

Sunday after Theophany January 22, 2017

It would seem from our Gospel reading this morning that repentance is once again on our spiritual menu. Last week we heard St John the Baptist, “the voice of one crying in the wilderness,” calling the people of God to repent as preparation for Christ’s coming. In today’s Gospel we hear Jesus Himself saying the same thing – repent.

I hope that our previous discussions of repentance have made it clear to everybody that what we Christians mean by repentance is not only the resolution to change the course of our lives and become disciples of Christ but also the ongoing labor of struggle to diminish the power of the old man in us and bring forth the power of the new man in Christ. St John gives us a very good guide as to what our overall attitude towards repentance should be when he says of Christ, “He must increase but I must decrease”.

The Christian journey is from self-centeredness to Christ-centeredness. The only way to make progress on that journey is by often repeated and ever deepening repentance. It is what we do! We are repenting repenters who repent.

Repentance is not so much a matter of going around feeling bad about yourself as it is about going around feeling good about Christ. It is not about us. He must increase. That’s what it means to glorify God.

This process of repentance is what St Paul is talking about when he writes that Christians must work to “put on Christ” not just to be better themselves and to “let this mind be in you that is in Christ Jesus”, a mind that glorifies God, not itself.

Let’s look a little bit at what our teacher, Jesus, has to show us about repentance, here in the time that we are now celebrating – the Feast of His Baptism and the time shortly following it. Let us look, not just for information, but most importantly for inspiration, for upliftment of spirit that can renew our strength.

Yesterdays Gospel reading, for example, told about how Jesus, right after His Baptism, was led by the Spirit into the desert and was there fasting from physical nourishment for 40 days. What was He doing during those 40 days? Fasting tells us only what He was not doing. The purpose of fasting is not that of punishing oneself but of freeing the soul to some extent from the cares of the body and enabling it to soar in contemplation of spiritual realities. Another way of looking at it might be in terms of charging one's spiritual batteries. Jesus did this often during His earthly ministry, even though He had no personal sin. Yet, He was incarnate in a material body and sought spiritual strength and renewal through fasting.

The Scripture tells us that after the 40 days the devil tempted Christ three times and this too should be instructive for us. St Nicholi Velimirovic explains the three temptations as being #1 The love of bodily pleasure (the temptation of food), #2 Love of glory (the temptation of vanity) #3 The love of money (the temptation of riches). Jesus is victorious over the temptations but we often are not. The old, self-centered man finds the three temptations very appealing indeed. The ego-centered person is attracted, the spiritually minded – not so much.

We might notice here that the three great pillars of our Orthodox ascetic practice have positive value in undermining the attractiveness of these three temptations and at the same time strengthening the building up of the new man in Christ; prayer, fasting and almsgiving. This is how we Orthodox practice repentance, how we put wheels on our desire and resolution to become better Christians. Fasting, of course, counteracts our tendency to be ruled by physical pleasure or pain. Prayer glorifies God, not ourselves, and almsgiving challenges our passion for wealth and the worldly power it can bring us. When we do these things, we are in fact repenting, doing the spiritual work that with God's help will further the transformation of our lives from me-centered to Christ - centeredness.

One of the great benefits of our Orthodox program for repentance is that right away it helps us see the truth about our spiritual condition. The difficulties we encounter in actually doing these things make it clear that, our physical

pleasures or pains do, in fact, dominate much of our lives, our actions and our moods; the difficulties of prayer makes clear the problem we have with glorifying anyone but ourselves and our reluctance to be as charitable as we need to be exposes our selfishness, whether we be rich or poor. All of this is really very hard to do - at least initially. Our vanity is so great. St Paisios of the Holy Mountain tells us that we must cultivate spiritual bravery and I think this is true. But we also need encouragement and the right kind of help.

Happily that help is at hand in the life of the Church. Here we hear and experience the continual affirmation of the truth and also receive nourishment and refreshment through the Sacred Mysteries. From the moment of our Baptisms we are no longer alone but are grafted into a great family of believers who are bound by Holy Oaths to aid and support one another.

At the beginning of our Feast of Theophany we heard John the Baptist – a voice crying in the wilderness – repent. Today we hear Christ himself with the same message, and He too is a voice crying in a wilderness. We must not think that His call to us is only about our own salvation. We are called out of the wilderness of self-centeredness and into a great corrective work, the building up of the Church - because the Kingdom of God is at hand.

We will be speaking more about repentance over the next several months. Next week is Zaccheus Sunday and that means Lent is coming. Wonderful! We need this, our own 40 days in the desert to strengthen ourselves for the trials to come. May God help us to be successful.

Amen