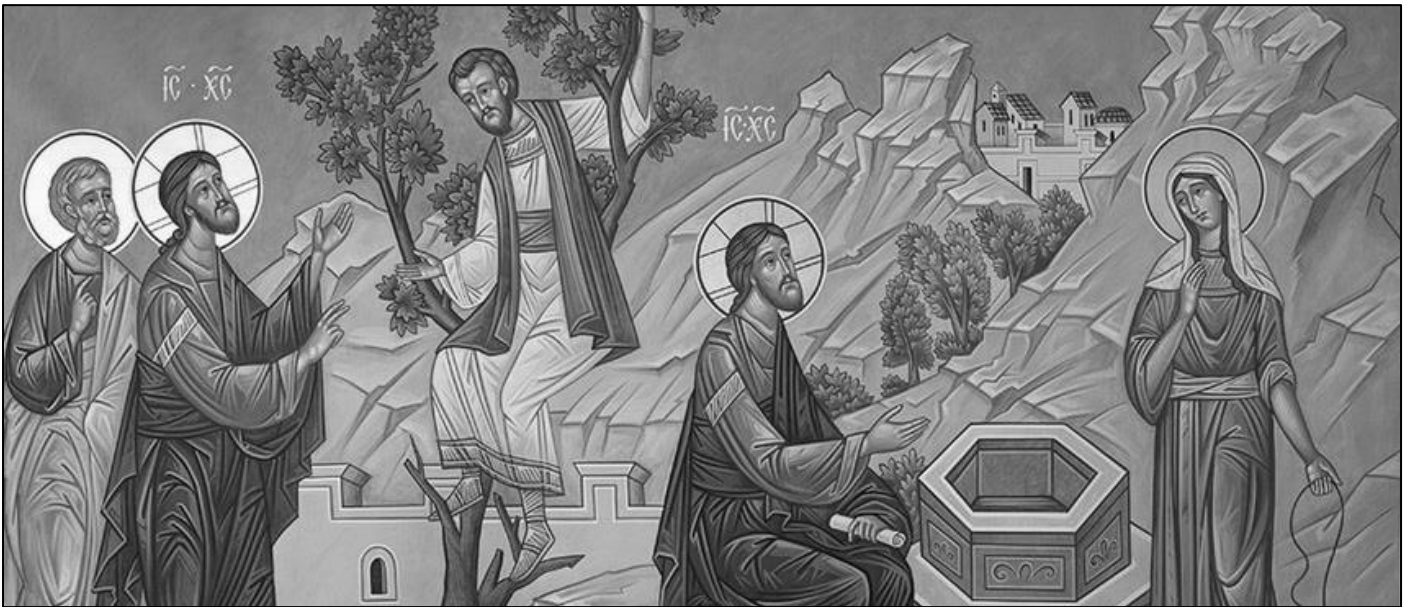

JOURNEY TO PASCHA

No. I

Sunday of the Publican & the Pharisee



Above: Jesus calls Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10) and Photini the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:4-26) to repentance.

“Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.”

– 2 Corinthians Ch. 6:2

“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!” – these were the first words of Jesus when he began His preaching (Mk 1:15; Matt 4:17). In the Gospels, written in Greek, the word for “repent” is *metanoia*, which literally means a “change of mind”. Repentance is not just feeling sorry for what we have done, or haven’t done, but a real resolve to turn away from our current ways and change: our mind first of all, but then from that our thoughts, words, deeds – our whole life.

Indeed, if we are to call ourselves Christians – followers of Christ – we **must be willing to be changed by God**. In the Gospels we read many examples of how Jesus visited those shunned by society: lepers, the insane, epileptics, unlearned fishermen; He also visited those who might have reason to be reviled: corrupt tax-collectors (like Zacchaeus), prostitutes, thieves, heretics (like Photini), and oppressors (the Roman Centurion). Jesus accepted them “as they are” but did not leave them as they are: He healed them; He changed them and they, on their part, wanted to be changed. Today too, we must approach Christ – through the Gospels, the Church, Prayer and at every opportunity – in order to be healed. One such opportunity for repentance, change and growth now presents itself: the period of the Christian Calendar called **Lent**.

About Lent, the Great Fast

Lent is the 40-day long period from ‘Clean Monday’ to the Friday before Palm Sunday, a week before Easter (or Pascha). Originally, Lent was a period of preparation for people wanting to be Christian (catechumens) before their baptism at Pascha. During this time, the catechumens would pray, fast, and generally repent, so that they could make a fresh start once they were baptized. The number 40 has a symbolic meaning: the Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness (Ex. 16:35); Elijah abstained from all food for 40 days as he travelled to Mt. Horeb (3 Kg. 19:8); and of course Christ fasted for 40 days and nights after His baptism (6th Jan). Already-baptized Christians used to only fast during Holy Week, the week before Pascha, but when they saw how helpful Lent was to those preparing for baptism they wanted to join in as well! So today Lent is a time of preparation for all the Church. We should see Lent as a time to repent – change – and arrive at Pascha ready to renew our baptismal vows, as though we were born again (Jn 3:3-5).

The word ‘Lent’ comes from the Old English meaning ‘Springtime’; the Great Fast is not a dark, wintery time of starvation and sadness, but a bright time of illumination and growth.

