

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

This morning's Gospel is about an event that happened just after Jesus, Peter, James and John had come down from the mountain where Jesus had been transfigured. There was a large crowd around the apostles who had not gone up on the mountain. A man had brought his son to be healed. The son had a mute spirit and would often foam at the mouth, gnash his teeth and would become rigid. The apostles were unable to heal the boy. When the father saw Jesus coming, he ran up to him and explained what had been happening. The father finished the explanation with the words "But if you are able to do anything, have compassion on us and help us!"

Jesus answered him by saying "If you are able! All things are possible to the one who believes! Immediately the child's father cried out in tears, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" Jesus then ordered the deaf and dumb spirit to leave the boy. The spirit cried out as it left the boy and the boy collapsed as if dead. Jesus took the boy by his hand and lifted him and the child got up.

It is important for us to hear what Jesus had said: Jesus answered the man by saying "If you are able! All things are possible to the one who believes!" Do we believe? How often do we come into situations where our lack of faith in Christ tempts us to quit believing that Jesus is the son of God? Perhaps, to even question the existence of God. How often do we hear people say that there is no God? Or if there is a God, he is not a personal God and does not want to be part of our lives. How often do we hear or perhaps even feel ourselves, that if there was truly a loving God there would be no illness or suffering in the world?

God did not bring illness and suffering into the world, it is the result of the first man, Adam, sinning and thus bringing death into the world.

Jesus did not try to rationalize with the father about the power of God. He simply said to the man that he must believe.

How should we handle these doubts? We too must answer as the father did, we must cry out with tears and say "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" This is the beginning of our spiritual growth. From here we must repent.

St. Gregory Palamas tells us:

"Since the Logos of God through his descent to us has brought the kingdom of heaven close to us, let us not distance ourselves from it by leading an unrepentant life.... Let us acquire the fruits of repentance: a humble disposition, compunction and spiritual grief, a gentle and merciful heart that loves righteousness and pursues purity, peaceful, peacemaking, patient in toil, glad to endure persecution, loss, outrage, slander, and suffering for the sake of truth and righteousness. For the kingdom of heaven or, rather, the king of heaven—ineffable in his generosity—is within us (Luke 17:21); and to him we should cleave through acts of repentance and patient endurance, loving as much as we can him who so dearly has loved us.

God is better understood as a physician than as a judge, just as sin is better understood as illness than as transgression. In the Mystery of Repentance, that is the Sacrament of Confession, this is the image used. The penitent comes before God and the priest, as God's agent, not to plead guilty but to seek healing. Indeed, the priest exhorts the penitent to leave nothing unconfessed, "lest having come to a Physician" they leave unhealed.

The apostles and Jesus went into a house, where the apostles asked Jesus why they could not cast out the demon and heal the boy? Jesus told them "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting."

If we are to achieve Theosis or Deification and thus do the work that God has called us to do, we must pray. What is prayer?

Prayer is not merely an occasional call for divine intervention when human resources fail, nor the recourse of the weak in body and spirit. Prayer is not magic to get what we want; it is putting ourselves and the people we pray for into God's hands, so that he can give what he thinks best and "what God thinks best" means what is best. There is never any question of trying to make God change His mind; but of letting him use us to make His will effective.

St. Theophan the Recluse delivered a short Homily On Prayer on November 22, 1864. He said:

"Why is it, you ask, that one can pray for so many years with a prayer book, and still not have prayer in his heart? I think the reason is that people only spend a little time lifting themselves up to God when they complete their prayer rule, and in other times, they do not remember God.

For example, they finish their morning prayers, and think that their relation to God is fulfilled by them; then the whole day passes in work, and such a person does not attend to God. Then in the evening, the thought returns to him that he must quickly stand at prayer and complete his evening rule.

In this case, it happens that even if the Lord grants a person spiritual feelings at the time of the morning prayer, the bustle and business of the day drowns them out.

As a result, it happens that one does not often feel like praying, and cannot get control of himself even to soften his heart a little bit. In such an atmosphere, prayer develops and ripens poorly.

This problem (is it not found everywhere?) needs to be corrected, that is, one must ensure that the soul does not only make petition to God when standing in prayer, but during the whole day, as much as possible, one must unceasingly ascend to Him and remain with Him.

In order to begin this task, one must first, during the course of the day, cry out to God more often, even if only with a few words, according to need and the work of the day. Beginning anything, for example, say 'Bless, O Lord!' When you finish something, say, 'Glory to Thee, O Lord', and not only with your lips, but with feeling in your heart.

If passions arise, say, 'Save me, O Lord, I am perishing.'

If the darkness of disturbing thoughts comes up, cry out: 'Lead my soul out of prison.'

