

The Confessor's Tongue for March 7, A. D. 2021

3rd Sunday Before Lent; Last Judgement

In honor of St. Maximus the Confessor, whose tongue and right hand were cut off in an attempt by compromising authorities to silence his uncompromising confession of Christ's full humanity & divinity.

Le Sunday of the Last Judgment

Here the reality of judgment and hell is portrayed in vivid language. We generally live oblivious to death, judgment, and the fact that we shall live eternally. Though it may seem far off, the judgment is just outside the door for each of us, and we must live with this awareness: each will stand before God to account for how he has spent the life God gave him. What, indeed, shall we do on that day if we do not begin preparation for it now?

Preparation consists, first of all, in repenting from and confessing every evil deed, word, and thought. On that day, every secret will be revealed, every sin disclosed. We shall not escape this, and shall have no excuse to offer. Our choice is this: repent and confess our sins now, voluntarily making a full disclosure of our sins, or waiting for all to be disclosed at the Judgment. If we confess them now, our sins will not haunt us at the Judgment: they will already be forgiven and forgotten. What an incentive for repentance!

Preparation also consists in clothing our souls with the virtues and good works. The Gospel lesson (Mat 25:31-46), "The Sheep and the Goats," shows that we shall be judged according to our deeds. Our deeds, after all, are the proof of our faith. They may condemn us: "Thy works will be there to accuse thee; thine actions will reproach thee and condemn thee" (Vespers, Aposticha). They may justify us: "Since God is the Judge, nothing can help thee there, no zeal, no skill, no glory, no friendship, but only the strength that thou gainest, my soul from thy works" (Matins Canon, ode 6).

These three Sundays show us our need for the Fast and urge us to cultivate repentance in humility while there is time before death and the Last Judgment.

Participation in Lenten Services

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann

Lent is not just a time not to eat certain foods. It is a time for spiritual renewal, for repentance, for rededication of the Christian's whole life to Christ. This takes a certain effort on his part. The Church assists him by orienting her services to this work of repentance and renewal. The Christian who takes his faith seriously and recognizes his need for the fast will find much help in the divine services. Thus, a complete fast will include increased attendance at the divine services. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann discusses this in the following excerpt from his book Great Lent.

No one...can attend the entire cycle of lenten worship. Everyone *can* attend some of it. There is simply no excuse for not making Lent, first of all, the time for an increased attendance of an participation in the liturgy of the Church. Here again, personal conditions, individual possibilities and impossibilities

can vary and result in different decisions, but there must be a decision, there must be an effort, and there must be a "follow-up." From the liturgical point of view, we may suggest the following "minimum" aimed not at the spiritually self-destructive sense of having fulfilled an obligation, but at receiving at least the essential in the liturgical spirit of Lent.

In the first place, a special effort must be made on the parish level for a proper celebration of the *Forgiveness Sunday Vespers*....It must become one of the great "parish affairs" of the year....

The next priority must be given to the first week of Lent. A special effort must be made to attend at least once or twice the *Great Canon of St. Andrew*. As we have seen, the liturgical function of these first days is to take us into the spiritual "mood" of Lent, which we described as "bright sadness."

Then, throughout the entire Lent, it is imperative that we give at least one evening to attend the *Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts* with the spiritual experience it implies—that of total fasting, that of the transformation of at least one day into a real expectation of judgment and joy. No reference to conditions of life, lack of time, etc., are acceptable at this point, for if we only do that which easily "fits" into the conditions of our lives, the very notion of lenten effort becomes absolutely meaningless. Not only in the twentieth century, but, in fact, since Adam and Eve, "this world" was always an obstacle to the fulfillment of God's demands. There is, therefore, nothing new or special about our modern "way of life." Ultimately, it all depends again on whether or not we take our religion *seriously*, and if we do, eight or ten additional evenings a year at church are truly a minimal effort. Deprived of that evening, however, we are depriving ourselves not only of the beauty and depth of the lenten services, not only of a necessary spiritual inspiration and help, but of that which, as we shall see in the next section, makes our fasting meaningful and effective.

Present-Day Martyrdom

Modern culture does not regard anything that involves denying oneself as virtuous. The ultimate act of self denial is martyrdom—sacrificing one's life for another person, a cause, a belief, or for one's country. We cannot offer anyone or any cause more than our life.

The Church calendar is full of commemorations of martyrs. The Church was literally built upon the blood of the martyrs, both those of the early centuries as well as those who died for Christ under Ottoman and communist rules. Presently, there are few places where this kind of martyrdom is carried out, but our lives as Orthodox Christians are to be lives of martyrdom in other ways.

The Church recognizes [or blesses] two ways, two paths, to the Kingdom of Heaven: monasticism and marriage. Both of these are a form of martyrdom. Monastic martyrdom is reflected in the black habit which the monks and nuns wear, symbolizing being "dead" to the things of

this world, forsaking the pleasures of married life and having children, and absolute obedience to the superior. Husbands and wives are to sacrifice everything for the sake of the other.

