



## *Fire & Light*

### **St. Symeon Orthodox Church**

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✠ **March 13, 2016** ✠

### **Forgiveness Sunday**

### **Cheesefare Sunday**

St. Nicephorus the Confessor,  
Patriarch of Constantinople (829)

### **First Week of Great Lent**

Let us begin the fast with  
Let us prepare ourselves  
for spiritual efforts!

Let us cleanse our soul  
and cleanse our flesh!

Let us abstain  
from every passion  
as we abstain from food!

Let us rejoice in virtues  
of the spirit and fulfill  
them in love!

That we all may see  
the Passion of Christ our God,  
and rejoice in spirit  
at the holy Pascha!

- ✠ Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete: Mon-Thurs, 6:30pm
- ✠ Friday, March 18 – First Presanctified Liturgy - Fasting Potluck Supper to follow.
- ✠ Next Sunday evening – 5:00pm ~ Sunday of Orthodoxy Vespers – Guests are coming!

### **Abandoning False Paths**

✠ Repentance is the abandoning of all false paths that have been trodden by men's feet, and men's thoughts and desires, and a return to the new path: Christ's path. But how can a sinful man repent unless he, in his heart, meets with the Lord and knows his own shame? Before little Zacchaeus saw the Lord with his eyes, he met Him in his heart and was ashamed of all his ways.

St. Nikolai Velimirovich of Serbia



### **The Spiritual Life and How to Embark Upon It**

St. Theophan the Recluse (+1891)

*“Consider prayer to be the first occupation in your life and have it this way in your heart.”*

You write that you cannot control your thoughts; they scatter and prayer does not take a proper course as you would like. During the day in the midst of preoccupations and meetings with others, you hardly even remember about God. Suddenly, it is impossible.

It is necessary to labor earnestly so that even to some degree your thoughts may become settled. What you had expected — just start and all is accomplished — this never happens. However, it is already a success that you have begun to notice this and consider it improper. Previously it was this way as well and you were not disturbed, but now you not only notice the unsettled manner of your thoughts, but you are disturbed by this and express a desire to gain control over them. Please continue and inflame this concern and apply every effort to correct this problem.

I have already written you that consistency and ceaselessness of labor is the irrevocable condition of success in the spiritual life. The permanent pacification of the thoughts is a gift of God, but this gift is not granted without your own strenuous efforts. Yet, with just your own efforts you will achieve



not — and God will not grant you anything if you do not try with all your might. This rule is  
Incr<sup>o</sup>sensible.

You have the book of St. Macarius of Egypt. Please read the 19th homily on how a Christian must force himself towards all good deeds. There it is written that "it is necessary to force oneself to pray even if one has not a spiritual prayer" and that "in such a case, God, seeing that the person struggles earnestly and yokes himself against the will of his heart (i.e. his thoughts), grants him true prayer", i.e. undistracted, concise, deep prayer such as when the mind stands firmly before God. Just at the moment when during prayer the mind begins to stand unwavering with God, then it will not wish to wander from Him for in this is sweetness which, once having tasted, one does not wish to taste any other.

Specifically what sort of labor does one need to apply? I have mentioned more than once: do not allow thoughts to wander freely, but when they happen to stray, bring them back at once, reproaching yourself, regretting and suffering over this inconsistency. St. John Climacus says about this that "one must forcefully lock one's mind in the words of the prayers."

When you memorize your prayers, as I wrote to you the last time, perhaps the matter will progress more successfully. Best of all would be to attend Church services for there the spirit of prayer would come most quickly because there everything is directed in that way; but for you this is not convenient. Labor at home to get used to praying with greater concentration and the rest of the time be with God as much as you can. In memorizing your prayers do not forget to delve into the meaning of each word and to feel it, then during prayers those words will hold your attention and kindle a prayerful feeling.

Also do the following: do not suddenly begin your prayers immediately after household concerns, conversations, and running-about, but prepare yourself somewhat by first collecting your thoughts and directing them to a worthy standing before God. Inspire within yourself a sense of necessity to pray, and particularly in this hour, for there may not be another. Likewise, do not forget to establish the awareness of your spiritual needs and first of all, your most immediate need, the establishing of your thoughts in prayer with the desire to satisfy them — namely in God. When in your heart there is an awareness and sense of such needs, then your heart itself will not allow your thoughts to run away to other subjects and will force you to implore God for these things. Moreover, you will feel your overall helplessness more strongly, that if not for God, you would perish completely. If a person faces danger and he has before him someone who by one gesture could deliver him from this peril, would he be distracted in his presence? No! He would fall before him and begin to plead. So it will be with you in prayer when you approach it with an awareness of the peril which surrounds you and the admission that there is no one who can deliver you but God Himself.

We all have to account to our conscience for one significant sin — when we undertake any other task, we do so with some preparation, no matter how small it may be; yet, we undertake to pray without any preparation and we wake haste to finish as quickly as we can as if this task is commonplace and subordinate to our daily business, not the most important of all. How then, given this, can there be any concentration of thoughts and feeling in prayer? Therefore, prayer takes its course haphazardly without structure.

