

On the Pre-Lenten Season

The Liturgical Year is for us a spiritual journey in which we follow our Lord and experience His mysterious love for us through which we draw closer to Him. This journey has now brought us to the Pre-Lenten period that comes before Great Lent. Not surprisingly, the Holy Fathers have dedicated these weeks to themes of repentance for our contemplation and prayer.

Participation in these Divine Services helps form our hearts, minds and souls into true disciples of Christ. The Pre-Lenten themes the Church has given us are: Zaccheus, Publican and Pharisee, Prodigal Son, the Last Judgment and Forgiveness Sunday. Officially, Zaccheus Sunday is not part of the Lenten Triodion cycle, and yet it is also connected to the following Sundays, each with their special focus.

Zaccheus was a notorious tax collector who amassed a great fortune using corrupt and dishonest means. It would be more accurate to say that he stole most of his wealth from those he victimized. Yet, when Christ told Zaccheus that He must dine with him, this great sinner repented and in an amazing turnaround, pledged to give away all his wealth both to the poor and to all those he had wronged. Here is repentance through a great act of restitution and charitable almsgiving.

In the Gospel of the Publican and Pharisee, we again see a sinful tax collector, the Publican, in contrast with a supposedly righteous man, the Pharisee. However, rather than stand before God in humility, the Pharisee reveals the very sinful and spiritually deadly passion of pride— ascribing his “righteousness” to his own goodness and additionally showing himself to be extremely judgmental, arrogant and condescending toward others— especially the Publican. However, the Publican comes to the Temple in deep humility and repentance and this time, repentance takes the form of prayer; “God be merciful to me a sinner.” Christ says that it was the repentant Publican who was justified by God—not the proud, self-righteous Pharisee. The Holy Church then directs us NOT to fast the following week, thus providing an important object lesson to not become puffed up by our own works, such as keeping the fast.

Then follows the Sunday of the Prodigal Son. Now we see the Prodigal leave his father’s house and spend all his inheritance on riotous living with sinful people. However, once he’s wasted all his money and impoverished himself, he is now forced to fast as it were, not being able to buy food for himself. It is precisely this state of want and need that helps him come back to his senses as he says “how many hired servants of my father have

bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!" And so through being deprived of rich food and sinful pleasures, the Prodigal is spiritually awakened and humbly returns to his father's house.

On the following Sunday, the Church directs us to say 'farewell' to meat after this Sunday. This "Meatfare" Sunday is also called the Sunday of the Last Judgment. The Gospel on this day is from Matthew 25 when Christ will judge everyone according to our good or bad works. "I was hungry and ye gave me meat..." This Last Judgment provides a real impetus for repentance, since it is a very sobering reality indeed when we contemplate our inevitable end of this earthly life and the Judgment that awaits us.

The final Sunday before Great Lent is Cheesefare or Forgiveness Sunday. The Gospel on this day reminds us that we must forgive one another if we wish to be forgiven by God. In the Forgiveness Vespers service that we do after the Divine Liturgy, we humbly bow before each other and ask forgiveness as our Lord has commanded us to do. What a better place this world would be if only more Christians would be obedient to our Lord Jesus Christ Who commanded us to forgive one another. After all, He forgives us, if we will only come before Him, repent and confess our sins.

In Christ,

+Fr. Gregory