

Dearly beloved: Christ is among us!

Today we begin using the Lenten Triodion, the book from which the hymns for Vespers and Matins and Liturgy will come beginning today and up through Great and Holy Week. This book will be our guide through our prayer, fasting and almsgiving leading us to Pascha. Even though Lent is weeks away, we begin with this book to orient ourselves gradually to the journey that lies ahead. These hymns and the Scripture readings of these Sunday lead us to prepare for the Lenten spring.

Today is the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee, the name coming from the parable Jesus tells us today in Luke's gospel. It is a story of contrasts in prayer: the Pharisee boasting about the good he does and judging everyone else while the tax collector stands in the back and says only, "God be merciful to me the sinner." Jesus is telling us first, not to judge others and second, the way we can keep from judging others is by humbly admitting our own sins.

This is a timeless lesson. In the lives of the saints of the desert of Egypt, centuries after our Lord Jesus spoke these words, we read that "one day Father Isaac of Thebes saw a brother sin and he condemned him. When Isaac returned to his cell an angel stopped him from entering, saying 'God sent me to fetch you to instruct Him where you want to throw the guilty brother whom you have condemned.' Immediately Abba Isaac repented and never judged again."

We also read that "a brother questioned Abba Poemen saying, 'If I see my brother committing a sin, is it right to conceal it?' The old man said to him, 'At the very moment when we hide our brother's fault, God hides our own and at the moment when we reveal our brother's fault, God reveals ours too.'"

This is a challenging lesson for us. And the challenge lies in the words of the publican today, "God, be merciful to me the sinner." This prayer is found in the Liturgy, in the Jesus Prayer and in Greek, Slavonic, Romanian it is "God be merciful to me, THE sinner" but in English we consistently mistranslate it as "God, be merciful to me, A sinner." To call ourselves "A sinner" implies that I know there are other sinners, who could even be worse than me. "THE sinner" says I am the only sinner of whom I am aware. No one else but me, THE sinner. There is something in our American mind that resists this correct understanding.

But when we read the lives and sayings of the saints, we see that they saw only their sins and themselves as THE sinner in need of God's mercy and help. It was this that brought justification to the tax collector and the lack of this that brought judgment upon the Pharisee. Acknowledging ourselves as THE sinner brings us to God. By seeing only his own sins St. Macarius the Great "became a god upon earth, because, for just like God, so Abba Macarius when he would see the sins of any it was as though he did not see them and when he heard the sins of any it was as if he did not hear them."

Acknowledging our sinfulness, each of us calling to God to be merciful to us THE sinner brings us to two fundamental truths: in relation to God we are nothing yet in God's heart, we are everything. Only realizing these two fundamental truths can bring us some peace. Don't confess other people's sins, don't even look to see them, only look at ourselves, our sins, confess ourselves as THE sinner and we will truly call God's mercy upon us and not His fearful judgment.

The great monastic saint, Anthony of Egypt, was told by God that there was someone in the city who was even holier than he, Anthony. So Anthony went to a cobbler to ask him about his way of life. The cobbler couldn't figure out why this old holy man had come to him to ask him about his life. As he mended a shoe the man said, "I do not know, Abba, if I have ever done any good. Every morning I get up and do my prayers and then I begin my work. However, I first say to myself that all the people in this city, from the very least to the very greatest, will be saved, and only I will be condemned for my many sins. And in the evening when I lie down, again I think about the same thing." And Anthony embraced and kissed the cobbler saying "I have grown old in the desert, toiling and sweating, but I have not attained to your humility."

Our salvation is found in humbly seeking the salvation of our brothers and sisters, praying for them, aiding them, as we pray with the publican, "O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, be merciful to me THE sinner."