

Homily on the second Sunday of Great Lent

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In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. One God. Amen.

This morning we listened to the Gospel reading of Saint Mark, where we hear the parable of the paralytic man. A man who was completely helpless, and who needed others to help him.

He was carried by 4 men on a stretcher. When they arrived at the house where Christ was, and saw the multitude of people being there, they could not enter through the door.

Instead of resigning themselves to the fact that they would not be able to get inside the house, they climbed upon the roof with the stretcher. They stripped the roof and then lowered the paralytic man into the house.

Nowhere in today's reading is there any mention who these 4 men were. We do not know if they were family members, neighbours, or just friends.

They were there with the sole purpose of helping the paralytic man. They were not there for themselves. They worked very hard carrying him to the house, climbing upon the roof, stripping the roof and lowering the stretcher inside the house where our Saviour was.

Christ saw their effort and care for the paralytic man. What he saw was the love these 4 men had towards the man on the stretcher.

They did not care about themselves but were there waiting for this paralytic man to be healed by Christ, because they believed that only our Lord Jesus could heal him.

Who is this man? Actually, he is all of us: we are just like him, paralysed by sin, weakened by our worldly thoughts and our materialistic ways of life, and lost in our ways.

Some of you might have heard the following Chinese proverb. In English it reads: 'May you live in interesting times.'

At first glance it seems to be some sort of blessing. May we all have lives full of interesting events, a life without problems, where everything goes the way we want it to go.

But it is not a blessing at all. In fact, it is a curse. What it really means is that the person to whom it is addressed, is cursed with a life full of adversity, troubles and challenges, all negative things.

Believe it or not: We all live in interesting times. We are all cursed.

We have forgotten to live as true Orthodox Christians, because we have been tempted away by material and worldly things. Instant gratification is ruling our lives. We want to have lots of money, new cars, big homes, long holidays, and everything our heart desires. And we have forgotten to care for our neighbours. And I use the word neighbours in its widest possible meaning.

But at what cost?

We live in the false belief that all is going well, but is it?

Your bank balance might be very healthy, you might own the latest model BMW, you might live in a very nice house, and you might already have paid a deposit for your summer holiday. Does this really mean all is well?

The answer to that is very obviously: NO!

What about our faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and our love for others?

This is so easy to neglect when all goes well. Especially when we are too busy dealing with our personal materialistic needs.

When we avoid coming to church, when we do not pray regularly because it interferes with our worldly interests, when we do not fast properly because it creates havoc with our social life.

Because when things go well for us, we become lazy and our personal needs prevent us from concentrating on Christ and our love for others.

We seem to avoid anything that is difficult and taxing. In today's Gospel reading the 4 men did not care that it was very difficult to lift the paralytic man upon the roof. And it was this that Christ noticed. He saw their faith and love and rewarded them.

As I have said before: 'Nobody said that the Orthodox Christian life would be an easy one. It is truly a difficult life.

In today's Gospel reading we hear that Our Lord does not immediately heal the man physically; but first forgives his sins. Although we normally hate to admit it, there is usually a connection between our physical state and our spiritual condition; and when we are ill spiritually, we often also suffer from a physical illness as well.

We should always be considering how we live, and we should confess and repent when we have sinned; and we should give thanks to God for the difficult circumstances that show us who we are, and how much work we each still have to do to become the person God wants us to be.

Saint Gregory Palamas reminds us of the importance of good works: 'It is pointless for someone to say that he has faith in God, if he does not have the works which go with that faith.'

Today, on the Second Sunday of Great Lent, we celebrate the memory of St. Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessalonica.

St. Gregory is known as one of the great defenders of Orthodoxy and is best known for his defence against the heresies of Barlaam.

Barlaam, a monk from Calabria in Italy, attacked the monastic ways of the Holy Mountain, and Gregory was tasked with the defence of these monastic ways.

Barlaam, who was strongly influenced by the Latin church, believed that philosophy and human thought were the way to know God. He stated the unknowability of God in an extreme form, having been influenced by a simplified, broken down interpretation of the writings of St. Dionysius the Areopagite.

Through the wisdom of the Holy Fathers, Orthodoxy had always known that prayer and fasting are the key to knowing God. Barlaam believed that the monks of Mount Athos were wasting their time in their prayers and fasting and claimed that they should be studying the great philosophers of humanity instead.

St. Gregory said that the Holy Fathers and the prophets had a greater knowledge of God, because they had actually seen or heard God Himself. He taught that modern ideas about human thought and reason had no place in the Church.

When asked how it was possible to have knowledge of the unknowable God, he showed the difference between knowing God in His essence or person and knowing God in His energies or being. It became clear that one could not find God in the logic of this world.

He taught the Orthodox that it is impossible to know God in His essence or person. However, by means of prayer and fasting and turning oneself over to God, through purification of one's soul, anyone can come to know God in His energies and being.

Lent is a very special time for us Orthodox Christians. It is a time for prayer, fasting and silent contemplation. Let us sit down and pray, not just for ourselves but for others.

Let us forget about our own health, well-being and salvation, and concentrate not only on our families, our friends, our neighbours and all who are dear to us but also those who are not near to us.

Let us also not forget that we need works to go with our faith, as Saint Gregory Palamas tells us. And if we do all this, Christ will be able to see our faith and works, and He will tell us and all those whom we pray for: 'My children, your sins are forgiven you.'

Amen.