

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is the second Sunday of Great Lent. We are in the midst Great Fast.

"Who will give us back this present time if we waste it?" says St. Abba Dorotheos of Gaza in his Discourses.

To appreciate properly the meaning of "this present time", we must meditate first on its purpose. What characterizes the difference between life on earth and the hereafter? We do not really know, but we can see what the Bible and the holy fathers tell us.

We learn as small children about going "to heaven" or "to hell." There is a great difference between them in our minds. This distinction comes from the Scriptures.

St. John and the other Evangelists speak in glowing terms of eternal life, and St. Paul tells us 'But it is written, eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God has prepared for those who love Him' (I Cor. 2:9).

So we know heaven is indescribably beautiful. St. Paul also speaks of having experienced a vision of paradise or heaven (Cf. II Cor. 12). In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, He writes "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up into the third heaven (whether [it was] in the body, I do not know, or whether out of the body, I do not know; God knows). [Yes], I know such a man (whether in the body, or outside of the body, I do not know; God knows), how he was caught up into Paradise, and heard ineffable words, which it is not lawful for anyone to utter.

The other is a place of hopelessness and desolation. St. Basil the Great says:

"Those who have grieved the Holy Spirit. .. will according to one of the Evangelists, be completely 'cut asunder,' (Cf. Matt.24:51) which means utter separation from the Spirit... the eternal alienation of the soul from the Spirit... Thus 'in hell there is no one who confesses, no one in death who remembers God', because the help of the Spirit is no longer available."

We know this also from the story of Lazarus and the Rich man (Luke 16:19-31). Lazarus begged crumbs from the rich man's table and was refused. Both the poor and the rich man died, Lazarus went to heaven, to the arms of Abraham; the rich man to hell, pleading with Abraham to send Lazarus to the rescue.

St. John Chrysostom tell us:

"But what do we learn from this? That no man can protect us there, if we are betrayed by our works, not because he will not, but because he cannot. For these too take refuge in the impossibility, this the blessed Abraham also indicated, saying 'between us and you there is a great gulf,' so that not even when willing is it permitted them to pass it. .. The end of each one is

at the doors, whether he be old or young: and it is not possible for men after they have gone hence, either to buy oil any more, or to obtain pardon by prayers, though he who entreats be Abraham, or Noah, or Job, or Daniel.”

The parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins, recorded by St. Matthew (Mt. 25:1-13) covers the same subject.

St. Gregory the Great wrote:

"What are we to understand by that petition for oil which they make to the prudent virgins if not that, in the hour of judgment, discovering their interior want, they seek testimony from without? .. In that day ... the testimony of each one will scarcely suffice for himself ... They will not find pardon then who waste the time now in which they might repent ... The Isaiah says, (Isa. 55:6) 'Seek the Lord while He may be found: call upon Him while He is near.'

But these parables alone do not tell the full story. They indicate that we will be judged by our works. But in order to "fit into heaven," our whole being - body, soul and spirit - must be prepared during this life. For we learn from many writings of the holy fathers that the key to the difference between God and man and between life and death as we know it is change.

"Every rational creature suffers changes without number and every man is different from hour to hour" St. Isaac of Syria tells us.

St. John Cassian writes:

"There is nothing of itself enduring, nothing unchangeable, nothing good but Deity alone, while every creature to obtain the blessing of eternity and immutability, aims at this not by its own nature, but by participation of its Creator, and His grace”.

St. Augustine of Hippo also writes:

"We are changeable, and we are changed for the better by becoming partakers of the Word: the Word is changeless, and suffered no change for the worse when He became partaker of flesh, by means of a rational soul”.

WE MUST GROW AND CHANGE WHILE ON EARTH!

The hereinafter provides no more opportunities for change. So this leaves our life on earth as the only time during which change is possible. St. Paul says 'Behold, now is the accepted time; behold now is the day of salvation' (I Cor.6:12).

Of this passage, St. John Chrysostom says: "Let us therefore strive for the mastery in the time of this gift. It is the day of grace, of grace divine, wherefore with ease even we will obtain the crown [of heaven]" (Homily XII on II Cor. 6.)

"If you approach now, you will receive both grace and mercy, for you approach 'in due season,'

but if you approach then, i.e., at the Day of Judgment, no longer will you receive it. .. Even now it is hard for those to find repentance who sin after baptism of grace ... Now is the time of the gift; let no man despair of himself. Then will be the time of despairing, when the bride chamber is shut ... For still are the spectators assembled; still is the contest; still is the prize in suspense," (St. John Chrysostom commenting on Hebrews IV).

So how do we use this 'accepted time' to benefit us for all eternity?

The Church, in her wisdom, has made available to us the sacraments for this purpose: Baptism, Confession, Communion, and Holy Unction. But none of these can help us in the depth of our being or effect the necessary essential change in us without our own contributing effort and without that crowning virtue: humility.

