

In the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit, One God, amen. Christ is in our midst.

Today is Sunday of Forgiveness. This morning's Epistle was taken from St. Paul's letter to the Romans. He tells us not to quarrel with one another and not to be jealous of one another. These are just two of the passions that we must resist and not allowed to control our lives. Many people think that the passions only relate to sexual immorality, but this is not so.

St. Gregory Palamas lists the passions as: anger; apathy; covetousness; envy; jealousy; gluttony; lust; lying; people pleasing; pride; self-love; and vainglory.

During Great Lent, we are called to do more fasting, more praying and giving more alms. Why do we do these things? It is to help us control the passions which try to dominate our lives. It is necessary for our salvation to take control of the passions. When we give in to the passions we are giving in to the temptations of the evil one.

When we fast, pray, and give alms we are strengthened by the Holy Spirit to resist the temptations of the passions. Jesus teaches us not to grow angry at anybody. He taught, "you have heard that it was said of old, "you shall not murder; whoever commits murder shall be in danger of judgment." But I tell you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment."

When we fast, we must render our minds merciful, clean our imaginations from shameful impure thoughts, anger and everything evil. Such a fast carried out in this way banishes and puts to shame all the evil passions together with the demons who are their makers and guardians.

When we practice both spiritual and bodily fasting and pray, the fire of fleshly desire will be extinguished with the help of good angels, and anger will be tamed like a lion. We will become partakers of prosthetic food with hope, faith and inner vision of good things to come, and will be able to tread on serpents and scorpions and over all the powers of the enemy, says St. Gregory Palamas.

Fasting which is not spiritual is accompanied by anger, hatred, pride and opposition to God.

We do not resist the demons just by fasting, but we use the breastplate of righteousness to protect us, the helmet of saving works of mercy, and the shield of faith.

Our Lord also taught us how to fast: "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."

Notice that Jesus did not say "if" you fast, but "when" you fast. Jesus fully expected his followers to fast. The disciples of John the Baptist had come to Him, asking, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann describes the Christian theology behind fasting as follows:

Hunger is that state in which we realize our dependence on something else-when we urgently and essentially need food-showing thus that we have no life in ourselves. It is that limit beyond which I either die from starvation or, having satisfied my body, have again the impression of being alive. It is, in other words, the time when we face the ultimate question: on what does my life depend?... Satan came to Adam in paradise; he came to Christ in the desert. He came to two hungry men and said: eat for your hunger is the proof that you depend entirely on food, that your life is in food.... Adam believed and ate; but Christ rejected that temptation and said: Man shall not live by bread alone but by God."

Fasting points the way to the fact that there is something more to life than just the physical.

Fasting, however, was never meant to stand alone. By itself it can be demonic. It can lead to pride. The rule of fasting can easily be a substitute for a personal relationship with Jesus. That is why Jesus connected fasting to prayer and helping the poor. Fasting is meant to serve as an aid to help us concentrate our attention

on God. It is meant to lead to a simplification of life: less time for self, more time for God; less time and care for physical food; more time and care for the Word of God in the Bread of Life. For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Fasting is meant to take the focus off me and my selfish desires and focus it on God and the needs of His suffering people.

In the words of St. Gregory the Great:

"But let no one believe that fasting alone is sufficient; for the Lord tells us by the mouth of the prophet, "The kind of fasting I want is this; remove the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice, and let the oppressed go free." And then continues, "Share your food with the hungry and open your homes to the homeless poor. Give clothes to those who have nothing to wear, and do not refuse to help your own relatives" (Isaiah 58:6, 7). The Lord therefore blesses the fast which uplifts our hands and alms giving... which is joined to the love of our neighbor, and founded on compassion. That which you deny yourself give to another; so that by which your body is weakened, may nurture the body of your hungry neighbor."

And so we are called to fast as Jesus fasted. And it is not a fast just for the stomach but also a fast for the eyes, and the ears, and the hands, and the feet at St. John Chrysostom wrote:

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 avarice.

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 ears 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?

Thus, fasting is much more than doing without food; that is the least part; it is fasting from all pride, selfishness, sin and greed.

St. John Kronstadt wrote, "If you eat and drink greedily, then you will be flesh; if you fast and pray, you will be spirit. Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit. Fast and pray, and you will accomplish great things. The overfed man is incapable of great things."

And so we are called to fast. But as we fast we cannot forget how forcefully Jesus pointed out in the Gospel lesson last week that our very salvation depends on what we do - or failed to do - on behalf of the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless, the ill-clothed, the sick, and the imprisoned (Matthew 25:31 – 46). Jesus has a special place in His heart for the poor and the oppressed - so much so, that He identifies Himself with them – “ 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.” How terrible will it be for us if we do not share His concern. It makes no difference morally whether person is murdered or condemned to starve to death by the indifference of others. It is still murder. Over 21,000 people die each day from starvation.

Metropolitan Philip began the Food for Hungry People program, which continues to this day. Let us each take a box home with us and the money that we do not spend on food be put into this box so that we can help those who are starving. They are by the bulletins as you came into the church.

I've heard that the coffee hours can cost up to \$100 to put on. Perhaps we should simplify them during the fast and put the unspent money into the Food For Hungry People program, thus helping those in need and are suffering from lack of proper food.

Fasting is more than just not eating meat, poultry, fish and dairy. It also means reducing the amount of food that we eat. If possible, we should not eat anything between meals. We should also not leave the table full. We should do this quietly without making a scene. For only God should know that we are fasting.

I know there are reasons why some people cannot fast from food. Some of us suffer from an illness or we are too young to fast. But there is no reason but we cannot fast from the sins that tempt us each day.

So, let us fight the good fight, keep the faith firm, quench all the fiery darts of the evil one, and when we have been proclaimed victors we shall rejoice eternally together with the Angels and Christ himself our Lord.