

## The Sunday of Orthodoxy

John 1: 43-51

March 9, 2014

Beloved in the Lord, may the blessings of true, soul cleansing repentance be with us all. Our “School of Repentance” has begun. Let’s try to pay attention to what the Church and the Holy Spirit are trying to teach us.

The spiritual fathers and teachers who, bit by bit over the years, organized the general structure and content of our Lenten services, had a profound understanding of the human soul. They truly knew from experience the art of repentance. Repentance in Orthodoxy must not be confused with formal religiosity, the predominantly negative rules imposed upon us by the fact of our membership in the Church. Rather, it is the acquiring of a particular spiritual atmosphere or state of mind. This is brought about, primarily, through our participation in the special Lenten services.

The late Alexander Schmemmann wrote of this process quite pointedly. “Little by little we begin to understand, or rather, feel, that a mysterious transformation is about to take place in us. It is as if we were reaching a place to which the noises and the fuss of life...have no access – a place where they have no power. All that which seems so tremendously important to us as to fill our mind, that state of anxiety which, virtually, becomes our second nature, disappears somewhere and we begin to feel free, light and happy. It is not the noisy and superficial happiness which comes and goes twenty times a day and is so fragile and fugitive. It is a deep happiness which comes not from a single or particular reason but from our soul having, in the words of Doestoyevsky, touched “another world”. And that which it has touched is made up of light and peace and joy and of an inexpressible trust. We understand then why the services had to be long and seemingly monotonous. We understand that it is simply impossible to pass from our normal state of mind made up almost entirely of fuss, rush and care, into this new one without first “quieting down”, without restoring in ourselves a measure of inner stability. This is why those who think of Church services only in terms of “obligations”, who always

inquire about the required minimum (How often must we go to Church? Go to Confession? How often must we pray?) can never understand the true nature of worship which is to take us into a different world. – that of God’s Presence – but to take us there slowly because our fallen nature has lost the ability to accede there naturally.”

Of all our Lenten exercises, forgiveness, fasting, prayer and almsgiving, our prayerful attendance at the Lenten services is, perhaps, the most fruitful for really acquiring this spirit of repentance. The character of these services is such as to make this experience accessible, not just to spiritual experts but to even the simplest believer. This explains why so many times, the person who has been “doing” Orthodox Lent is, actually, saddened to see that time ending. For some, only the consolation of the glorious celebration of Christ’s Resurrection makes their feeling of loss bearable. But I am getting ahead of myself.

In addition, to the special weekday services of Great Lent – especially the Presanctified Liturgies of Wednesday and Friday evenings, each Sunday during the Fast is given a special commemorative theme that can, also, aid us in our repentance. Here at Holy Transfiguration, we celebrate these Sundays with a special Vigil Service on Saturday evening. On Sunday evening there are, also, special “Mission Vespers” held at a succession of local Orthodox churches. Tonight the service is at St. Sophia’s Greek Orthodox Church in DeWitt.

The theme of this week’s Sunday of Orthodoxy is the historical restoration of the use of icons in Church worship. The iconoclasts had maintained that any use of images was idolatry and had violently persecuted the iconodules (the icon lovers). All this took place in the eighth and ninth centuries. The matter was finally resolved by the Seventh Ecumenical Council in favor of the iconodules. Of course, this only resolved the issue for and in the Church. There are still plenty of iconoclasts in the world today, most notably, Islam, Judaism and much of Protestant Christianity.

The Church, in resolving this issue as well as other doctrinal questions does not seek to impose it's Faith on the non-Orthodox. It rather labors to make clear what the Orthodox teaching is in the face of the challenges from those who would intrude upon Her Identity with teaching contrary to or corrupting of the foundational integrity of Her Faith – the Apostolic teaching of the Gospel itself.

On this Sunday of Orthodoxy, therefore, She, not only remembers and celebrates the victory of truth concerning the icons but, also, re-affirms Her Faith, in its entirety, with a triumphant pronouncement, usually, at the procession with the icons. The bishop or priest reads out a lengthy confession of the main dogmas of the Orthodox Faith – basically the doctrines we all confess at every Liturgy – The Nicene Creed. These foundational “truth claims” are heralded “as the Prophets beheld, as the Apostles taught, as the Church received and as the Teachers decreed”. At the conclusion he proclaims, “This is the Faith of the Fathers! This is the Faith of the Orthodox! This is the Faith that holds up the world!”

After this Confession of Faith, the choir and the people sing a joyous hymn, praising and glorifying God, “What God is as Great as our God? You are the God who works wonders.” Powerful stuff, indeed.

Significant as these proclamations may be, in and of themselves, they are, also, significant as an important element of our School of Repentance. One of the most important lessons of our school is that our attention must be focused, not so much on our increasingly obvious shortcomings, but upon God's Goodness, Mercy, Truth and Love. Without this perspective, it is all too easy to become depressingly absorbed with ourselves. We will never overcome our passions by gnawing on the bones of our sins in darkness. We must remember, also, that the devil is called “the accuser” but offers no hope of a cure.

The Church begins our Lenten Sundays with a “Triumph” of Truth. Just before Easter Matins the priest holds out the New Light of Pascha and sings, “Come, take Light from the Light, The Light that is never overtaken by night.” All the victories, all the triumphs of Orthodoxy are, in fact, triumphs of Truth over falsehood, Life over death, Light over darkness, Love over egoism.

All of these victories are God's Victories and when we are re-united with Him, through a life of repentance, we can celebrate His victories as if they were our own.

Repentance, in our experience, is, then, an experience of God's Victory over our failed efforts to live separately from Him. In a strange but wonderful way, through the defeat of our egoism we experience the Triumph of Orthodoxy.

Our problems with repentance is that we, often, continue to identify with the old man of our fallen nature. The more we can identify with the New Man of redeemed humanity, the more positive our attitude will become. Then, we will, truly, be repenting repenters who repent. And not only that, but people who have come to understand that this is the most positive, beneficial and joy producing activity we can ever undertake – The Orthodox Way of Life.

May God Bless us all with renewed enthusiasm for our Lenten journey and a, truly, blessed repentance. Amen.