A baptism casually buried in the mire of subsequent sin, a perfunctory confession, communion taken without the fear and devout love of God, and holy unction received without fervent belief in its power of healing - all these are useless to us. Indeed they are a mockery and a sacrilege.

The change that must take place in us must be in the heart, 'with much groaning and weeping' Rom.8:23. It must be real. For only the real and the pure can enter heaven.

The Bible speaks in many places of hardened hearts. A hardened heart a terrible thing. for it cannot change. It cannot make use of the 'accepted time'. Our Lord would rather see an abject sinner like the prostitute, who prostrated herself at His feet and washed them with her tears of repentance, than see a proud man who never admits a fault.

When an artist models clay, it is pliable; it can be shaped and made into an object of beauty. But once it is baked, it sets and change is no longer possible. A soul with humility is always pliable and it will surely see the Kingdom.

This, ultimately, is the purpose of time: to enable us to evolve, to purify ourselves through change, like a sword honed in a refiner's fire, to make us fit for the life to come.

Isaiah says "Children have come to the birth, and there is no strength to bring them forth" (Isa. 37:3). In the spiritual reflections of Father Matthew the Poor. (The Communion of Love), he says:

"Such also is the state of the sinner when he stands at the gate of repentance, agonizing in the hope of salvation and renewal of life. Yet when he looks back at the past he has defiled he weeps, and when he aspires to the future he desires he faints, for he finds that feebleness has pervaded his entire being, and that he is no longer able to pull himself out of the mire, encompassed as he is by weakness. It is as if sin were the illness of withering that infects a plant, not leaving it till the gloom of death surrounds it from every side. This is exactly the nature of sin, which is cast into the entire being of a man to expel the spirit of life."

"Wherefore I entreat and beseech, and lay hold of your very knees, that whilst we have this scant viaticum of life ... that you would become better men; that we may not, like that rich man, lament to no purpose in that world after our departure, and continue thenceforth in incurable wailings. For though you should have father or son or friend or any soever who has confidence towards God, none of these will ever deliver you, your own works having destroyed you," says St. John Chrysostom (Homily XLII on I Corinthians 15).

"First my mind must become detached from anything subject to flux and change and tranquilly rest in motionless repose, so as to be rendered akin to Him who is perfectly unchangeable; and then it may address Him by this most familiar name and say: Father ... The unjust and impure cannot say Father to the just and pure" says St. Gregory of Nyssa. (The Lord's Prayer).

'What is the profit of this present life, when we do not use it for our future gain?' says St. John Chrysostom. (Homily XC on Matthew 28).

Who will give us back this present time if we waste it? .. We are not yet perfect, but at least we desire to be so, and this is the beginning of our salvation ... Someone wanting to acquire the spiritual craft must not interest himself in anything else but, day and night, attend to it... unless a man drives himself and fights against his evil inclinations he readily falls away and diverges from the path of virtues.

St. Dorotheos of Gaza. Discourses, X: On Traveling the Way of God.

We must never forget that the "Son of Man has the power to forgive sins." I often hear a person say to me my sins are too great, God will never forgive me. This is not true. Just as these men had the humility to lower the paralytic through an opening in the roof, we must have the humility to go before God, with tears, asking for forgiveness.

St. Peter of Damaskos tells:

"Even if you are not what you should be, you should not despair. It is bad enough that you have sinned; why in addition do you wrong God by regarding him in your ignorance as powerless? Is he, who for your sake created the great universe that you behold, incapable of saving your soul? And if you say that this fact, as well as his incarnation, only makes your condemnation worse, then repent; and he will receive your repentance, as he accepted that of the prodigal son (Luke 15:20) and the prostitute (Luke 7:37–50). But if repentance is too much for you, and you sin out of habit even when you do not want to, show humility like the publican (Luke 18:13): this is enough to ensure your salvation. For he who sins without repenting, yet does not despair, must of necessity regard himself as the lowest of creatures, and will not dare to judge or censure anyone. Rather, he will marvel at God's compassion."

It is always possible to make a new start by means of repentance. "You fell," it is written, "now arise" (Proverbs 24:16). And if you fall again, then rise again, without despairing at all of your salvation, no matter what happens. As long as you do not surrender yourself willingly to the

enemy, your patient endurance, combined with self-reproach, will suffice for your salvation. “For at one time we ourselves went astray in our folly and disobedience,” says St. Paul. “... Yet he saved us, not because of any good things we had done, but in his mercy” (Titus 3:5). So do not despair in any way, ignoring God’s help, for he can do whatever he wishes. On the contrary, place your hope in him and he will do one of these things: either through trials and temptations, or in some other way which he alone knows, he will bring about your restoration; or he will accept your patient endurance and humility in the place of works; or because of your hope he will act lovingly toward you in some other way of which you are not aware, and so will save your shackled soul. Only do not abandon your Physician.

Let us spend the rest of this fast repenting. If we fall, then we must get up. And if we fall again, then we must get up again.

Through the prayers of the holy fathers, Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy upon us.