

Sunday after Theophany

Matt 4: 12-17

January 26, 2014

May the Light of the Holy Trinity continue to shine upon us all. This “Sunday after the Theophany” marks the completion of our celebration of the Great Feast and, also, an indication of what will constitute our “next step”. Where do we go from here? Before we get to that, however, we have some catching up to do.

Those of you who have been keeping up with our daily Scripture readings know that yesterday we heard how, after His Baptism, the Lord was led by the Holy Spirit into the desert where He fasted forty day and was, then, tempted by the evil one. Jesus, Himself, must have been the source for this information since He was alone in the wilderness. He, obviously, thought it important that His Disciples know about this in some detail and they, in turn, recognized in this event, an important incident in Jesus’ ministry.

The three temptations are of particular interest to us since the Holy Teachers of our faith have always recognized these to be examples of three great soul sicknesses that afflict all human beings from our very birth. These sicknesses are pride, vanity and self-love. They afflict all of us as a consequence of what Christians call ‘The Fall’. They are the result in human souls of the “ancestral sin” just as death is its result in human bodies.

Jesus is, however, “The Sinless One”. He is the only human being to ever be born without these sicknesses. Yet, here in the desert, He is, nevertheless, assaulted by them. This is in a sense, a recapitulation of the tempting of Adam and Eve in the garden of Paradise. They fell; but Christ does not.

According to the Fathers everything Jesus does as God Incarnate is for our sakes. He does not need baptism, says St. John Chrysostom. It needs Him. His victories over sin, the devil and, ultimately, death itself are for our sake. Of all the “gods” of human experience, real or imagined, He is the Only One to sacrifice Himself for humanity’s sake instead of requiring humanity to sacrifice for or to

Him. He is always our Great Benefactor. Everything He has done, everything He has established is intended for one purpose only – to help us. Only one thing is required of us – repentance.

Over the next five weeks the Church will present us with images of repentance, Zacchaeus, the Publican & the Pharisee, the Prodigal Son and, also, reminders of the Fall itself and of the Last Judgement to prepare us for the Great School of Repentance – Lent. Here we go again. We are repenting repenters who repent. This is the foundation of everything we can do to respond properly to what God has done and continues to do for us.

For Orthodox Christians, repentance is not something we just do once when we become Christians, or, occasionally after that, when we do something wrong. Yet many Orthodox people have very childish and simplistic ideas about repentance. I will not even try, here, to refute all of the silly, ignorant and even superstitious notions that actually prevent people from really repenting. What I will do is try to review with you what it is that we mean when we are talking about repentance. Perhaps some study of the three temptations that Jesus faced and overcame in the wilderness can help us here.

As I mentioned earlier the Fathers teach that the three temptations of Christ in the wilderness are representative of the three main illnesses of the human soul – all human souls. Pride, vanity and self-love are the main passions that we are all born with. They are keeping many of us from knowing ourselves well enough to make our lives work out the ways we'd like them to. They are giving some of us wrong desires that could bring failures and disappointments. They are pelting others with unnatural excitements that force them into stressful and emotional struggles and however great your life may be right now, they are keeping you buried inside a shadow of how it really could be for you spiritually. For some, these passions even make each day of their lives a day of torment.

St. Clement of Alexandria describes these passions this way, “There is a persecution which arises from without, from men assailing us. But the most painful is internal persecution which proceeds from each person’s soul being vexed by the passions.” This is a problem that afflicts all of us even if it seems to us that our life is going the way we want – or at least the way we are content with. But no matter

how content with our lives we may be – and life can be very good indeed sometimes – the Holy Spirit is not content. It's work in us is always the same. St. Anthony the Great describes it this way, “ The aim of the teaching and guidance of the Holy Spirit is to purify people completely and bring them back to their original state, in which they were before the Fall.”

People often think that God should accept them as they are – And He does. God has no intention, however, of leaving us as we are or of just accepting some (very slight) improvement only. Most of us, if we are at all honest with ourselves, would be more than willing to settle for much less than being brought back to our original sinless state. We all tend to want to have our cake and eat it, too. This is one of the main reasons people shy away from real repentance. Our vision is too limited. That is one reason our initial repentance leads us to baptism – so that we can receive the Holy Spirit Who will teach us and inspire us. St. Anthony, again, says, “Leading the repentant person to undertake spiritual work, the Holy Spirit, Who called him to repentance, also, grants him His comforts and teaches him not to turn back.”

As Christians, we must understand that to be led by the Holy Spirit will not often coincide with how our own diseased spirit will want to lead us. The Holy Spirit will always lead us into repentance. What is repentance? It is everything we do to get our souls healed of those three passions and all of their children – our sins. It's reading, thinking, praying, educating ourselves in spiritual work, fasting, confessing, forgiving, helping others and following the guidance of the Saints. Repentance is the renunciation of what harms us and the acquisition of what is beneficial for us.

So, what are we to make of all this, here, today? I would think that most of us, even those who have made some progress in repentance, can recognize the need for some adjustments to our ways of thinking about repentance and how we actually go about it, if, indeed, we ever do.

Well, as I said before, the Church recognized our need for this by setting aside these Pre-Lenten weeks to help us prepare for a successful Lent. Even here we will need the help of the Holy Spirit because, try as we will, our genuine desire for repentance is often weak or even non-existent. What are we to do?

Begin to include in your prayers a prayer for a repentant spirit. St. Isaac of Syria even says that repentance is the only thing we should be praying for. So, let us start now, asking God's help with this.

Only repentance will bring us healing and the restoration of spiritual health. Only repentance will bring us the experience of Christ's Victory over sin in our own lives. May God Grant us all this repentance.