

8th March 2026 2nd Sunday of Great Lent
Fr Chrysostom MacDonnell

1] Having just heard that gospel reading today, one might think that it was chosen because Great Lent is a time of forgiveness and, of course in part, that is true. But it is worth being reminded that the fathers, who composed the ordered lectionary, read at the Divine Liturgy, had something else at the forefront of their minds. With all the gospel readings during the Sundays of Lent, the early fathers of the Church had, primarily, the catechumens in mind; those who were preparing to be received by Baptism at Pascha.

2] The themes of the gospel readings over these five Sundays all relate to the initiation of the catechumens: the meeting with Christ last week; healing and the forgiveness of sins, as today; the taking up of the cross and following Christ, next Sunday; then the deliverance through exorcism and finally, being baptised with the baptism of Christ as he sets His face towards Jerusalem.

3] Yet, despite all that, we the faithful are not thereby absolved from paying attention, as if this did not concern us as well; as if this did not apply to us who were baptised so long ago. For how can we expect such commitment, such self-denial, such zeal for the faith from the catechumens, if we, the faithful, have ourselves grown lukewarm, have fallen back into self-

regard, have become reluctant, indifferent, or even careless over our souls?

4] How salutary, how useful, therefore, is this holy season! How beneficial for our own salvation ~ *if* we use the time well. The purpose of our ascetic life is not to fast for the sake of fasting itself. We certainly do not fast in order to be known by others as people who fast. Our fasting is in secret, as the gospel instructs. It is according to our ability, our health and position in life. No one here is expected to be able to struggle like a monk or nun in a monastery; we are not monastics. For us in the world to imagine that we should indulge in extreme asceticism is just that: an indulgence, rooted in pride; certainly not be undertaken without the direction and blessing of a spiritual elder.

5] Nearly always, we have catechumens here in this parish. Should they be fasting now? Of course, they should, as we, the faithful should: just as we should pray, according to a sound rule, and more than anything, should be generous in charity and almsgiving, for charity covers a multitude of sins. (cf I Pet 4:8)

6] But let us be very clear as to what this is all for. It is so that we may arrive at Pascha, changed. Unless, of course, we are already perfected; unless our salvation has, even now, been assured; unless our illumination in Christ is already achieved in our Theosis. Who among us can be complacent, when our faith

teaches us that holiness and communion with God is revealed by our coming to unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God; a perfected humanity, measured by nothing less than the stature of the fulness of Christ Himself? (cf Eph 4:13)

7] But for us weary souls; those with busy lives, how do we regard this season? A set of restrictions, an imposition, a nuisance even? Just another complication in our life that we might do without, at the moment? *At the moment?* But what did we hear, just two weeks ago? *'It is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand.'* [Rom 13:11-12]

8] But this *is* the nature of our life in the world. This life we live now is the arena of our own ascetic struggle: not waiting for some ideal time, some change in our circumstances, when we imagine that we shall be able to live a holy life. If only I did not have to worry about the cost of living; if only I had more room in the house; if only my relationships were more stable; if only I did not have all these things to attend to...

9] But our call in Christ was not a future dream, a theory, a philosophical idea, not even an aspiration for when we might be retired. It is an experience, *now*, and is to be lived out, *now*. We certainly do not live under the order and rhythm of monastic peace; neither have we withdrawn from the world, like the fathers of the

desert. It is here that our spiritual warfare is waged. Only, however we are able to engage with this time of struggle, we shall need to pay attention to what the letter to the Hebrews set before us this morning: *'How shall we escape, if we neglect so great a salvation, which having at first been spoken through the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard?'*

10] If fatigue, or weariness, trepidation and fear, sloth or mere boredom have taken hold of the soul, then if you can do nothing else, at least recite the Lent Prayer of St Ephraim daily with attention. And do the prostrations and metanoia, as well, that is, if your bad back and worn out knees will allow! *'Take from me the spirit of sloth, meddling lust of power and idle talk.'* ~ It is, you see, *'high time to awake out of sleep!'* *'But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility, patience and love to Thy servant.'* ~ There, in those beautiful things, we see the ascetic life of Great Lent. And the prayer draws to a close with, *'Grant me to see my own sins and not to judge my brother,'* ~ to guard us, lest we fall into any hypocrisy.

11] But how shall we be changed? What might we become by the time we have arrived at Pascha? Perhaps we shall have bought the Pearl of Great Price; uncovered the treasure hidden in a field; become that lost coin which was found. For this is the very mystery of the Orthodox Christian Faith; the entire purpose of our spiritual endeavour in Christ: to be changed. How so?

12] Think of the story of Adam with whom we begin, how he and Eve sought to be their own creature, to find a life apart from communion with their Creator; seeking their own independence; a self-affirming, self-authenticating existence, realising Good and Evil in themselves, changing the mode of their being, that set them in isolation and dependency on the changes and chances of the natural world, and letting in and ending in death.

13] But through the Incarnation of God; through the cross and resurrection of Christ; through our own Baptism into Christ, we have been initiated into a new way of being, given a foretaste of a new mode of life, hidden in the kingdom of God. That choice to eat of the fruit of good and evil reflects the nature of all sin. And sharing, through our common nature, in the ancestral sin, mankind takes nourishment now from biological necessity, and we take it for ourself, alone. The temptation is to grasp at life, not as communion and relationship, but rather as individual survival and self-existence.

14] But what a different life is found here ~ the one we know in holy communion, where we realise a new kind of life, this time, only in reference to the Eternal and Life-giving Trinity; where we come only to give, offering the holy sacrifice in the oblation of bread and wine; in offering only true worship in spirit and in truth; in finding our life not from within our self, but in the Holy

Gifts given in a mysterious exchange. For this is the abundance of life (cf Jn 10:10) this is eternal Life. And for the faithful, this is the means set before us: the way of the cross; the ultimate test of our trust in God and the self-abandonment of our life, here, to God. For this is how St Paul describes the new life in Christ writing to the Corinthians: *'...as dying, and behold we live; as chastened, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.'* [2 Cor 9-10]