

Fourth Sunday of the Great Fast
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The word *Lent* in English, meaning the time of the Great Fast, comes from the Old English for the season of Spring, when the days were literally *lengthening*. I wonder whether our brethren in the Antipodes use the same term when, I suppose, their days are shortening? The gospel readings appointed for these Sundays of the Great Fast were carefully selected by the fathers who constructed the lectionary. The themes of these gospel readings, in fact, addressed what happened at this season in the earliest centuries of the Church.

Our Springtime fast emerged in imitation of the fasting observed by the catechumens who were preparing for Baptism. In our days people are received into the Church at any time, but among the first Christians, converts were baptised especially on the eve of Pascha, as well as at Pentecost and Nativity, following a long period of catechesis and instruction. This was necessary in the pagan culture of the Roman Empire, and it is becoming necessary once again in our own times in the West where the dominant culture has abandoned Christianity.

On the first Sunday of the Great Fast we heard of Philip telling Nathanael that the Messiah, the Christ, had been found, and invited Nathaniel to *come and see*. It is the same invitation to find Christ that we give to others. The very existence of this open, holy house is an invitation to others to *come and see*.

Next, we heard of the healing of the paralytic, let down through the roof, you will remember: a man who received healing through forgiveness of sins. Clearly, the same forgiveness was found by the catechumens who turned to Christ and entered the Church.

Thirdly, last week we heard the command of Christ to deny ourselves and take up our cross. This too, in the first place, is addressed to those about to be received, that they be aware of what following Christ means. This was not like the mystery cults of the late Roman Empire; a secret initiation into a privileged band, promising a

heavenly life with a chosen god, beyond the veil of this world. Entering the body of Christ was entering into the contest, the way of struggle against sin.

And today, we read how that struggle continues against all that is demonic, armed with the weapons of prayer and fasting. For the catechumens too were exorcised before their baptism, as they are to this day, although, anciently, the exorcism were done during the forty days of fasting that the candidates undertook.

So, Sunday by Sunday, those preparing for baptism would hear these gospels with the homily, but then they would be dismissed with a blessing and could not be present for the second part of the Liturgy, hence the cry of, '*the doors, the doors!*' instructing the doorkeepers to make sure that only the faithful remain. For in ancient times the catechumens were not permitted to be present with the body of the faithful to offer the bloodless sacrifice.

We have a number of catechumens this year, as we had last year, and some of them will soon finish their time of instruction and will be received in time for Pascha. Those who have not received baptism will be baptised and chrismated, others need to be chrismated only, to complete their initiation into Christ and to become full members of his body, the Orthodox-catholic Church. Like us they have, in St Paul's words this morning, '*fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope that is set before us; a hope, which we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast.*'

However, I want to make a particular point today, that we should not really talk of people *converting* to Orthodoxy, especially when they come from one of the western confessions. In reality, we can only *convert* to Christ. For conversion, that turning of the mind, that repentance, is finding our salvation in Him. As Paul says in Corinthians [2 Cor.3:16] '*When one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.*' Rather, we should talk of them *becoming* Orthodox, and Orthodox Christianity, as you know, is *Holy Tradition*, handed on by the apostles, taught and guarded by the succession of bishops within the communion of the Church.

To become Orthodox is to acquire the mind of Christ, but it is also something we are always becoming. We have received in our Chrismation the anointing of God the Holy Spirit, As St John says in his first epistle, *'The anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things... you will abide in Him.'* [1Jn.2:27] Yes, this indeed is received even by babes-in-arms when they are baptised and anointed in their innocence; they too become full members of the Church, Christ's body. But they have still to grow and develop; they have still to learn how to fight Sin and overcome the passions of the Old Adam. In encountering the world, they will still have to acquire, through repentance, the mind of Christ.

And what is true of those infants in Christ, is true for those who will become neophytes, new-born in their later years this Pascha. They too will just be starting out, babes-in-Christ. *And what is true of them is true of us as well!* Who among us, who already belonged to Christ in heterodox confessions beforehand, yet were to find our place the Orthodox Church much later - who among us can say we are now fully Orthodox, fully like Christ? As Our Lord says to his disciples in St Luke's gospel, *'So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, "We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do".'*

And, moreover, even you who were brought up in Orthodox Christianity from childhood, who absorbed the Faith, as they say, with your mother's milk, can you be sure that your religion is not just cultural. What did John the Forerunner say to those Jews who came to hear him preach repentance? *'Do not begin to say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father. For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.'* It is so easy to be a nominal Christian and know nothing, really, of what is demanded. You may recall the exasperated Paul writing to the Corinthians, *'And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal.'* [1Cor.3:1-3]

Today, the fourth Sunday of Lent we commemorate St John of the Ladder. He lived during the seventh century and became abbot of St Catherine's monastery at Mount Sinai. He is best known for writing a book called *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* which describes how we can raise the soul to God by stages, as if on a ladder. Bearing mind that St John is writing for his fellow monks, he starts with renunciation and detachment from the world and passes through such stages as true repentance, freedom from anger and meekness, talkativeness and silence, non-possessiveness, purity, and chastity and overcoming vainglory. Yet even for us who are still bound to this world, there is still a ladder to climb. We who are here, burdened with many worldly duties and so many social obligations, must yet work out our salvation in fear and trembling, step by step, making our way into the heart of our faith and its communion with God. We are not monks, but we are yet warriors of Christ, and our commitment is only a matter of degree.

There are few things more holy on earth than a sinless, newly baptised infant, but they are yet to bear fruit for the kingdom of God. Those who are baptised soon may never be more sanctified in this world as when they step out of the waters, but they have only just begun. And all of us, although joined to Christ in the Church, have still to advance until, in a paradox, we manifestly become what we became in our baptism, judged according *to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.* [Eph.4:13]

In our rite of Baptism, the candidate is asked whether he has renounced Satan and united himself to Christ. And the final prayer of exorcism prays for the casting out of *'the spirit of error, the spirit of guile, the spirit of idolatry and of every concupiscence; the spirit of deceit and of every uncleanness which operates through the prompting of the Devil.'* But it goes on to ask that God, *'make him a reason-endowed sheep in the holy flock of Thy Christ, an honourable member of Thy Church, a child of the light, and an heir of Thy Kingdom; that having lived in accordance with thy commandments, and preserved inviolate the Seal, and kept his garment undefiled, he may receive the blessedness of the Saints in Thy Kingdom.'* That is the servant of God, that is the Orthodox mind, that is the measure by which we may judge ourselves and repent.