No — please refuse to engage in this sin and do not allow yourself under any guise to wander in prayer. Direct yourself to the conviction that such an attitude toward prayer is a crime — a crime of the most serious nature. Consider prayer to be the first occupation in your life and have it this way in your heart. Therefore, approach it as the first occupation, not as a pastime. Struggle! May God help you! Watch and fulfill that which is prescribed. If you fulfill it, then very soon you will see the fruits. Strive to sense the sweetness of true prayer. When you have sensed it, then this will lure you to pray and inspire you to diligent and attentive prayer. May the Lord bless you! ✕ ✕ ✕



# On the Sundays of Preparation for Lent

A Sermon by Metropolitan Anthony Bloom of London

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. To go through Lent receiving all it can give, we must understand in what spirit we approach it; many endow Lent as a period of sadness and they are mistaken. Bitter, challenging, bracing would have been the weeks of preparation when we are confronted in the reading of the Gospel, in the hymns of the Church, with all our human situations: with our blindness in the person of Bartimaeus who causes us not only to understand that we are blind. It causes us to come to a point of such desperation that we should no longer be able to bear it and should turn to Christ when He passes our way in the words of the Gospel, in the prayers of the Saints, in the gifts of Sacraments, and cry to Him louder than all the voices that try to silence us, "Lord, have mercy, Lord, save me, Lord, give me my sight!"

And then we are confronted again with what happens when we begin to see; we cast a glance around us and we see human faces, we are confronted with human judgment and we are afraid of the appraisal of men. We must learn from Zacchaeus to reject all our fear of human judgment, of human mockery, of human rejection, and turn to God whatever the cost, however foolish it may appear, however much it discloses to others that we are sinners and that we need salvation, while they may have been thinking that we are better than we really are.

And then, when we turn away from the judgment of men we are confronted with the stern judgment of our own conscience. You remember the story of the Pharisee and the Publican; how the Publican stood at the threshold of the Temple, having all of a sudden perceived that this place belongs to God, that this realm is holy, that he, with the life he had led, had no right even to step into it.

And yet, he did not turn away, he did not turn from the presence of God because even his worldly life had taught him that in a cruel human society there are moments, there are oases of mercy, of compassion and that such moments can give hope, that justice or cruelty may suspend their action and that a miracle may occur, and freedom, liberation, and forgiveness may be offered. And yet, in the face of his own judgment he did not dare walk in the sacred realm of the holiness of God; he returned to his house, beating his breast, recognizing his sins, but the Lord had seen him and he returned more justified than the righteous Pharisee who was unaware of sin.

But there is more to our relationship to God; the story of the Prodigal Son teaches us what we need not, when we are condemned by our conscience, only beat our breast, only stay at the threshold and then sadly return to the world of godlessness, the world where He is not the Lord and King: however far we have strayed from home, however cynically we have taken all the gifts of God to squander them in the strange land, we must remember that we have a home and we have a Father, that we may have become unworthy sons and daughters, prodigals, indeed, but the Father has remained faithful and fatherly while we have forgotten Him. He has remembered us with pain and love. We can, like the Prodigal Son, move homewards and will be met on our way by the Father Who has been waiting for us and we will be reintegrated into the household for no other reason than that we have not forgotten that we have a Father and a home and we have come to be forgiven and may fall again.

And again, the Church confronts us in these weeks of preparation with the Judgment. And again we are faced with something more than the judgment of man, the judgment of our conscience, the testing hope of the Publican, the hope of the Prodigal or the despair of the blind Bartimaeus. We were confronted with the fact that the very substance of the Judgment is not the multiplicity

the variety of good and evil actions which we may have done on earth, or committed on earth, but *love*. The story of the sheep and the goats tells us that the only judgment is based on love: Have you been human? Have you been compassionate? Have you been merciful? Have you had pity, have you been, at your own risk, faithful to the solidarity and fellowship of men? If you have, then you may enter in the greater realm of the greatest love which is love divine. But, if not, there is no way into divine love, what to do?

And the next Sunday (Forgiveness) will tell us that if we cannot get love, we can at least forgive, if we wish to be forgiven, and if we cannot yet forgive with greatness of heart, wholeheartedly, generously, we can at least accept one another, sinful as we are, difficult as we are, a cross to one another as we are, and carry one another's burdens; and the first burden is my neighbor's person and personality, and so, one day become able to receive on another as Christ has received us.

But this is the end of preparation. After Forgiveness Sunday, when we have entered into the spirit of forgiveness, we enter also into a new realm, because forgiveness has one characteristic which judgment has not: it is gratuity. We enter now, we have entered into the realm of grace, into the realm in which God, gratuitously, freely, gives to all who will come to Him, all who need to be saved.