This “martyrdom” for both monastics and those who are married is reflected in the Epistle readings for the rite of monastic tonsure and also for the marriage service. While they are different readings, they are both taken from St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians.

The Epistle for monastic tonsure, taken from chapter six, refers to the monastic “arming” him/herself for battle. Interestingly, this is the same Epistle that is read on the feasts of women martyrs. A battle lies ahead. *For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places* (Eph 6:12).

The Epistle for the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony refers to the obedience of the wife and that the husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the Church and *died* for it. A martyrdom of will and a martyrdom of life! In fact, at the marriage service, the bride and groom are led around the table which holds the Holy Gospel while “O holy martyrs, who have fought the good fight and received your crowns...” is sung. This is not coincidental.

All of us are called to a life of martyrdom. This living martyrdom for both monastic and the wedded—not having possessions, obedience, giving in to the desires of a spouse, etc.—is just the beginning. The Church gives us specific days and seasons in which we deny ourselves even more through fasting, extra prostrations, forsaking forms of entertainment, longer vigils. All this is in accordance with St. Paul who said *I treat my body hard and bring it into subjection* (I Cor. 9:27).

The soul is superior to the body, for it is immortal. In the Lord’s Prayer, our Savior Jesus Christ teaches us first to seek what is eternal: “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done” and only after that to ask from God that which is the most basic element to our earthly existence: “Give us this day our daily bread.”

We have inverted the order of things for which we yearn. Simple bread is not enough—we want the most, the best, the highest quality of food, housing, transportation, entertainment, and all our other transitory, earthly things. Where is the yearning for eternity? We do love the longer lenten services, but how long are they compared to the time wasted in front of a computer screen daily?

Do we “treat our bodies hard” as St. Paul says? Perhaps a bit more during Great Lent, but we are called to treat our egos harder. We can “die” a thousand times a day for Christ—and He will bless us for it—if we accept the hardships, the insults, being overlooked or underappreciated, all without complaining.

The martyrs endured unimaginable tortures for the sake of Christ, and never, not in one single martyric account, do we read that they complained, wined, griped, whimpered, accused others, or felt that they suffered unjustly. No. They accepted insults and fleshly tortures in the same way that our Lord did—willingly and without complaint.

We call ourselves “Christians” which one spiritual father defines as “little christs”. Do we behave in that way? No one wants to hear us always complaining or whining. Think about it: the people you want to be near the most are those who do not always complain, but rather are more positive. It is so easy to notice that others “gripe and complain all the time,” but we need to recognize it in ourselves.

This griping, complaining, whining, and negativity is a sin. One thing that is heard in monastic settings is older monastics saying to younger ones, “Don’t gripe!” Why? Because this sinful griping shows and voices our ingratitude to God for all He has bestowed upon us. How can we imitate the martyrs; how can we imitate the Lord Himself, who suffered tortures, insults, and death, if we cannot accept the least slight against us? We complain about the weather, our jobs, our friends or coworkers, politics, drivers on the road, bills, and everything else imaginable, instead of being thankful: thankful for the warmth and sunlight and moisture; thankful for the ability to work; thankful for friends and family; thankful for freedom; thankful for having means of transportation; thankful for goods and services that enable us to live from day to day.

Yes, hardships befall all of us. Some we bring upon ourselves; some the Lord allows us to suffer to make us stronger spiritually; and some are temptations which the devil assails us with as he sees us striving toward Christ. But the devil does not hear our confessions, nor does he know our thoughts. How then does he always manage to strike us where we are most vulnerable? How? He hears it from our own mouths when we complain. Then he not only rejoices at our ingratitude to God, but he strikes us there even more!

These struggles, these attacks from the devil, are temporal if we constantly give thanks to the Lord *for He is good, for His mercy endureth forever* (Psm 135:1). If we can change our attitudes and accept all which comes upon us—however difficult or unbearable it may seem—we may find that those trials were a path for our salvation. The martyrs knew that their bodily sufferings would end in physical death, and they endured. That physical death was the doorway to eternal life. Their love for God was so great that many of them did not even feel the tortures, for we read in the accounts of their martyrdoms that they “suffered as though not in the body.”

Love, which is the greatest of the virtues, overcomes all things. Love for Christ, longing for Him, willing to sacrifice all for Him, overcomes even physical or emotional suffering.

As we find ourselves in the holy time of the Great Fast, let us extend our lenten efforts to die daily, willingly for Christ, *without* complaining. We can answer rebukes with kind remarks or gratitude; we can compliment someone whom we normally try to avoid; when we open our mouths to complain, let us instead utter encouraging or loving remarks. St. James tells us clearly that *the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity; so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell* (James 3:6).

If we fix our eyes on Christ, we will hold our tongues. The martyrs were aware that the Lord is everywhere present. We declare it every time we say the beginning prayer “O Heavenly King...” but we need to be more aware of this great reality by giving thanks instead of complaining, by bowing our heads to hardships and insults, giving thanks to the Lord always, for this is what plants in us a pure heart.

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GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!