If dishonest deeds present themselves and sin leads you to them, pray, 'Set me, O Lord, in the way', or 'do not give up my feet to stumbling.'

If sin takes hold of you and leads you to despair, cry out with the voice of the publican, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.' Do this in every circumstance, or simply say often, 'Lord, have mercy', 'Most Holy Theotokos save us', 'Holy Angel, my guardian, protect me', or other such words.

Say such prayers as often as possible, always making the effort for them to come from your heart, as if squeezed out of it. When we do this, we will frequently ascend to God in our hearts, making frequent petitions and prayers. Such increased frequency will bring about the habit of mental conversation with God."

Christ tells us that we also must fast. In the New Testament, the Lord Himself fasted for forty days, Mathew 4:2. He commanded His disciples to fast after His ascension, Mathew 9:14,15 and prescribed fasting as a spiritual weapon against evil, Matthew 17:21 as we heard in today's Gospel. After Christ's ascension, the disciples continued to practice fasting in every aspect of their apostolic lives. In Acts 14:23 we read: "After appointing presbyters for them in every Church, with prayer and fasting, Paul and Barnabas committed them to the Lord in whom they placed their trust." In 1 Corinthians 7:5 we read: "Do not deprive each other {of marital relations} unless it is by consent and for a season, so that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer." They handed down this tradition to their disciples to preserve and practice it after them.

Generally speaking, fasting is a voluntary denying or abstention from certain foods and drinks or both for a certain period of time. However, there is a clear distinction between fasting and hunger. Fasting is not measured by how much hunger we endure. Even though hunger is an important factor in fasting, it is not enough by itself. In addition to physical hunger, we are called to recognize our spiritual hunger and seek to feed it with repentance, prayer and almsgiving.

Fasting is not only abstaining from meat and dairy products, rather, fasting is to live in austerity and renounce the worldly pleasures. By doing so, and we become more able to feel compassionate with those who are in need, we will be able to save our resources and give back to the poor and hungry.

Fasting isn't a virtue but is a means to obtain virtues. We don't fast because it gratifies God when we don't eat. Remember, "the devil also never eats", neither do we fast because it gratifies God when we endure affliction and pain. Neither do we fast as an act of penance for our sins, because fasting is not a punishment; quite the opposite, fasting is a joyful act of love, through which we express our love, faith and obedience towards God.

Through fasting, we control our senses and our physical weakness from all that hinders the contemplation of God; and we become freer to commune with Him in prayer. St. Isaac the Syrian states: "Fasting, vigil and prayer are God's holy pathway and the foundation of every virtue."

Fasting without prayer becomes a bodily punishment, a physical diet or a false ritual, and likewise prayer without fasting loses its power and misses its goal. Fasting without effort in virtue is wholly in vain, and likewise it is impossible to acquire virtues without fasting and prayer, for to acquire virtues is to reacquire the divine likeness of God.

Great Lent is a time for self-examination and self-denial. It is a time to renew and fortify our relationship with God and others through works of mercy, charity, visitation of the sick and assistance to the unfortunate. Lent is a time when we get closer to our family, relatives and friends. Lent is a time to reconcile hostility and hatred; a time to forgive and forget; a time for a new beginning.

Some important things to remember about fasting.

First, in no way should we fast in a manner to cause damage to our health or to an extent where we become unable to accomplish our daily tasks and work responsibilities.

Second, very young children, pregnant woman, sick elderly people, nursing mothers and individuals with certain medical conditions are exempted from strict fasting unless they are advised otherwise by their doctor. That being said, people in these groups are encouraged to abstain from some kinds of food one or two days of the week, as much as they can tolerate.

Third, we should not fast "like the hypocrites", in a way to draw attention to ourselves. When we are invited to eat in others homes, we should accept what we are offered to eat raising no objections. If our fasting embarrasses others or causes them extra work, then our fasting has lost its value and missed its purpose.

Finally let us always remember, that fasting, prayer, and almsgiving are three elements that can't exist apart from each other. Certainly, nothing is more expressing of the real meaning of fasting than the words of Saint John Chrysostom stating:

"Do you fast? Give me proof of it by your works. If you see a poor man, take pity on him. If you see a friend being honored, do not envy him. Do not let only your mouth fast, but also the eye and the ear and the feet and the hands and all the members of our bodies. Let the hands fast, by being free of greed. Let the feet fast, by ceasing to run after sin. Let the eyes fast, by disciplining them not to glare at that which is sinful. Let the ear fast, by not listening to evil talk and gossip. Let the mouth fast from foul words and unjust criticism. For what good is it if we abstain from birds and fishes, but bite and devour our brothers? May He who came to the world to save sinners strengthen us to complete the fast with humility, have mercy on us and save us."

Amen.