

## The Seeds Sown Before Great Lent

We are about to embark on a tremendous journey together with our Lord and with each other—traveling with Him, through His life, Passion, Crucifixion and Resurrection. This period is called the opening of the Tiodion, the beginning of the weeks before Great Lent. We are invited to step out of “Caesar’s grasp” for a time, “now lay aside all earthly cares” and attend to a world of spiritual refinement and benefit for our eternal soul.

The next four weekends help us to lay the foundation stones for a good Lent. The themes are explored below so that we will be attentive and ready: Humility, the Mercy and Love of the Father, the Last Judgment and Forgiveness.



We seek to “meet the Lord” in the temple of our own heart and to prepare for this encounter through repentance. Let us follow the themes of the weeks:

**Zacchaeus Sunday**- Even though it is not officially part of the series before Great Lent, arriving at Zacchaeus Sunday is a trumpet blast saying, "It is here! Lent is coming!"

Zacchaeus amazes us by his thorough turn around! We are also struck by our Lord's love for us sinners. We can imagine him scanning the crowd of admirers and finding Zacchaeus "the unworthy one" overtaken with irrational or rather super-rational zeal to see the

Lord. We marvel and are inspired by his zeal of repentance.

What did he do? He admitted his guilt. He kept of wealth only what he needed. He gave the rest to the poor and returned what he had taken unlawfully, not two fold as was required by the Jewish law, but more severely-four times according to the law of his conscience. What seeds are planted by the gospel account of Zacchaeus?

By humbling himself and following the yearning of his spiritual heart Zacchaeus was present to meet the Lord's searching for him. Zacchaeus the "unworthy" dined with the Lord. In exchange for the sweet delight of "meeting the Lord" he gave his full repentance, and restored all that he

had taken. This is a good preparation for the sequence of spiritual studies in preparation for Great Lent.

**The parable of the Publican and the Pharisee** helps us to discern the spiritual condition of our own heart. From the Gospel we see that our goal should be like the Publican and not the Pharisee. The Publican was a true man of prayer according to St. Nicolai Velmirovich: always penitent, humble, never seeking the first seat because he knew that God sees him wherever he is. He experiences his nothingness before God which is expressed through the words of St. John the Baptist who said: *I am not worthy to unloose the latches of His shoes.* (St. Mark 1:7). He smote his breast knowing the rebelliousness of the flesh. And he realized that God alone could save Him and so didn't look anywhere else calling out: Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.

The Pharisee's prayer: God I thank thee...was only a superficial formality that preceded his self-satisfied listing of his own accomplishments. His prayers, fasting and tithing didn't bear the fruit of repentance and love.

St. Isaac the Syrian says: "Until a man achieves humility, he will receive no reward for his work: The reward is given not for the works but for the humility."

The Pharisee offered a blemished offering as did Cain in that he fasted with pride, tithed with boastfulness and judgment of a brother. And like Cain's offering his offerings were rejected.

Thus we should learn to be like the Publican in praying with humility to God and looking to Him for all blessings. This is an amazing key to a life of prayer. Humility is according to the Fathers the foundation of the spiritual life and the cornerstone of building a house of virtue.

### **The Prodigal**

Ingratitude is a form of spiritual blindness that leads to a profligate life and spiritual decay. Nothing the prodigal had was his. He was like the foolish husbandmen who were given a field of fruitfulness but then refused any harvest to the landlord. The prodigal in not recognizing the source of his inheritance ended up wasting and losing it all.

Similarly we waste the time of our life and the gift of life because we fail to recognize the God of our life and our Savior.

If we can retain with gratitude the spiritual seeds and pearls we receive each time we partake of the Eucharist; if we would not spill the grace after a time of fasting, prayer of attention to spiritual things by light minded talk, jokes, entertainment but use the gift and share the boat of paradise as St. Isaac said.

The prodigal is a warning to the youth but it also a warning to us when God renews us like an eagle and washes our sins away through His touch.

Certainly we also see His humble love and desire for us to have His Kingdom but He also shows us the need for to take seriously our ontological relationship with Him.

## The Last Judgment

"Blessed is the man who is busy sharing his boat to Paradise" St. Ephraim the Syrian Hymns on Paradise

"Blessed are the Merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."



The Lord who is merciful and who bestows on us such rich and beautiful things inwardly and outwardly expects us to also be merciful. He has united himself with what He calls *the least of My little ones* and calls us to show our love for Him through them. We are therefore measured and judged not so much by what we have done wrong, as we all worry sometimes out of pride; but we are

measured by what we have withheld from our brothers and sisters.

The Final Judgment proves that our lives are meaningful-what we do or don't do, what we say or don't say, even what we think because this precedes our hearts disposition and our actions.

Judgment reveals what God is looking for in us. If we have cultivated divine life in this world we will find eternal life with Him in the world beyond the grave.

Judgment indicates the true end and goal of our life on the other side of physical death. It teaches us to do what we are doing in consideration of the end. Planning in the abc's that we are heading for and reaching for the z.

Our lives have meaning and our salvation is in our brother!

## The Falling away of Adam

St. Siloan composed a beautiful and haunting poem called **Adam's Lament** to express the great sorrow felt by Adam at his falling away from God. This strikes a different though related chord

to the prodigal. Adam's lament according to St. Silouan was not so much for the loss of the beautiful life he had in Paradise but for grieving God and losing touch with His love. Seeing the effect of his sin on his sons Cain and Abel also deepened his sense of grief. All men now would live in suffering and enmity with each other.



This should remind us of the effects that our disobedience and sin has on our family and community and that it is more than just personal but of cosmic proportion. It also indicates the effect of sanctity and prayer even though hidden and the effects on all men and the world. This forms the foundation of monastic and all Christian striving.

St. Silouan speaks with Adam's voice :

*My soul wearies for the Lord, and I seek Him in tears.*

*How should I not seek Him?*

*When I was with Him my soul was glad and at rest,*

*And the enemy could not come nigh me.*

*But now the spirit of evil has gained power over me,*

*Harassing and oppressing my soul,*

*So that I weary for the Lord even unto death,*

*And my spirit strains to God, and there is nought on earth can make me glad, Nor can my soul take comfort in anything,*

*But longs once more to see the Lord*

*That her hunger may be appeased.*

*I cannot forget Him for a single moment,*

*And my soul languishes after Him,*

*And from the multitude of my affliction*

*I lift up my voice and cry:*

*Have mercy upon me O God. Have mercy on Thy fallen creature.*

*p. 448-9 St. Siloan the Athonite*

O brother and sister prodigals let us make our way back to a better paradise than even Adam had before the Fall, the one won for us by our Lord who restored Adam. Perhaps Adam's Lament will touch us and turn our depression into a passion for return, remind us of a love that is greater than any attachments and desires for things of this world. We need our hearts warmed towards God because they have become cold.

St. Siloan helps to make real the relationship between Adam's choices and the suffering of all men. It expresses the most passionate feelings for God and also exposes the link between Adam's sin and our own.

All these seeds cover the ground of our hearts as we enter Great Lent and begin the joy-making sorrow- the work of repentance.

God give us all energy for this great work!