

THE PREPARATORY SUNDAYS FOR GREAT LENT

Adapted from Father Alexander Schmemmann's book: *Great Lent*



ZACCHAEUS

Desire

Long before the actual beginning of Lent, the Church announces its approach and invites us to enter into the period of pre-lenten preparation. It is a characteristic of the Orthodox liturgical tradition that every major feast or season is announced and prepared in advance. Why? Because of the deep psychological insight by the Church into human nature. Knowing our lack of concentration and the worldliness of our life, the Church knows our inability

to change rapidly, to go abruptly from one spiritual or mental state to another. Thus, long before the actual effort of Lent is to begin, the Church calls our attention to its seriousness and invites us to meditate on its significance. Before we can practice Lent, we are given its meaning. This preparation includes five consecutive Sundays preceding Lent, each one of them - through its particular Gospel lesson - dedicated to some fundamental aspect of repentance.

The very first announcement of Lent is made the Sunday on which the Gospel lesson about Zacchaeus is read. It is the story of a man who was too short to see Jesus, but who desired so much to see Him that he climbed up a tree. Jesus responded to his desire and went to his house. Thus the theme of this first announcement is *desire*. Man follows his desire. One can even say, man is desire and this fundamental truth about human nature is acknowledged by the Gospel: "Where your treasure is," says Christ, "there shall your heart be." Thus, the only question is whether the power of desire in us is aimed at the right goal or whether - in the words of the existential atheist, Jean Paul Sartre - man is a "useless desire."

Zacchaeus desired the right thing: he wanted to see and approach Christ. He is the first symbol of repentance for repentance begins as the rediscovery of the deep nature of all desire: the desire for God and His righteousness. Zacchaeus short - petty, sinful and limited. Yet his desire overcomes all this. It forces Christ's attention and brings Christ to his home.

Such then is the first announcement: ours is to desire that which is deepest and truest in ourselves, to acknowledge the thirst and hunger for the Absolute which is in us whether we know it or not and which, when

we deviate from it, turns our desires away and makes us, indeed, a "useless passion." And if we desire deeply enough, Christ will respond.

THE PUBLICAN AND THE PHARISEE

Humility



The Gospel lesson for this Sunday pictures a man who is always pleased with himself and who thinks that he complies with all the requirements of religion. He is proud and self-assured. In reality, however, he has falsified the meaning of religion, reducing it to external observances and measuring his piety by how much money he contributes to the temple. But the Publican humbles himself, and his humility justifies him before God.

If there is a moral quality almost completely disregarded - and even denied - today, it is humility. Our culture constantly instills in us the sense of pride and self-glorification. It is built on the assumption that man can achieve anything by himself and even pictures God as the One Who gives credit for man's achievements and good deeds. Humility is viewed as a sign of weakness. Are not even our churches imbued with the same spirit of the Pharisee? Do we not want our every contribution and all that we do "for the Church" be acknowledged, praised and publicized?

But what is humility? The answer to this question is rooted in a strange affirmation: *God Himself is humble!* To anyone who knows God knows that humility is truly a divine quality. It is the very content of that glory which, as we sing at Liturgy, fills heaven and earth. In our human mentality, we tend to oppose "glory" and "humility" - humility being for us the indication of a flaw or deficiency, rooted in ignorance and incompetence. It is almost impossible to put across to modern man - fed on publicity, self-affirmation and endless self-praise that all that which is genuinely perfect, beautiful and good is, at the same time, naturally humble. Precisely because of its perfection, humility does not need publicity, external glory or "showing off." God is humble because He is perfect. His humility is His glory and the source of all true beauty, perfection and goodness. And anyone who approaches God and knows Him immediately partakes of the divine humility and is made beautiful by it.

How does one become humble? For a Christian, the answer is simple: by contemplating Christ, the divine humility incarnate, the One in Whom God has revealed once and for all His glory as humility and His

humility as glory. "Now," said Christ on the night of His ultimate self-humiliation, "the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in Him." Humility is learned by contemplating Christ Who said, "Learn from Me, for I am meek and humble in heart." And is learned by measuring everything by Him, by referring everything to Him. Without Christ, true humility is impossible, while, with the Pharisee, even religion becomes pride in human achievements and another form of self-glorification.

The Lenten season begins, then, by a quest and prayer for humility - which is the beginning of repentance. For, above everything else, repentance is a return to the genuine order of things, to the restoration of a right vision. It is therefore rooted in humility, and divine and beautiful humility is its fruit and end. "Let us avoid the high flown speech of the Pharisee," says the Kontakion of this day, "and learn the majesty of the Publican's humble words."

THE PRODIGAL SON

Return From Exile



On the third Sunday of preparation for Lent, we hear the parable of the Prodigal Son. Together with the hymns of this day, the parable reveals to us the time of repentance as our *return from exile*. The prodigal son, we are told, went to a "far country" and there spent all that he had. A far country! It is this definition of our human condition that we must assume and make ours as we begin our approach to God. One who has never had that experience, be it only

briefly, who has never felt that he is exiled from God and real life, will never understand what Christianity is all about. And one who is perfectly at home in this world and its life, who has never been wounded by the nostalgic desire for another Reality, will not understand what is repentance.

