Saturdays and Sundays. The Sundays of Lent, then, are filled with splendor by serving St. Basil's Liturgy. Having fasted the whole week, we are fed by the lush words of St. Basil, filled with the richness of God's love for us from the moment of creation, to the present, and until the coming again of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the Liturgy we call God, "All-Holy." These two words are full of meaning. Calling God "All-Holy" is our proclamation that the only holiness there is, the only Holy One, is God Himself. He is all holiness, all good, all loving. We, on our own, have nothing of holiness or of righteousness. What leads us to holiness, that is to God Who is All-Holy, is repentance, re-orienting ourselves from pursuing things that are passing to pursuing God. And repentance exceeds righteousness. One of the saints, "Abba Sarmatas said, 'I prefer a sinful man who knows he has sinned and repents, to a man who has not sinned and considers himself to be righteous.' "Why is repentance better than righteousness? Because righteousness in itself is not worth anything. Righteousness in itself doesn't benefit us. The worthlessness of righteousness comes through very clearly in our texts. The Holy Unction service we will celebrate in Holy Week repeats the words of the Prophet Isaiah (64:6) that before God "all our righteousness is as filthy rags." "The language of the prophet is very powerful: 'all our righteousness is like a rag of a woman who sits apart,' a reference to monthly cycle, which is, in Jewish terms, one of the most powerful examples of impurity.

"Salvation cannot be earned. And righteousness, because it is not worth anything, cannot earn one salvation. Obeying the commandments does not earn merit, because there is no merit. As Christ Jesus tells us, when we have done all that is commanded us, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.' (Luke 17:10) A saint puts it this way:...the kingdom of heaven is not a reward for works, but a gift of grace prepared by the Master for his faithful servants. A slave does not demand his freedom as a reward; but he gives satisfaction as one who is in debt, and he receives freedom as a gift." (St. Mark the Ascetic, On Those who Think that They are Made Righteous by Works 2-3)

What leads us to God, to His All-Holiness, to His gift of salvation is repentance. And repentance begins with humility. So it is that our prayers begin from humility. We call ourselves God's servants. We call God Lord and Master again and again in our prayers: the prayer of St. Ephraim we say during Lent, throughout the Liturgy and all our prayers. As servants we will call God our Master at this Liturgy and say "we have done no good deed upon earth." These words are not a poetic exaggeration. Our prayer in the Liturgy proclaims that any holiness that there is in anyone, in the saints, is God's holiness in them. We will call God today "He who accomplishes all in all." (St. Basil, first prayer of the faithful) and ask Him "to unite (them) to every good work." These words profess the reality that God is far over and above anything or anyone. In Him is all goodness. In Him is all holiness. In Him is love.

The goal of our life is to be a living temple in whom God dwells. We do this by humbling ourselves before God, confessing that we have done nothing good upon the earth and judging no one except ourselves. Our fasting is to humble us in body and spirit that we may realize our

dependence upon God for everything. Our salvation is to be God, that is, to allow God to live within us so that He Who is the only good and all that is good, may fill us with His goodness, with His holiness, with His presence. This is not some morbid putting ourselves down but rather a confession of reality. This is what the saints did before us and the living saints do now. As Bishop Alexander said, the icons of the saints show God's holiness, God's very presence, in these specific people: John the Baptist, Nicholas of Myra, and, above all, the Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary. And with all of them it began with humility. Humility defeats sin and the devil. We pray to God during Lent "O Lord and Master of my life...give the spirit of humility...to Thy servant." Indeed, God grant us each humility by judging only ourselves, not others, and confessing that any good we do is You, O God, at work in us.