

SUNDAY OF THE LAST JUDGEMENT 2018

It is an easy, and common mistake, to find in our Gospel reading about the "sheep and the goats", a rationale for a kind of works based salvation. Such works of "charity" as Jesus describes in this account can, and should, be the expected fruit of a living and active Faith. However, the whole point of these Pre-Lenten Sunday Gospel lessons is to focus our attention on, and hopefully awaken our awareness of, the condition and state of our hearts. As Fr Seraphim used to say, "Everything outward can be a counterfeit", even acts of charity.

In our story this morning, the "sheep", those called by Christ to "Come" into the Kingdom of Heaven, are apparently innocent of any cunning self-interested calculation in their charity. They genuinely love one another. They are even surprised when Christ identifies Himself with the recipients of their love. The "goats" also are surprised and protest that if they had known that it was Jesus. (such an important person), whose favor they would certainly have self-interestedly sought, they would have done so. It is not so much the acts, but the hearts that are revealed here.

For the Christian, love of God and love of our brother or sister is joined together. St. John the Evangelist tells plainly; For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another." Jesus Himself said that; "they will know that you are my disciples by your love for one another." Again St John says; "He who says that he loves God and hates his brother is a liar. "We need to be careful here and avoid the temptation to say to ourselves "I don't hate anyone." That's probably true, but isn't it also true that we are often rather like the man who just ignored the suffering of Lazarus on his very doorstep?

St. Silouan the Athonite once wrote that, "the man who knows the delight of the love of God - when the soul, warmed by Grace, loves both God and her brother - knows, in part, that the Kingdom of Heaven is within us." Brothers and d sisters, do we know this delight, this love of God and of each other? Even if only "in part?" I know that we do, or we would not be here to worship together this morning. The goal of our Repentance and the goal of our Lenten struggle is to grow in this delight, this joy of Gods Spirit in our hearts. The outward labors of Prayer, of Fasting and of Almsgiving help us towards this goal. They are, however, but the means and not the goal itself, which is the Transformation, by Gods Grace, of our hearts. This is our Salvation. Without this we will only know the coldness of self- satisfaction and self- justification, like the Pharisee, The anger and resentment of the " good" brother of the prodigal and the incredulity and outraged sense of "fairness, when, at the last judgment, Christ will say to us "Depart."

In his book, "Parenting toward the Kingdom" Philip Mamalakis gives us an interesting and, I think very helpful, insight into how and why it is that Christ makes such a strong identification of Himself with suffering humanity. "Each one of us" he reminds us, "is created in the image and likeness of God" We are thus, "essentially, icons of Christ" In other words, we are created to be vessels of the Holy Spirit and mediators of Gods uncreated Grace to the material world. Even though we are horribly fallen from that state, that is still what we are. The Saints have to some extent regained this "likeness" and the halos of their icons represent the light of Christ

Himself. We too, as Orthodox Christians have been given this same light through our Baptism and Chrismation. All people have the potential for this and therefore, as Prof. Mamalakis continues; "When we help a person or act respectfully to someone, we are showing respect to Christ. When we insult or criticize someone we are insulting or criticizing Christ." He goes on to refer to the same Scripture that we are hearing today. "We see the evidence of this in the New Testament when Christ teaches that whatever we do to the least of these we do to Christ Himself."

Blessed is the soul that loves her brother, for our brother is our life" says St.Silouan.How then are we to develop such a genuine love and care for one another? It is to do exactly this that Christ calls us into His Church, His "Hospital for Souls." It is the Church, which is working to prepare us, through these Pre-Lenten lessons from the teaching of Christ, for the therapeutic exercises of the Great Fast, our yearly "refresher course" in Repentance and Spiritual Renewal. Hopefully, after hearing these lessons, we will have begun to take them to heart and been led by Gods Grace to a greater realization of our own personal need for such a renewal. Only with such a recognition will we find the willingness to really "do" Lent.

Now looking forward, we must prepare fir the first great act of the Fast - not fasting itself, but a gathering of the community next Sunday evening for the service of mutual forgiveness. Here, then is the beginning of all repentance, Seeking forgiveness, not just from God, but from each other. Forgiveness for what? For something that all of us, every one, can and should confess - our failure to love one another. This is always the beginning, and already I am asking you this morning, please forgive me.

May God bless us all, that we may all grow in love for one another in these sacred weeks of the Great Fast. Amen