The preparation before the preparation

Lent is still some weeks away. Before then, the Church sets aside time to contemplate **how to repent**, because repentance is the doorway to Lent, the starting-point of the journey to Pascha.

Each Sunday before Lent, therefore, has a particular theme – with associated hymns, prayers, and Bible readings. By spending time contemplating these themes, we can properly get ready for Lent, and help defend against some of the negative ‘side-effects’ that can accompany fasting.

- 4th Sunday before Lent: **The Publican and the Pharisee** (Epistle reading: 2 Tim 3: 10-15; Gospel reading: Luke 18:9-14), followed by a week of no fasting.
- 3rd Sunday before Lent: **The Prodigal Son** (Epistle: 1 Cor 6: 12-20; Gospel: Luke 15:11-32)
- 2nd Sunday before Lent: **The Last Judgement** (Epistle: 1 Cor 8:8-9:2; Gospel: Matt 25:31-46), followed by a week of abstaining from meat.
- Final Sunday before Lent: **Expulsion of Adam & Eve from Paradise**, also known as **Forgiveness Sunday** (Epistle: Rom 13: 11- 14:4; Gospel: Matt 6:14-21), followed by the first week of the Great Fast.

The Publican and the Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14)



“Better a man who has sinned, if he knows that he has sinned and repents, than a man who has not sinned and thinks of himself as righteous.” (Sayings of the Desert Fathers).

The Pharisee in Jesus’ parable (top left and bottom right in the picture) had not done anything “wrong” when he came to pray to God. His fatal mistake came in not wanting, nor seeing the need, to change – to be healed. “What is the Church, if not a place where the sick meet their physician?” writes St Nikolai of Ohrid, “Do the healthy go to hospital, to boast of their health to the doctor?” Yet this is what the Pharisee had done; he came to the Temple and outwardly looked holy, yet as he prayed “within himself” (i.e. from the heart) he secretly derided others. This very feeling of self-righteousness indicated a greater spiritual sickness; a delusion. St Nikolai again: “Once, when I was visiting a mental hospital, the doctor took me in front of a wire screen across the cell of the most seriously ill of his patients. *‘How do you feel?’* I asked him. He replied: *‘How do you think I feel, among all these madmen!?’*”

A publican is another word for tax-collector, which means the Publican in Jesus’ parable was a national traitor: extorting money from his fellow Jews on behalf of the occupying Roman army. But the Publican *knew this*, and wanted to change, so came before God in humility, in contrast to the Pharisee’s pride. Not even daring to look upwards, the Publican stood apart from everyone else, beat his breast, and with tears cried: “God be merciful to me, the sinner!”

The strength of the Parable is that we can learn from both the Publican and the Pharisee. “Let your prayer be completely simple,” teaches John Climacus, “For the publican was reconciled to God by a single phrase.” On the other hand, John of Kronstadt warns: “Did the Pharisee think he prayed hypocritically? He did not... Do the Christian hypocrites of today think they pray and live hypocritically? They do not. They pray every day, but they pray without heartfelt contrition, without a firm desire for amendment... We all sin, more or less, by praying hypocritically, and we shall be greatly condemned for this.” The hymns for the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee repeatedly reinforce the lesson of seeking humility and avoiding pride; some examples:

“The Pharisee thought to drive swiftly in the chariot of virtues; but the Publican outran him on foot, for he had yoked humility with compassion.” (Ode V, the Canon)

“Understanding, O my soul, the difference between the Publican and the Pharisee, hate the proud words of the one, and imitate the contrite prayer of the other, crying aloud: God be merciful to me the sinner.” (Stichera at Vespers)

But that is not to say that we cannot go further and have both humility and righteousness:

“Let us make haste to follow the Pharisee in his virtues and to emulate the Publican in his humility, and let us hate what is wrong in each of them: foolish pride and the defilement of transgressions.” (Ode V, the Canon at Matins)

However, the ultimate exemplar of humility is Jesus Christ Himself:

“The Word who humbled Himself even to the form of a servant, showed that humility is the best path to exaltation.” (Ode IV, the Canon at Matins)

The week after the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee is fast-free. This is not for us to use up all our food and gorge ourselves before the Great Fast, which in any case is weeks away, but so we can further avoid the downfall of the Pharisee when he boasted “I fast twice a week.”

The Eight Deadly Passions

Sin is a time when we ‘fall short’ of what God expects and we need to be forgiven. Yet behind all our mistakes, poor choices and bad habits lies a spiritual sickness that makes us more likely to do these things. The purpose of our Christian life is, with God’s help, to be *healed* of our illnesses. First, we need to recognize exactly what our illness is. The monastics who lived in the wilderness had a keen understanding of human nature and one monk, Evagrius of Pontus, identified eight ‘tendencies’ that lead to all manner of sins and unhappiness. These are called *Passions*, which comes from the Greek word meaning ‘suffering’ (as in the Passion of Christ). In future issues we will look at each of the passions, how to recognize them in ourselves, and how to fight them with God’s help (always with God’s help). The eight passions are:

Gluttony | Lust | Anger | Avarice | Sorrow | Despondency | Vainglory | Pride

Note: the ‘7 deadly sins’ are derived from the 8 passions, but we will look mainly at the original ‘classification.’