

## **Homily on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Great Lent (Saint John Climacus of the Ladder)**

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**Sunday, April 3, 2022**

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

Today the 4th Sunday of Great Lent we listened to the Gospel reading of Saint Mark.

In today's Gospel reading we listened to the parable of a father who has a son who is possessed by demons. This father brings his son to our Lord for healing from demons.

The father is unsure as to whether our Lord will be able to heal his son because when he had first approached His disciples they failed to heal the unfortunate young man. Our Lord rebukes the father and the crowd that had gathered around them.

Our Lord then asks the man to believe that this healing can occur. He says that he believes but also 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 confronts us here is the existence of evil spirits, who are fallen angels or demons. We would all like to deny their existence and dismiss their actions as being a form of mental illness. We all know that mental illnesses do exist but they are different from the spiritual illness the son in this Gospel reading is suffering from. 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.

Demons want to convince us that they do not exist and 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 we believe the lie that tells us that there is no evil then it becomes easier for us to believe that we do not need God.

One of the other lies that the devil wants us to believe is that he is an evil god who is equal to our loving God. When we believe these 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 illnesses 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 reading. The father refers to his son as a lunatic or a crazy person. This father wants to believe that the illness is something other than a sickness of the soul.

Somehow, the man wants to believe that his son's illness was given by God. That it is a punishment from God. This is the true denial of God by attributing to Him the evil of the fallen angels. It is not a punishment of God, but it has been self-inflicted through the misuse of our free will.

We must never forget that everything that God has created is good. This is continually reinforced for us, as God creates the world in Genesis with the words, "and God saw that it was good." (Genesis 1:10-31)

This is why 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 offend 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.

Then Jesus asks the father to bring his son to Him for healing. Our Lord asks him to believe that his son can be healed. The man then cries out: "Lord I believe heal my unbelief". This 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 God can enter into 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 behaviour is 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 responds by saying that it is because of their unbelief and that this type of demon can only be 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 to this day so that we can regain or strengthen our faith and enter into continuous communion with God.

Today, on the 4<sup>th</sup> 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?

We know little 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 Saint Catherine's Monastery at the base of Mount Sinai. There, Abba Martyrius became his mentor and guide. He was tonsured a monk 4 years after entering the monastery.

Saint John progressed in monasticism for 19 years in total 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 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, where he was abbot for 4 years. During this period, Saint John, abbot of the Raithu Monastery, asked him to write a book on monasticism for monks who wished to attain spiritual perfection. This book, we all know as "The Ladder of Divine Ascent".

The abbot 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 things to the Holy of Holies. It describes the spiritual life and growth to God through 30 steps on a ladder. Through these 30 steps, a man is transfigured into continual 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 have to develop our humility and sense of our sinfulness in such a way that Christ can pour his unfailing love, His Divine Energies into our being. We need to advance our spiritual lives carefully and slowly, taking one step at a time.

What we need to do to keep going upwards is constantly pray, especially the Jesus Prayer. The sources of our sinfulness are our reliance on ourselves and our pride. The fact that we sin shows us that we focus on other things than Christ Himself.

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, unless we employ our efforts in correcting ourselves and our lives, through 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.