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# JOURNEY TO PASCHA

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No. III

Sunday of the Last Judgment



Above: Detail of the Last Judgement (The “Bamberg Apocalypse”, Germany, 11<sup>th</sup> Century).

***“...It is appointed unto men to die once, and after this the judgment...”***

– Hebrews Ch. 9:27

On the second Sunday before Lent, we remember the Second Coming of Christ and the Last Judgement (Matt 25:31-46). We are reminded that although God’s love is limitless and He patiently awaits any sinner who turns back to Him, *He does not forgive those who don’t repent*. The world will end, and Jesus Christ will return as a judge. ‘Behold the goodness and *severity* of God’ (Rom 11:22). This is the message of Lent to all of us – turn back while there is still time. We don’t know when the End will come, only that it will be too late to repent after it comes. *“Turn back, O soul, and lament, before the fair-ground of life ends, before the Lord shuts the door of the bridal chamber.”* (Ode 3, Canon)

The imagery for this Sunday can be lurid in detail (hell-fire, the undying worm etc.), which is to spur us towards repentance. Just as terrifying as the sentence, however, is surely the trial itself when *“the books will be opened and all secrets disclosed.”*(Kontakion) Moses trembled with fear when he saw just the back of God (Ex. 33:18-23), so how are we to feel when we see Him face-to-face and give an account for our whole life? Clearly we’re in trouble. Yet rather than hide our sins, which is ultimately pointless, we must be open about our failings before God now: *“Turn back, repent, uncover all thou has hidden. Say unto God to whom all things are known: Thou alone knowest my secrets, O Saviour; ‘have mercy on me’, as David sings, ‘according to Thy mercy’”* (Ode 7, Canon at Matins)

As well as the clear calls to repentance, Jesus' parable of the sheep and goats also clearly sets out the practical nature of repentance; at the final judgement our religious beliefs, fasts and prayers count for nothing if they were not accompanied by acts of love. From Vespers for this Sunday:

***“Knowing the commandments of the Lord, let this be our way of life: let us feed the hungry, give the thirsty drink, visit those in prison and the sick. Then the Judge will say even to us: ‘Come ye blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you.’”***

Let this also be “our way of Lent” – true repentance that leads to unfeigned love and mercy.

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## **Facing Death and Dying**

The day before the Sunday of the Last Judgement is a universal commemoration of the dead ‘from all ages’. Before we remember the Second Coming, we commend those to God who have gone before us, who are now waiting the Last Judgement. There are also commemorations for the dead on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> Sundays of Lent; and on every Saturday we remember the dead in some way, as it was the day Jesus lay in the tomb, the old Sabbath – the day of rest. Indeed, death is a constant theme in Orthodox spirituality, with many Saints exhorting us to meditate on death constantly: when we sleep, upon waking and at all times!

Rather than being morbid, this approach is just realistic: our death is inevitable, so shouldn't we at least give some thought to it? “Death is the touchstone to our attitude to life,” wrote Anthony of Sourozh. “People who are afraid of death are afraid of life. It is impossible not to be afraid of life with all its complexities and dangers if one fears death... If we fear death we will never be prepared to take ultimate risks; we will spend our life in a cowardly, careful and timid manner. It is only when we can face death... determine its place and our place in regard to it, that we will be able to live fearlessly, to the fullness of our ability.”

For those who believe that death is the absolute end, it will, of course, always be frightening. For Christians, however, death is but the end of chapter; not the closing of a door, but the opening of a door into a mysterious, yet eternal, existence. But in light of Christ's Second coming, it is a stage in our existence that we must be ready for:

**“Prepare your heart for your departure.** *If you are wise, you will expect it every hour. Each day say to yourself: ‘See the messenger who comes to fetch me is already at the door. Why am I sitting idle? I must depart forever. I cannot come back again.’ Go to sleep with these thoughts every night, and reflect on them throughout the day. **And when the time of departure comes, go joyfully to meet it, saying: ‘Come in peace. I knew you would come and I have not neglected anything that could help me on the journey.’**” (St. Isaac the Syrian)*

This is not to say death in itself is a joyous thing: Jesus wept for his dead friend Lazarus (Jn 11:35) and was filled by anguish at the prospect of His own (Matt 26:38); St. Paul regards death as an *“enemy to be destroyed”* (1 Cor 15:26) and the result of sin (Rom 6:23). However, with “preparation”, death can be the prelude to eternal, unchanging, blessedness and peace with our Lord Jesus.