Repentance is often and simply identified as being a cool and objective enumeration of sins and transgressions, as the act of pleading guilty to a legal indictment. Confession and absolution are seen as being of a juridical nature. But, in seeing repentance in this way, something very essential is overlooked, without which neither confession nor absolution have any real meaning or power. And that "something" is precisely the feeling of alienation from God, from the joy of communion with Him, from the real life as created and given by God. It is easy to confess that I have not fasted on prescribed days, or missed my prayers, or became angry. It is quite a different thing, however, to suddenly realize that I have defiled and lost my spiritual beauty, that I am far away from my real

home, my real life, and that something precious, pure and beautiful has been hopelessly broken in the very texture of my existence.

Yet this, and only this, is repentance - for the content of repentance is the deep desire to return, to go back, to recover the lost home and wonderful riches I received from God: I have first of all received life and the possibility to enjoy it, to fill it with meaning, love and knowledge. Then, in baptism, I received the new life of Christ Himself, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the peace and joy of the eternal Kingdom. I received the knowledge of God and the power to be a son of God. All this I have lost and am losing all the time - not only in particular sins and transgressions - but in the sin of all sins: the deviation of my love from God, preferring the "far country" to the beautiful home of the Father.

But the Church is here to remind me of what I have abandoned and lost. And as she reminds me, I remember that, as the Kontakion for that day says, "I have wickedly strayed from Your Fatherly glory, and have wasted with sinners the riches You gave me." And, as I remember, I find in myself the desire to return, along with the power to return: "I shall return to the compassionate Father, crying in tears: Receive me as one of Your servants."



THE LAST JUDGMENT

Love

It is love that constitutes the theme of the Sunday of the Last Judgment (also called "Meat-Fare Sunday," because it inaugurates the week before Lent when no meat is to be eaten). The Gospel lesson for the day is Christ's parable of the Last Judgment. When Christ comes to judge us, what will be the criterion of His judgment? The parable answers: *love* - not a mere humanitarian concern for abstract justice and the anonymous poor, but concrete, personal love for the human person - any person - that God makes me encounter in my life.

This distinction is important because today more and more Christians tend to identify Christian love with political, economic and social concerns. In other words, they shift from the unique *person* to anonymous entities such as class, race, the "poor" and so forth. Not that these concerns are wrong. It is obvious that in their responsibilities as citizens, Christians are called to care to the best of their possibilities and understanding, for a just, equal and, in general, a more humane society. All this, to be sure, stems from Christianity and may be inspired by Christian love. But Christian love as such is different, and this difference is to be understood and maintained if the Church is to preserve her unique

mission - and not become a mere "social agency," which she is definitely not.

Christian love is the "possible impossibility" to see Christ in another man, whoever he is, and whom God, in His eternal and mysterious plan, has decided to introduce into my life - be it only for a few moments - not as an occasion for a good deed or an exercise in philanthropy, but as the beginning of an eternal companionship in God. For, indeed, what is love if not that mysterious power which transcends the external in the other - his physical appearance, social rank, ethnic origin, intellectual capacity - and reaches the soul, the unique and uniquely personal root of a human being which is truly the part of God in him? If God loves every one, it is because He alone knows the priceless and absolutely unique treasure - the "soul" or "person" He gave to each one. Christian love is the participation in that divine knowledge. There is no impersonal love because love is the wonderful discovery of the "person" in "humanity," of the personal and unique in the common and general. It is the discovery in each person of that which is "lovable" in him - of that which is from God.

In this respect, Christian love is sometimes the opposite of social activism with which one so often identifies Christian love today. To a social activist, the object of love is not "person," but abstract "humanity." For Christianity, man is lovable because he is person. There, person is reduced to humanity; but here humanity is seen only as personal. The social activist has no interest for the personal and easily sacrifices it to the common interest. Christianity is rather skeptical about abstract "humanity," but it commits a mortal sin against itself each it gives up its concern and love for the person. Social activism is always futuristic in its approach. It invariably acts in the name of justice, order, and happiness to come. Christianity cares little about that problematic future, but puts the whole emphasis on the now - the only decisive time for love.

The two attitudes are not mutually exclusive, but they must not be confused. To be sure, Christians have responsibilities toward this world and must fulfill them. This is the area of social activism, which belongs entirely to "this world." Christian love, however, aims beyond this world. It is itself a ray and manifestation of the Kingdom of God. It transcends and overcomes all limitations and conditions of this world because its motivation, goals and consummation are all in God. And we know that even in this world, which "lies in evil," the only lasting and transforming victories are those of love. To remind us of this personal love and our vocation to fill the sinful world with this love: this is the true mission of the Church.

