

21 March 2021 1st Sunday of Lent
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Before the gospel is chanted at the Liturgy, the priest, standing at the Holy Table, reads a prayer of preparation: *'Illumine our hearts, O Master, who lovest mankind, with the pure light of Thy divine knowledge, and open the eyes of our mind to the understanding of Thy gospel teachings; implant in us also the fear of Thy blessed commandments, that trampling down all carnal desires, we may enter upon a spiritual manner of living, both thinking and doing such things as are well-pleasing unto Thee.'*

The opening of the eyes of our mind is the heart of this prayer, yet the *trampling down of all carnal desires* is not just about our more bestial behaviour, the control of our animal instincts, but concerns the whole focus of our lives. For most people in this world their lives have always been fixated on the carnal desires, on the flesh, the outward experience, the physical needs. That is perfectly understandable, for the eyes of the mind are closed; closed like the doors of paradise, with an angel armed with a fiery sword to guard the way.

It is no surprise to find that, for so many, this has been a year of anxiety. It is not just the pandemic, there is, we are told, so much more to worry about nowadays, so much social unrest and racial tension, so many impending global catastrophes, dark conspiracies, and threats from everything, creating a fear of everything. All seems well until the outward man is in danger. As Satan says to the Lord in the Book of Job, *'Skin for skin! Yes, all that a man has he will give for his life. But stretch out Your hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will surely curse You to Your face!'* [Job 2:4-5]

But it was ever thus! What little knowledge of History people have! If History, whether global, national, or personal, teaches us anything, it is that we have been here before. In reality, for the majority in our western world, people have never been so secure, actually far from random violence, living healthier and longer lives; never so comfortable. And yet they are slowly going mad all around us. We need not be surprised at that, either!

For some, however, those who have begun to open the eyes of the mind, these common threats, signalling our physical frailty, have caused them to stop in their tracks; these existential disasters are signposts, inviting them to consider a different path altogether; an invitation to turn inwards.

But in turning inwards here, I am not referring to that personal, psychological world; the experience of lone, subjective feelings; the damaged mind, in conflict with the body, that seems to have driven so many of our contemporaries into such states of anxiety. And where does anxiety come from? It comes from those very carnal desires that have not been trampled down. It is evidence of that loss of alignment and integrity of soul, body, and spirit that I spoke of last week; the loss of what St Nicolaj Velimirovitch called, *harmonious trinity in holy unity*.

As ever, the Greeks have a word for it: ἀκήδία (*akedia*), a kind of slothful despair that the great spiritual writers of the Christian tradition warned against; a spiritual boredom, of not being bothered. Others might become aggressive, protest and rage, seizing the moral high ground to assert their superiority in the face of perceived injustices, privileges, and inequalities, but even this is a carnal way of thinking and living, and a failure to awaken and open the eyes of the mind. Once more we have an image of Adam, weeping outside the gates of paradise in hopeless despair: ἀκήδία!

But what of those who have seized the moment, opening the eyes of the mind? The current season of grace, this time together in the spiritual wilderness, invites us to rethink our lives. How much of our attention is attracted, beguiled even, by the carnal world, and by what appear to be our most immediate concerns. What if we could pray in the words of St Basil the Great, *'Nail down our flesh with fear of Thee, and let not our hearts be inclined to words or thoughts of evil, but pierce our souls with Thy love, that ever contemplating Thee, being enlightened by Thee, and discerning Thee, the Unapproachable and Everlasting Light we may unceasingly render confession and gratitude to Thee.'*

In truth, if we could do that, *nailing down the flesh* in its proper place, if we could turn inwards, at least for some of the time, our landscape would change; how we receive and experience the world around us, would change. But for this to happen we have to have faith, and to allow God's love, in Basil's phrase, to *pierce our souls*.

There will be plenty of Christian people who will regard the Great Fast itself with a kind of ἀχῆδια, still seeing only from the carnal perspective a time of restrictions and limitations and troublesome rules. They have not yet begun to nail down the flesh. But for those who are truly awake, the vigilant ones, they see instead a straight road, a liberation, and clear guidance. For them there is a different kind of mourning outside paradise: not that of desperation, but a holy sadness for the soul's separation from the Tree of Life. And yes, the Greeks have a word for that, too: πένθος (*penthos*), the opposite of despondent ἀχῆδια. Penthos brings what the spiritual writers call the gift of tears. St Isaac the Syrian, for example, describes this compunction of the heart, this awareness of our lost paradise, driving us eagerly to prayer; that disciplined, regular prayer that bears such fruit. He calls the fullness of prayer, *the gift of tears*.

I am fully with His Beatitude, Metropolitan Onuphry of Kiev and All Ukraine, who called on his people recently during the great Fast, to recite one kathisma of the psalms each day, alongside their usual prayers. There is nothing like the biblical Psalms, recited over time, to teach us *Penthos*, that longing which pierces the heart, making us aware of a spiritual pain and yearning for what we have lost, drawing our attention away from the carnal desires to that spiritual manner of living.

None of this should be new to us. This is the way of growth in Christ. This is not just for 'specialists', only for the fervent and devout, or those in the monastic life. For the soul to be in charge of the body, not the other way round; for the mind to be above the carnal *is* the narrow gate through which we enter, of which Our Lord taught in the gospel (Matt.7:13). Indeed, there are those who pass beyond even that, who when they pray, the mind descends to the heart to offer the prayer of the heart, but that is a gift of the grace of God. It is enough

for us, now, just to enter our secret chamber and pray to our Father who sees in secret.

We are not canonised saints, neither martyrs, who in faith shed their life blood in witness to Christ, nor heroic ascetics who have finally nailed down the flesh. But we are those summoned by Christ, and like Philip in today's gospel, we call others to *come and see* what we have found.

How fitting that we should consecrate this Lord's Day to the restoration of the Holy Icons. Where the iconoclast sees only idols and graven images, or the more cultured see, at best, forms of artistic expression, we the faithful, letting the light pass through our carnal eyes, may pass beyond, and with the eyes of the mind, perceive the archetype beyond, the persons revealed through windows into heaven. And with our mind's eye open, we shall process around the temple, a few further steps on our spiritual journey.

But we must do this together. We cannot undertake this purification of the heart, this letting-go of the carnal desires, without help and without the sharing of burdens, lest alone in our pride we fall back once again. We must engage the body to serve the soul: the ears receiving the words of the sacred scriptures, teaching us a spiritual manner of living; the eyes taking the sight of that great cloud of witnesses that have gone before us; and our mouths, partaking of the Holy Gifts, tasting, and seeing, as the psalmist sings (Ps 33:8), that the Lord is good. How central, how vital, how essential it is that we are here, together, to encourage one another and to find the means of grace that will perfect all our strivings in the Lord. For this too, the Church of the living God, is a body, and the body of Christ moreover, serving in discipline, in goodly order and in the integrity of the mind of Christ, pointing to a spiritual manner of living, *both thinking and doing such things as are well-pleasing unto God.*