

Dearly beloved: Christ is among us!

Today we are on the threshold of the Great Fast, the forty days which lead us to the passion and Resurrection of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ. During these forty days we will increase our fasting, abstaining from meat, dairy and eggs; we will intensify our almsgiving, using the money we would have spent on meat to help the poor; we will increase our prayer as we add the prayer of Saint Ephraim to our daily prayers and the Liturgy of the Presanctified during the week. Yet it is not to be a gloomy, miserable time. Jesus tells us not to look dismal so that everyone around us can tell we're fasting because we look miserable. Jesus tells us to fast brightly, let our Father in heaven see our struggles. And we see now that spring is upon us. And Lent is the springtime for us Christians when through our fasting, almsgiving and prayer we strip away those things that lead us astray: gluttony, pride, lust, anger, jealousy, anger, laziness.

Among those things which lead us away from God is a lack of compassion, to be merciless, to be unforgiving. This is totally opposite of how God deals with us: He forgives us whenever we repent. Yet our Father in heaven gives us the freedom to say "no" to say "I will not forgive this person." We are utterly free not to forgive. And Jesus teaches us the Lord's Prayer, the "Our Father." It is the only prayer in which we make a covenant, a pact, with God. "Our Father, forgive me in the same way I forgive others." "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Matthew 6:14-15)

Some may think that there's someone we can't forgive. Which is easier: with bitterness and anger to hold on for months or years, holding on to the memory of a sin committed against us, or is it easier to pray to God for the person who hurt us every time we remember them or the sin they committed? For our own health, spiritual and physical, God opens to us the way of forgiveness. Instead of looking with anger upon the person who hurt us, we can look with sorrow upon them for they, too, are suffering in some way. We can see him or her as a fellow sufferer, a fellow human being who is in need of the very healing of which we are in need.

Forgiving requires us to let go of our pride. By forgiving one another we let go of our anger, we let go of our hurt, and we let God into the altar of our hearts. There's the old saying, "Forgive and forget." We may not be able to forget the sin against us. At Vespers we always hear the words, "O Lord our God...protect (us) from...evil memories" When the remembrance of wrongs done to us come into our hearts, let us see it as an opportunity to renew our forgiveness; a chance to pray again for the person who wounded us. Then we live as did Jesus when upon the Cross He prayed for those who were crucifying Him, "Father, forgive them..."

God wants to forgive us, He wants us to be with Him in heaven. The only thing, or rather the only person, standing in the way is we ourselves when we do not forgive others. Forgiving others is made easier by remembering our sins first. But our "pride makes us forget our sins." (St. John of the Ladder, Step 23 On Pride) Each one of us is a sinner, each of us in need of confessing our sins and repenting of them. Remembering our own sins brings to us humility. We do not have in God a person Who is looking to condemn us. "God desires us to be saved, (He is not looking) for reasons to torment us...His face is set all the time towards forgiveness...To anyone (of us) who shows just a little suffering and sorrow for our sins, to such a person immediately, at once, without any delay, God will grant forgiveness of (their) sins." (St. Isaac of Nineveh, XL, 12-14)

Or we may wonder whether "God will forgive me of the sins which pain me and by whose memory I am tormented? Sins which, though I hate them, I go on returning to commit them but after I commit them they give me great pain; though I hate these sins, I am still right in

the middle of them, and when I repent of them with suffering, I return to them again...” (ibid., 15) Saint Isaac of Nineveh continues, saying “This is how many God-fearing people think, people who foster virtue and are pierced with the suffering of remorse, who mourn over sin, yet (human) tendency compels them to bear up with the sliding back into sin which results from it: they live between sin and repentance all the time.” (ibid., 16)

This is where we are: between sin and repentance all the time. We are not to fall into despair because of our sins. It’s not that we shouldn’t be sorry for committing them but rather we should never think our sin is incurable. There is, indeed, a Healer for the person who has stumbled: Jesus Christ Who upon the Cross asked mercy be shown to His crucifiers and Who pardoned His murderers while He hung on the Cross. (Homily LXIV) Jesus tells us that ‘All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men’ (Matthew 12:31) through repentance.

When we sin, let us not delay a day, nor an hour, nor even a second, but turn immediately to God in sorrow for our sins, asking His forgiveness. Even if it is the thousandth time we’ve fallen into the same sin because “...the right hand of our Lord is stretched out night and day...He is on the look-out to support, to comfort and to encourage everyone (of us) – especially to see if He can find any (of us) who endure even just a little suffering and grief so that (our) sins might be forgiven. Using even such small starting points as (our sorrow for sin), His aim is to make (us) heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven, and to bring (us), without any hindrance, into His joy.” (ibid., 17) Let us begin the Fast with the joy of knowing that God is eager to forgive us our sins, and so let us begin by forgiving one another.