

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

We have, my brothers and sisters in Christ, completed the first week of the Great Fast. These sacred forty days which the Church sets before us is for our benefit and growing in faith. We give up eating meat, give up eating flesh. What is more significant here is not the meat we buy in the butcher's or supermarket but the flesh of our neighbour. Each time we look down on him as he stumbles we break the Fast, each time we gossip about another we dishonour ourselves and descend into further sin, each time our actions cause another to sin *we* will answer for that sin, whether in confession or on the dread Last Day.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, have you, have I, even after a week, started the Fast? Have we brought ourselves before the Lord in prayer? Have we been charitable? Or have we become irritable and angry because we have no milk in our tea and coffee? Would our neighbours, our friends, our colleagues, our fellow students, notice a change in us for the better? Are we becoming more prayerful, more peaceful, more loving? Have we, even after a week, started the Fast?

This is not to diminish the abstinence from certain foods, the dietary rules are important, but they are to facilitate our turning towards God, not to turn us away. The Lord desires all to come to him but it is by the narrow gate, a difficult way, that we journey to life. Our fasting is to train us for the journey.

The Church offers us encouragement along the way, fans cheering in the stands as we compete in the stadium, and today we commemorate the Faith of our Church, the Victory of Icons. The icons are, in the words of the great saint of our Church John of Damascus, "an image of the invisible God, ... having become visible for our sakes through flesh and blood." It is through the icons where we come into the presence of the Divine One and of his saints. The icons are a reminder to us of our being "surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses," so, therefore, "let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." They are here in our presence, or rather, we are here in their presence, and they support us, encourage us, challenge us, guide us, admonish us, help us, raise us up, pray for us.

The Apostle Paul, in today's Epistle reading, describes for us what the saints have endured. He speaks here of great champions of the Old Testament but we can apply his words to all the saints, who "who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, and put foreign armies to flight." This is not to discourage us, to dishearten us, but to see how, when we allow ourselves to reflect the image of God within us then all things are possible: "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels," says St Paul in another Epistle,

that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.

Always living, always working – as images, as icons – in Christ.

Have we, though, started the Fast? To make a start is hard, is difficult: but start we must. The Apostle Philip made a start, he heard the voice of the Lord and acted upon it, “Follow me” Christ called to him and he did. Nathanael was, perhaps, a bit more like us: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” he replies to Philip’s invitation; we, too, all too easily, answer the Church’s invitation, “Can anything good come out of fasting?” It is easy to dismiss the Fast as something which I do not need, “I am basically alright,” “I go to Church already, why should I do more?” And the Church replies to us in the same way that Philip replies to Nathanael: “Come and see.”

Come and see. Come and see the community of the saints. Come and see what you can become, what you are capable of becoming. Come and see the Lord of all. In the Fast we are invited, alongside Nathanael, to meet Christ. And when we meet Christ we discover that he already knows us, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!” he exclaims to Nathanael and Nathanael is able to see, in that moment, a revelation of God’s power. But there is more: “How do you know me?” “How is it,” he questions, “that you are able to see into my heart and reveal who I am?”

When we Fast, when we stand humbly before the Lord, we allow God to start the revelation to us of who he is: but this revelation of who he is, is made by revealing who I am. God, working through me, helps me to scrape off the mask I pretend to be and to reveal my sinful self. To remove our masks is no easy thing, we would rather live through our lives repressing our inner selves, yet it is the only way to health and life, it is the only way to the Kingdom of God. “How do you know me?” we say before the icon of Christ, “How do you know my true self which even I pretend does not exist? How do you see underneath my mask of respectability?” And the Lord sees us, sees into our hearts. Yet an amazing thing happens: he sees us as we truly are and is not repulsed by us. He sees my true self and loves me; despite my sin, despite my spiritual ugliness, despite my self.

The Lord answered Nathanael, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” When in Scripture we hear of a fig tree it is not an inconsequential detail: the fig tree is meant to remind us of the first mention of figs in the Bible, “Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings.” In the biblical narrative, a fig is connected directly with sin. “When you were under the fig tree,” can, being interpreted, mean “when you were under sin.” So the Lord says to Nathanael, “Before Philip called you, when you were under sin, I saw you.” And he says the same to us, “Before you even accepted your true self, underneath the mask you pretend to be, before you even realised you were sinful, I saw you.”

And Nathanael sees, in this moment, the truth of who he himself is and therefore the truth of the man before him: "Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" He recognises his sinful self, recognises it and is not repulsed by it since he knows that God can make him whole. In this recognition of himself he is able to proclaim Christ as the Son of God, the King of Israel.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, have we, even after a week, started the Fast? Have we answered the call to come and see? Have we stopped eating our neighbour's flesh? Do we surround ourselves with icons of Christ and his saints?

When we allow Christ into our hearts, through the training offered to us by the disciplines of Lent, we can come to knowledge of our true selves and peel away our own denial and heal our repressions. Allow him in. Let the Lord fill your heart that you may be a reflection of his likeness and become the saints we were created to be.

That together with all the elect we may fill the world with holiness and glorify the name of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and ever, and to the ages of ages, Amen.