

12th March 2023  
Fr Chrysostom MacDonnell

Second Sunday of Great Lent

1] I have mentioned to you before that the gospel readings for the first five Sundays of Great Lent were chosen by the fathers with the catechumens in mind: those who were preparing for baptism at Pascha. The readings reflect the kind of process involved when someone turns to Christ.

2] The first Sunday has Philip saying to Nathanael, 'Come and see.' just as those catechumens had come to Christ. This Sunday has Our Lord healing body and soul through the forgiveness of sins, just as the catechumens confessed their sins. Next Sunday we are invited to take up the cross and follow Christ, just as the catechumens undertook to follow in the Way. The fourth Sunday presents us with an exorcism accomplished through prayer and fasting, just as the catechumens fasted and were exorcised before baptism. Finally, the fifth Sunday, Our Lord teaches his disciples will drink His cup and be baptised with His baptism, and of how true greatness is found in humble service, just as the catechumens would participate in the holy mysteries of Christ.

3] But the Church, though established in truth, is not static, and our own experience of history has left its marks upon the Liturgical calendar. This means that secondary themes have been attached to the calendar: very noticeable in Great Lent. Last Sunday, the Restoration of the Holy Icons; the third Sunday, we venerate the cross; the fourth, St John of the Ladder; and the fifth, St Mary of Egypt.

4] There is a logic to be found here. We are concerned at this season with the restoration of the image of God within us, with taking up the cross; of making that ascent to God through the stages of sanctification; and of emulating, as far as in us lies, that ascetic life, dedicated to finding the kingdom of heaven.

5] Today, however, the veneration of St Gregory Palamas may seem less obvious: what connection might this have with our preparation for Pascha?

6] St Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) was a monk on Mount Athos who became archbishop of Thessalonika. He became involved in what was called the Hesychast controversy, defending the Athonite monks against the Calabrian monk, Balaam.

7] Balaam taught that knowledge of God came through human reason in philosophy, and by study and academic learning. But as I pointed out in the current edition of the Narthex, the true theologian is one who is in communion with God through contemplation and prayer; God is known in relationship, not through second-hand knowledge according to limited human reason in this fallen world. Our faith is a revealed faith, not one arrived at by our own thinking.

8] This is why St Gregory defended the monks who practiced the prayer of the heart, the so-called, Jesus Prayer. Balaam believed that God was absolutely unknowable and that the monks were better engaged in study rather than wasting their time in silent prayer. Of course, God in His divine nature is unknowable to the creature, Man, But St Gregory showed that, as persons, we can relate to the persons of the Holy Trinity and that we can know the life of God within by grace, through participation in the divine energies.

9] St Gregory reiterated that it is indeed possible to know God by what He does, and even who He is, in relation to us, His creation. After all, God has made this supremely possible, when the Word of God became incarnate in our own nature as Jesus of Nazareth. In his understanding of Orthodox Theology, St Gregory was clearly in agreement with the early fathers and, in particular, with the great Cappadocian Fathers such as St Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian and St John Chrysostom.

10] Following the attacks by Balaam, St Gregory countered the Calabrian's extreme rationalism by writing to defend his fellow Hesychasts in his work, Triads in defence of the Holy Hesychasts (c. 1338). After many difficulties and meetings of Church councils,

Gregory was finally vindicated by the Orthodox Church and Balaam's ideas condemned as heretical.

11] The Hesychast way of prayer, as with all Orthodox spirituality, linked the body and soul together in cooperation for our relationship to God. And this is very much in line with the biblical tradition and understanding of what a human being is, a union of body and soul. We have only to think of our practice of prostrations and metanias, frequent crossing, our anointings and blessings, taking holy water and antidoron, our singing and chanting, our kissing of the holy images; and of course, the Holy Gifts: all involve the consecration of this body of flesh as well as the soul. Indeed, there are those Athonite monks whose minds were so attentive to the prayer of the heart that they came to experienced the uncreated light of God within.

12] Here we find the relevance of our commemoration today. For our observance of this lenten season is physical, just as much as it is spiritual. Why else would we deprive the demands of the body through fasting? It is entirely wrong-headed to imagine that Christianity is purely something appreciated only in the mind, as if the flesh and spirit did not interact or did not depend on one another. We do not follow the philosophy of the ancient Greek, Plato, who ultimately saw the body as a prison for the soul. Our strivings at this time do, however, teach us that it is the soul that must lead and be mistress over the body, binding and quietening the sinful passions that have become lodged in the flesh.

13] 'And he rose, and immediately took up the pallet and went out before them all,' we are told in St Mark's gospel this morning. The physical proof of that man's spiritual absolution is there, before their very eyes. We might even call it sacramental: the moving of his once paralysed limbs manifesting what has happened in his soul. I have often seen penitents in confession showing the cleansing of their souls through the weeping of tears. For tears shed from our bodily eyes are held to be a spiritual gift among us, washing the soul in a type of renewal of baptism.

14] The uncreated light, the divine vision, the knowledge of God, were in Adam at his creation. At this time, we are engaged in the greatest work, the highest pursuit that any of our race can undertake: not just the recovery of paradise but participation in the life, the kingdom, of God. For our calling, our vocation is not just to be fixed here, the species homo sapiens, just some large -brained ape, lost on a small planet in a galaxy among billions; a mere accidental conglomeration of space dust. We are invited to become as Christ is now, Theanthropos, the God-Man, exalted in glory.

15] Our baptism is irrevocable: God the Holy Spirit is within each one of us and no one or no thing can take that from us. It is only our sins, sparked by the passions that covers over all this. We are guarded by angels; the saints themselves pray for us: it only depends on our response. As the troubled poet and mystic, Francis Thompson wrote in his poem, 'In No Strange Land,'

The angels keep their ancient places;—  
Turn but a stone and start a wing!  
Tis ye, tis your estrangèd faces,  
That miss the many-splendoured thing.

16] Unless we choose to reject the love of God, no sin or anything demonic can harm the soul where there is repentance. Unless we choose to blaspheme the Spirit of God, deriding as evil what is holy, we are never forsaken by God. The Light is there, within: it is our inner eyes that have become blinded and miss the splendour.

17] May the prayers and intercession of St Gregory Palamas, the light of Orthodoxy, as he is called in his troparion today, strengthen us in our lenten endeavours, that in almsgiving, in prayer and in fasting, we might let the light within shine out into the world to God's glory. Amen.