

5th February 2023 The Publican and the Pharisee
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1] We have arrived at the season of the Triodion, that is, the liturgical book that contains the services for these Sundays of preparation, Great Lent, Great and Holy Week and Pascha. We have just heard the gospel of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee. As we set out towards this Lenten journey we are invited to consider how we approach God at all; what do we bring with us when we stand before the Divine presence? And two ways are set before us in the gospel.

2] St Andrew of Crete in his famous Great Lenten Canon of Repentance, talks of the first approach, what we might call, the pharisaic mind. 'Boastful I am, and hard-hearted, all in vain and for nothing. Condemn me not with the Pharisee.'

3] The pharisees were a religious and political party in Our Lord's day. They accepted the Writings and Prophets as scripture along with the Torah; they believed in angels and in the resurrection of the dead. Scrupulous in the observance of the Mosaic Law, they were more inclined more towards the Synagogue than the temple in Jerusalem. They definitely opposed to the rule of the Roman Empire, and were contemptuous of those who did not follow their way.

4] In the parable we have just heard we are presented, in the pharisee, with an image of just such a religious mind. This man has come to the temple to pray, but his whole approach to God leaves him unjustified. Indeed, this parable in chapter eighteen of St Luke, is actually introduced with the words, 'He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.' [Lk.18:9] Simply put, the fault of this man is self-righteousness. He offers up to God his own religiosity, his piety, his assiduous keeping of the commandments, his moral rectitude; he judges himself an honest and pure Israelite, unlike the despised Tax Collector, a collaborator with the Roman state.

5] What Christ spoke, therefore, to those who trusted in their own righteousness, we must, firstly, apply to ourselves, as we begin the approach to the mystery of Pascha. Even Job the Long-Suffering, perplexed by his own misfortunes, maintains his own righteousness. So the Lord answers him, 'Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Now prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding.' [Job 38:2-4]

6] Job, of course, unlike the pharisee here, eventually repents: 'You asked, Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge? Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.' [Job 42:3-6]

7] And the prophet Isaiah, in his vision, standing before the glory of God, realised that he beheld things that the profane eyes of man should not gaze upon. At vespers last Wednesday, on the eve of the current feast, we heard these words of Isaiah read: 'Woe is me,' Isaiah says. 'For I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.' [Is.6:5]

8] Prayer, ascetic practice and charity in all their forms lie at the heart of our inner, spiritual life in Christ, and especially so in Great Lent. But no matter how much we do, no matter how carefully we observe the Church canons, no matter how uncompromising we are in applying our rule of life, we cannot manufacture our own perfection before God; we cannot appear before God, demanding a return on our spiritual efforts.

9] The Orthodox life in Christ is a synergy, a working together with God's grace, where we offer what we can, what we are able to offer, according to the measure that has been entrusted to us. And the rest is completed by God's grace. As our Lord says in His sermon on the plain in St Luke, 'Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over

will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.' [Lk.6:38] In order that we may have the mind of Christ, again, St Luke gives us the words of Our Lord, saying, '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. [Lk.17:10] This is the opposite of the pharisaic mind, abandoning self-righteousness, standing humbly before God.

10] But let's not get this wrong: both these men in the parable are sinners in the eyes of God; one through self-righteousness and a heart and mind wrapped up in itself. Then, the other, the Tax Collector, a publican: one who has spent his life extorting money for the benefit of the occupying power and for himself. The difference between them is that one can offer nothing to God except his sincere repentance, and he is the one who is justified. The mind of the pharisee, though, cannot admit the need for humility and repentance, as if he were equal to God in utter holiness.

11] The point of what we have been saying was summed up simply by the late Metropolitan Anthony (Bloom) of blessed memory: 'God can save the sinner you are, but not the saint you pretend to be.' This does not mean, as St Paul commented in Romans, 'Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not!' [Rom.6:1-2(a)] What, then, does this mean for us as we get ready for this coming season? I shall not call Lent a penitential season, as if through acts of piety we might earn justification. It is for us, rather, a season of repentance, metanoia, a change in the heart; an acquiring of the mind of Christ.

12] All our hope for eternal salvation, that theosis, that everlasting participation in the life and energies of God, rests solely in what Christ in his life, passion and resurrection has done for us. Not paying some perceived debt to a god offended at man's guilt: an idea of atonement that developed in mediaeval Western Theology. But, rather, in Christ's defeat of the last enemy, Death, restoring our nature in the image and likeness of God. It is the time for us to

root out all pretence, all hypocrisy; everything that is unnatural to our real nature created in Christ's image.

13] Our problem is not that we do religious things from time to time and leave it there. I have told you many times before, and I repeat it again: we are not saved by religion; we are saved by Jesus Christ. Our religion is there to maintain our contact with Him, and Orthodoxy is the way of the Church, the body and the mind of Christ.

14] We know from the inverted prayer of the pharisee that grace cannot coexist where sin reigns, where there is no repentance. Our sins are the symptoms of our spiritual condition, and Christ came to destroy the reign of sin. Our problem is that our life seems like a series of layers, of which so many have not yet been fully offered to God for their healing; that we always seem to keep so much back. How right Blessed Augustine of Hippo was in saying that God has made us for Himself and that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Him. So much of human sin is being unaware of this and instead, being beguiled, trying to find rest in the things of this world, whether they be riches, possessions, distractions, amusements, pleasures or powers. But if they create the illusion of contentment for a time, wealth is left behind, pleasures fade and powers fail.

15] If the collector of taxes in the parable becomes an icon of humble repentance, the very image of how we must approach and stand before God, consider also Simeon the God-receiver and Anna the prophetess, whom we commemorate during this the feast of the Meeting: who held nothing back in the lives and, waiting patiently only upon God, looked for the advent of the Christ. And with their longing fulfilled, they departed in peace.

16] The coming season of repentance, with all its activity: its prayer and fasting and almsgiving, invites us to reassess not only how we should stand before God, but also where we stand with Him; how does He see us? As the Great Canon of Repentance says, 'Condemn me not with the Pharisee, but rather grant me the

humility of the Publican, O only merciful and just Judge, and number me with him.