So, what is this preparation for death? Over the entrance to some monasteries is the inscription:

***“If you die before you die, then you won’t die when you die.”***

That is to say: we must repent, by dying to self-love and this world’s distractions, right now, before our physical death. Then, when our physical death does come, we will be saved from spiritual death in eternity. Lent is the means by which, through fasting, prayer, acts of mercy and general attentiveness to our spiritual health, we naturally detach ourselves from more mundane (and temporary) cares and prepare ourselves for the joyous return of Christ. But it must be stressed; this is **not** a case of putting ourselves through physical hardship and misery for “pie in the sky when we die”. The saints were adamant – and they spoke from experience – that what is good for eternity, can be good for now too. We can feel the punishments of the Judgement early, in this life, when we don’t follow Jesus’ commandments; so too can we get a taste of the Kingdom of Heaven now, by drawing close to God. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saint, Elder Porphyrios says this with child-like innocence:

***“Struggle to become immortal from now, by dying here on the earth to your bad self. In this way, you won’t be sad, but you’ll be very happy, living together with Christ.”***

By facing death, and preparing for it through Lenten practices, we can truly **repent** – and make the change where we die to our old, sick, sinful self, and become changed and reborn in Christ.

## The Eight Deadly Passions – **Gluttony**

Gluttony stems from a natural bodily desire to eat that has become excessive or misdirected. Those experts in diagnosing and treating the passions, the desert mothers and fathers, gave a lot of attention to fighting gluttony, as the failure to control such a basic bodily urge often indicated a person incapable of doing much else in the spiritual life. *“You cannot talk theology on a full belly,”* goes a Russian saying, and so those suffering from gluttony find themselves with dulled senses, tired from overconsumption, and unable to pray or contemplate God, or do much else of use. Overconsumption doesn’t do our physical health much good either; and in a world of rampant consumerism and wastefulness, it could be said that gluttony is even destroying our planet!

But some good news: the methods for battling gluttony are naturally part of Great Lent.

**Signs of gluttony:** overeating, drunkenness, secret-eating, excessive love of physical comfort, obsession with fine food (being a ‘foodie’).

**Leads to:** general intemperance and dissoluteness (particularly in sexual conduct), temptation to independently alter the fast and prayer-rule, self-love.

**How to combat gluttony:** the main virtues to defeat gluttony are **abstinence & temperance.**

Try not to snack between meals and always pray before eating – a dog eats without praying first (though is probably more thankful *afterwards* than we are). Generally, the Saints taught to eat enough to satisfy bodily needs and to try to leave the table able to eat a little more. Great Lent’s increased prayer and fasting help to weaken bodily desires without harming our health. We often find that at Pascha we look forward to meat, eggs and dairy, but cannot eat as much as we could before the Fast because we’ve subdued gluttony. Some Saints taught *very* harsh treatment of the body to defeat gluttony. Suitable for monastics, these methods need to be modified for those of us with jobs and families. Therefore **always** seek advice from your priest/confessor beforehand.

*“Through gluttony we underwent the first stripping, overcome by the bitter-tasting fruit, and we became exiles from God. Let us turn back to repentance and, fasting from food that gives us pleasure, let us cleanse our senses on which the enemy makes war... Our food shall be the Lamb of God... Who disperses the darkness of ignorance by the Light of His Resurrection.”* (Vespers of Sunday Evening)