The parable of the Last Judgment is about Christian love. Not all of us are called to work for humanity, yet each of us has received the gift and

grace of Christ's love. We know that all people ultimately need this personal love - the recognition that in them of their unique soul in which the beauty of the whole creation is reflected in a unique way. We also know that people are in prison and are sick, thirsty and hungry because that personal love has been denied them. And, finally, we know that - however narrow and limited may be the framework of our personal existence - each one of us has been made responsible for a tiny part of the Kingdom of God - made responsible by that very gift of Christ's love. Thus, on whether or not we have accepted this responsibility, on whether we have loved or refused to love, shall we be judged. For, "inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these My brethren, you have done it unto Me..."

FORGIVENESS Cheese-Fare Sunday



Finally comes the last Sunday of Preparation, usually called Forgiveness Sunday, but whose other liturgical name must also be remembered: *The Expulsion of Adam from the Paradise of Bliss.* This name summarizes indeed the entire preparation for Lent. By now we know that man was created for paradise, for knowledge of God and communion with Him. Man's sin has deprived him of that blessed life, and existence on earth is an existence in exile. Christ, the Sa-

vior of the world, opens the door of paradise to everyone who follows Him, and the Church - by revealing to us the beauty of the Kingdom - makes our life a pilgrimage toward our heavenly fatherland.

Lent is the liberation of our enslavement to sin and the prison of "this world." The Gospel lesson for that Sunday sets the conditions for that liberation. The first is *fasting* - the refusal to accept the desires and urges of our fallen nature as normal, and the effort to free ourselves from the dictatorship of the flesh and matter over spirit. To be effective, however, or fast must not be hypocritical, a "showing off." We must not appear not unto men to fast, but to our Father Who is in secret.

The second condition is *forgiveness*. "If you forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you." The triumph sin and the main sign of its rule over the world is division, opposition, separation, hatred. Therefore, the first break through this fortress of sin is forgiveness: the return to unity, solidarity, love. To forgive is to put between me and my "enemy" the radiant forgiveness of God Himself. To forgive is to reject the hopeless dead-ends of human relations and to refer them to Christ.

Forgiveness is truly a breakthrough of the Kingdom into this sinful and fallen world.

Lent actually begins at Vespers of that Sunday. The service begins as solemn Vespers, with clergy in bright vestments. The hymns announce the coming of Lent and - beyond Lent - the approach of Pascha. Then comes, as usual, the Entrance with the evening hymn: "O Gladsome Light of the holy glory..." The celebrant then proceeds to the high place behind the altar table for the proclamation of the evening Prokeimenon - which always announces the end of one day and the beginning of another. This day's Great Prokeimenon announces the beginning of Lent:

Turn not away Thy face from Thy child, for I am afflicted! Hear me speedily. Attend to my soul and deliver it!

Listen to the unique melody of this verse, to this cry that suddenly fills the church - *for I am afflicted!* - and you will understand the starting point of Lent: the mysterious mixture of despair and hope, of darkness and light. All preparation has now come to an end. I stand before God and before the glory and beauty of His Kingdom. I realize that I belong to it, that I have no other home, no other joy, no other goal. I also realize that I am exiled from it into the darkness and sadness of sin "for I am afflicted!" Repentance is, above everything else, a desperate call for that divine help.

Five times we repeat the Prokeimenon. And then Lent is here! Bright vestments are put aside and lights are extinguished. When the celebrant intones the petitions for the evening litany, the choir responds in a Lenten melody and, for the first time, the Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem, accompanied by prostrations, is read. At the end of the service, all the faithful approach the priest and one another asking for mutual forgiveness. But as they perform this rite of re-conciliation, as Lent is inaugurated by this movement of love, reunion and brotherhood, the choir sings the Paschal hymns. We will have to wander forty days through the desert of Lent. Yet, at the end already shines the Light of Easter, the Light of the Kingdom.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

The Sunday of Zacchaeus

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. And there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and rich. And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not, on account of the crowd and because he was small of stature. So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for I must stay at your house today." So he made haste and received him joyfully. And when they all murmured, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." And Jesus said to him, "Today, salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost."

The Publican and the Pharisee

Jesus said: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus within himself: 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other men,

extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other, for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The Prodigal Son

Jesus said: "There was a man who had two sons, and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all that he had and took his journey to a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into the fields to feed swine. And he gladly would have fed on the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father and I will say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.' And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet, and bring the fatted calf and kill it and let us eat and make merry.' Now his elder son was in the field and as he came and drew near he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked him what this meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has received him safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command. Yet you never gave me a kid that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoted your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf.' And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

The Last Judgment

Christ said: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and fed thee, or thirsty and gave thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothed thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee? And the King will answer them, 'Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty, and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison, and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I say to you, as you did not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.' And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Forgiveness Sunday

Jesus said: If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses. And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father, who is in secret. And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and dust consume and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consume and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.