

Homily for the 4th Sunday of Great Lent

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

Today's homily will not be read out in church, as is customary. Instead, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, it will be available to all of you on the Saint Dunstan's Church website and Facebook page. I pray that you will all stay safe.

On this the 4th Sunday of Great Lent, the Gospel reading deals with the parable of the father who has a son who is possessed by demons. This father wants his son to be healed from the demons and therefore brings his son to our Lord and Saviour.

The father is not convinced that our Lord can heal his son, because when his disciples tried to heal him, they failed. At first our Lord rebukes the father and the crowd that had gathered.

Christ then asks the father to believe that this healing can occur. The man says that he believes but asks Christ to heal his unbelief. The man's son is then healed. Later the disciples ask why they could not heal this man's son. Jesus replies that this type of demon can only be removed through prayer and fasting.

The first thing that we are confronted with in this Gospel is the existence of evil spirits, fallen angels or demons. We would all like to deny their existence. We would all like to blame their actions as being an illness or mental illness.

Mental illnesses really exist but they are different from the spiritual illness of the son in this Gospel. The possession of the soul by demons is a sickness of the soul. The sickness of the soul separates a person from God and from other people.

What do demons do? What is their purpose? Their goals are to convince us that they do not exist and/or to make us believe that they have the same power as God. The prince of these demons is Lucifer, the devil himself. He is the prince of lies. If he can convince us to believe the lie that there is no evil then it becomes easier for us to believe that we do not need God, and when this happens, Lucifer succeeds.

The other lie, the devil wants us to believe is that he is an evil god who is equal to our loving God. When we believe those lies we deny the power of God and separate ourselves from Him and others. Because of this separation from God and others, our soul becomes sick. In the most severe cases of sickness of the soul, the person afflicted starts to act differently. Sometimes this is mistaken for a mental illness.

That is what we see in today's Gospel. The father refers to his son as a lunatic or a mad person. He wants to believe that his son's illness is not a sickness of the soul but something else. Somehow the man wants to believe that this illness is something that was given by God.

He wants to believe that his son's illness is a punishment from God. And here we see the true denial of God. How? By attributing to our Lord and God and Saviour the evil of the fallen angels which has been self-inflicted because of our misuse of our free will. We must remember and never ever forget that everything that God has created is good. This is continually reinforced for us in Genesis as God creates the world with the words, "and God saw that it was good." (Genesis 1:10-31)

Therefore, our Lord rebukes this father and the gathered crowd. He does this because they keep forgetting that everything that God has created is good and because He wants to bring them back to believing in Him. The Apostle James explains what rebukes are in the following passage from his epistle "For in many things we offend all. If any man offends not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body. Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body." (James 3:2-3) Thus, rebukes may seem offensive, but they are a tool to turn us back to a correct way of living.

After the rebuke Jesus asks the father to bring his son to Him for healing. Our Lord then asks him to believe that his son can be healed. The man then cries out: "Lord I believe, heal my unbelief". This crying happens when we can no longer endure the pain of not trusting in God. We often hear this in the cry "God help me!" when we are despairing. It is when we despair that we allow God to enter our lives. This is when God can help us to have belief and faith in Him.

When the man's son is healed our Lord tells the demon to enter him no more. In this the Lord is reminding us and the young man that our behaviours are often engrained in our very being.

After the healing of the man's son, Christ's disciples ask him why they could not cast out the demon. Our Lord's response is that it is because of their unbelief and that this type of demon is only cast out through prayer and fasting.

Our Lord then gives the prescription for healing and how to regain that which was given to them by God: prayer and fasting. This same medicine is given to us by the Church so that we can regain or strengthen our faith and enter in continuous communion with God. During Great Lent, prayer and fasting are extremely important in our journey towards Pascha.

Today, on the 4th Sunday of Great Lent we also commemorate Saint John Climacus, also known as Saint John of the Ladder. This name was given to him because he wrote a great spiritual work: "The Ladder of Divine Ascent".

His life and work affirm him as a supreme bearer and defender of Christian asceticism. His asceticism is a source of inspiration for our Lenten journey.

But who was Saint John Climacus?

There is little information about his origins. Some say he was born in Constantinople around the year 570 and that his parents were Xenophon and Maria, who also became Saints.

When he was sixteen, he went to the Monastery at Sinai. This monastery is known to all of us as the Saint Catherine Monastery in Sinai. There, Abba Martyrius became his mentor and guide. He was tonsured a monk after 4 years at the monastery.

Saint John progressed in monasticism for 19 years in obedience to his spiritual father. After the death of Saint Martyrius, he embarked on a life of solitude, living in a wild place called Thola. There he worked for 40 years in silence, fasting and weeping tears of penitence.

Visitors from all walks of life came to him, wanting to hear his words of teaching and salvation.

At the age of 75, he was chosen as abbot of the monastery in Sinai. He was the abbot of the monastery for 4 years.

He was asked to write a book on monasticism for monks who wished to attain spiritual perfection by Saint John, abbot of the Raithu Monastery. This book, we all know as "The Ladder of Divine Ascent".

The Abbott of Raithu, knowing of the wisdom and spiritual gifts of Saint John Climacus, asked him to write down whatever was necessary for the salvation of those living a monastic life.

Saint John felt that such a task was beyond his ability, yet out of obedience, he fulfilled the request.

The book is a ladder leading earthly beings to the Holy of Holies.

In this book he describes the spiritual life and growth to God through 30 steps on a ladder. Through these 30 steps, a man is transfigured into continuous communion with God.

The spiritual growth that is achieved by the action of these steps is only achieved through God's mercy, prayer and fasting.

In this book, Saint John begins by teaching us not to rely on our own strength and will, for that is asking for trouble! We are to become like open lamps in humility and a sense of our sinfulness so as to have Christ pour his unfailing love, His Divine Energies, into our being. We need to advance in the spiritual life slowly, taking one step at a time.

What we need to do to keep going upwards is constantly pray, especially the Jesus Prayer. Reliance on self and pride are the source of our sinfulness. The fact that we sin shows that we have a focus on other things than Christ Himself.

This book, as I mentioned earlier, was especially written for monks. But any Christian living in the world will find it an infallible guide for ascending to God, and will find it very supportive in their spiritual life.

Let us remember this. Saint John Climacus has described the ladder of spiritual ascent: each Christian must ascend this ladder. The great ascetics ascended swiftly and graciously; we scarcely ascend at all. Nonetheless, let us not forget that, unless we employ our efforts in correcting ourselves and our lives by means of believing in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, fasting, prayer and repentance, we shall cease our ascent, and, most assuredly, we shall begin to fall.

Amen.