

Dearly beloved: Christ is among us!

Today we stand at the doorway leading to Great Lent. We will enter into forty days of increased fasting, increased prayer, increased charity to the poor. Our fasting is not an end in itself, an item to be checked off of our "to do" list. Fasting is a tool, it is a method of opening ourselves up to God. By not eating certain foods in Lent we are reminding ourselves of Jesus' own words to the devil in the desert when Jesus was fasting for forty days: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." (Matthew 4:4) Fasting tames not only the appetites of our belly but our other appetites, of the passions, which can lead us astray. When our bellies are filled to overflowing, our spirit becomes lazy: we don't feel up to praying, we look at what others have and want it for ourselves, we indulge in pride and lust. Fasting is to make us hunger the more for God, for Him Who is our whole life, our whole hope. God is our everything, He is everything to us. Fasting turns us away from petty things to the fullness of being Who is God Himself. This is why Jesus teaches us today, "when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance...But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face." (Matthew 6:16-17)

To make Lent fruitful for us, bringing us into closer communion with God and one another, we add to our fasting more prayer and more giving to those in need. We take the money we saved by not eating meat and dairy and give it to charity. And this whole first week of Lent every day we have the opportunity to come together in God's holy temple and offer prayers to God asking for the forgiveness of our sins. It is this, the forgiveness of sins, that gives this Sunday its other name, Forgiveness Sunday.

The name comes from Jesus first words of today's gospel: "if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Matthew 6:14-15) Our journey through Lent will lead us nowhere good if we do not begin and continue by forgiving one another, whether the person who has offended us asks us for forgiveness or not. Jesus tells us to forgive one another because God the Father is forgiving of our sins. If God, Who is so far above and beyond what we are, what we can conceive, if God forgives us, how can we possibly withhold forgiveness from another?

Forgiveness is placed on our lips every day by the prayer Jesus taught us, "Our Father, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." When we pray these words, we call God to examine how we forgive others and beg Him to forgive us in the same way. If we do not forgive, we should quake in our shoes for what awaits us. If we find forgiving someone a difficult task, perhaps we can ask ourselves, why is it difficult? Is it because I want so-called justice? That my view of the world is correct and therefore this or that person should be punished? Can I not forgive because I am stubborn and believe I am in the right? Even though Jesus tells us to bless those who curse us, to love those who hate us?

Let me close with an event in the life of Saint Silouan of Egypt which tells us all we need to know about our so-called justice and God's forgiveness. "One brother from Libya came to Abba Silouan, at Mount Panepho, and told him: 'Abba, I have an enemy who did many evils to me. Before I became a monk he trampled upon my field and many times he planned to harm me. Now he puts out poisons to poison me. So I intend to hand him over to the judge (for him to be punished).' The elder said, 'Do, my child, as comforts you.' The brother added 'There is no doubt, Abba, that if he is punished, his soul will be greatly benefited.' The elder again said

'Do as you think, my child.' The brother said, 'Get up then, father, so that we can pray, and then I am leaving for the judge.' So they got up and began praying. However as soon as they arrived at the phrase (of the Lord's Prayer) "and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those that trespass against us" (Matthew 6:12), the elder said: "and do not forgive us our trespasses as neither do we forgive those who trespass against us..." The brother interrupted, 'Not like that, father.' The elder answered 'Yes, my child, that way. If you truly want to go to the judge to realize your revenge, Silouan will not do another prayer for you.' The brother then did a prostration and forgave his enemy.