

1] On this Sunday, on the eve of the Great Fast, we also commemorate the expulsion of Adam from paradise. In the long history of mankind there have been many expulsions of people. We might recall in the last century alone the Armenians of Turkey, the Pontian Greeks and the European Jews under the Nazis. Earlier in their history, the people of Judah had known the exile of seventy years in Babylon.

2] It was there in Babylon that the ones who had been expelled by King Nebuchadnezzar: the rulers, the temple hierarchy, the skilled workers and their families, began to reflect on their history, to edit and gather together their ancient and sacred texts and gave shape to a unique religious world into which Our Lord was later to be born.

3] How those ancient exiles must have mourned and longed for the old days, back in the old country, where the holy temple of the Lord God now lay in ruins. As the prophet says in the Lamentations of Jeremiah, *'Judah has gone into captivity, under affliction and hard servitude; she dwells among the nations, she finds no rest; all her persecutors overtake her in dire straits. The roads to Zion mourn because no one comes to the set feasts. All her gates are desolate; her priests sigh...'* [Lam.1:3-4]

4] It is as if God's old people, the Jews, the people of the Lord, were re-enacting in history the very condition of mankind himself, revealed in the story of Adam and his expulsion.

5] We do not have to think of Adam and Eve as a direct part of this world's history, but we know and believe that this world is here, having fallen from paradise; as the Anaphora of the Liturgy of St Basil expresses it: *'But when he disobeyed You, the true God Who had created him, and was led astray by the deceit of the serpent, he was made subject to death through his own transgressions. In your righteous judgment, O God, You exiled him from paradise into this world...'*

6] We ourselves are found to be exiles from paradise, in this heavy world of the flesh, which we must all leave now through Death. We have not inherited Adam's guilt; we are not responsible for the start of our spiritual loss. But we have inherited Adam's nature; we are the children of our primary, spiritual ancestors, the archetypes, Adam and Eve. Sharing with them still the image of our Creator, we are born here now, without His Likeness. Just as we share in the traits bequeathed to us by our physical ancestors and forebears, so we do, spiritually, in Adam.

7] But this does not make us evil by nature. Indeed, Evil itself is not a *thing*, there is no *force of Evil*. Evil is whatever has become estranged from the Good; that absence of the Good: that is, God Himself. But we do, though, inherit a propensity, a leaning towards evil, or rather, a habit of falling away from the Good. If there are evil things existing within us, they are alien to our real nature, for all that God created is good. But we have free will; and we have that tendency to choose, to act out that which is evil. That is why we have the mysteries of the Church, especially confession and communion, that through grace we may fight and overcome. Just as Adam falls through his own choice, going his own way, so by the grace baptism we are reborn to start out once again, like Adam and Eve restored; a second life, risen in Christ.

8] *My tears have been my food day and night,*' says the Psalmist [Ps.41:3-4] remembering, with nostalgia and longing, the temple in Jerusalem. *'While they continually say to me, "Where is your God?" When I remember these things, I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go with the multitude; I went with them to the house of God, With the voice of joy and praise, With a multitude that kept a pilgrim feast.'*

9] In the same way we must see our life here, our spiritual endeavour, here in the Church together, as a longing to return, once again. Only, our grief is not from some idealised memory of the past; it is not even for that paradise of the creation story: our remembrance, our hope and pursuit, is for the heavenly Jerusalem, for what, as yet, is unknown and unseen; a journey of faith. As it

says in the letter to the Hebrews: *'Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.'* [Heb.11:1]

10] It is for this reason that we stand, once again, on the edge of the Great Fast; something like those sons and daughters of the Church who in the days following the ascendancy of St Constantine the Great, went out into the desert places of the earth to retrace Adam's steps back to paradise; to abandon this world for a strange, and ascetic way of life. Some found sanctification, others failed; some even went mad in the pursuit; all faced trials and were tempted.

11] We might not be able to match their fortitude and spiritual courage, or even indeed, their faith! But we can, at least, go part of the way with them, if only to affirm that we are not bound here; we are not enslaved; we too can recover something of that likeness to the Divine that is our calling in Christ.

12] I want to remind you that the Great Fast is not primarily about food: it is about breaking the habits that we tend towards; tendencies that flow from our impassioned, fallen nature. And the tools of our trade, the very weapons with which we fight against those habits of thought and word and deed are indeed *fasting* against the constancy of desire; *prayer* that we may frequently maintain our communion with God; and *almsgiving* that overcomes our innate selfishness. All three are needed, as I may remind you once again that fasting without prayer is a mere diet, and that prayer without almsgiving is hypocrisy.

13] *What* we are attempting is set forth for us in the epistle today 'Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day...' [Rom.13:12-13] *How* we should do this is given to us in the gospel, *'that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father Who is in secret.'* [Matt.6:18]

14] We might be amazed when we arrive at Pascha what the grace of God has wrought in us, merely through our willing co-working and synergy with Him. The 19th century Russian Bishop, St Ignatius Brianchaninov, tells us that the human soul is like a mirror;

that the activities we engage in are reflected back onto the soul. He writes: *'the soul becomes stamped with the deeds and activities of its surroundings...Those impressions that are stamped onto the soul in the hour of death remain part of the soul forever, and guarantee either eternal blessedness or eternal suffering.'* [from: The Field). To remove the evil, he suggests, takes time and effort. This is precisely what we must do in the Great Fast, being invited to take on those good activities of prayer, fasting and almsgiving and they will make a good impression upon us.

15] We must guard against thinking that this ascetic life is in some way a kind of punishment, a penance and penalty for our sins. This idea can invade our thinking from certain kinds of heterodox, western Christianity. We are not seeking, morally, to balance out our sins through pain and suffering, as if making up for what we have done wrong. It is faith in Christ that takes away our sin, and it is through spiritual effort of this good work, that we establish the good, receive the transforming grace of the Holy Spirit, and begin to acquire that likeness to God in which we were created in Adam; had lost in Adam; and found anew in the second Adam, Christ our God.