Let us therefore re-examine ourselves and if we have not done so according to the passages offered in the weeks of preparation, take off our blindness, become aware of our desperate condition, turn to God in desperate hope, away from human judgment, face our own conscience, face God's own judgment and hope, and love, and enter into the realm of the gratuitous love of the grace of God which is Lent.

Let us enter into this time which is called "the spring of life" as we enter into the physical Spring of this season, when all things are made new, when all things begin to breathe with new life, and only then shall we be able to face the stern and yet life-giving days of the Passion, of the death and the Resurrection of Christ. Amen!

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### **PRAYER FOR THE BEGINNING OF LENT**

O Lord Jesus Christ our God, hope of all the ends of the earth and of them that be far off at sea, Thou hast established these holy days of fasting by Thy law and the prophets, as a way for our mortification and repentance. In the fullness of time, Thou didst manifest Thyself in the flesh on this earth, and by Thy fast of forty days and nights, Thou didst hallow the practice of fasting, and didst command us to follow Thine example. As a merciful and gracious God, enable us to begin these holy days of the Great Fast with perfect repentance, with humility rather than hypocrisy, with diligent prayer, with hunger and thirst for righteousness, with frequent prostrations, and with a contrite heart. Enable us, also, to complete this time of the Great Fast without reproach and with a pure conscience, keeping our faith inviolate and achieving victory over sin. Send us an angel of peace to watch over our lives, to protect us from all the snares of our enemies, and to assist us in the performance of the virtues. Strengthen us by Thy power that we may accomplish the ascetic struggle of the Great Fast. Then, with, our passions bridled and our souls and bodies cleansed, we will be worthy to partake, without condemnation, of Thy most pure Body and Thy most precious and life-giving Blood. For Thou art the merciful and gracious Lover of mankind, Who hast come to save all, and to Thee we send up glory, together with 'Thine Unoriginate Father, and Thine All-holy, Good and Life-creating Spirit, now and ever and unto the ages of ages.

Amen.

***Modern people may have difficulty agreeing that there is such a thing as the soul, but they would not want to be locked in a room with someone who does not have what the tradition calls "the soul." And those who deny the soul's existence may very well discover that they have locked themselves in just such a room.***

I do not understand Zombies. When I was a child, Zombie movies were virtually non-existent. The word referred to something like a Golem in Jewish thought – a creature without a soul. It is properly a frightening thing – for that which we think of as the soul, is also the seat of compassion and kindness. A creature without a soul would be driven by something other – which can only be dangerous for everything and everyone around them. A Golem cannot be reasoned with or appealed to. Like a Zombie, it can only be killed.

So what is this soul, this something that makes us not a Zombie or a Golem?

A man is walking down the hallway in his home. A spider suddenly darts out from under some furniture. Without a thought the man instinctively steps on it. For the man, the action is nothing more than a reflex, like scratching an itch. For the spider, it is the end of the world. Of course, we think of other human beings with greater regard than a spider. Killing another human being is murder. But sometimes, the unthinkable occurs, and a mass-murderer goes on a killing rampage, randomly shooting children or adults, until, exhausted, he ends his own life, or his life is ended for him. We use phrases such as "killing rampage" that sound like a fit of anger. Such rages have been described as far back as Homer, and somehow make tragic sense for us. But we are also realizing that there is a new phenomenon – not a rampage – but an exercise in existential meaninglessness. The killing takes place without anger or words, but mindlessly, like stepping on a spider. Soul-less actions?

Modernity holds that we do not have a soul. And, in other terms, it holds that we do not have a nature. Human beings are a collection of choices and decisions. We can be whatever we want to be, or whatever makes us happy. Of course, such decisions may involve other human beings so that we engage in contractual relationships, negotiating our mutual happiness. If I don't kill you, you agree not to kill me. I want what you make, so I agree to pay you what you ask. You want someone to make your widgets, so I agree to work for you in the widget factory. We call this negotiated world the "market." There we buy and sell our happiness, hoping that the market remains in an upward mood.

But is there such a thing as the soul? Where do we find it?

The soul is not observed like the liver or the heart. It is a quality that makes the brain more than a biological calculator. In the Scriptures, it is pretty much synonymous with "life." But this is rooted in a world-view that understands a person's life to be more than mere biology and instinct. Modern people may have difficulty agreeing that there is such a thing as the soul, but they would not want to be locked in a room with someone who does not have what the tradition calls "the soul." And those who deny the soul's existence may very well discover that they have locked themselves in just such a room.

A primary care for the soul in human history is the telling of stories – not just any stories – but *soul stories*. I have coined this phrase to help us think about *myths*. Many modern people think that ancient myths are stories that were told in an attempt to explain a universe that was not understood.

And so we think that now that we understand everything, we have no more need for such stories. But myths are not stories of “how?” They are stories of “Why?” and “What does it mean?” and “How should I live?” The answer to such questions are found in the formative stories of every culture.

When Plato described his ideal society in *The Republic*, he required children to learn to play musical instruments, and described it as a requirement of the soul. The soul requires beauty. It requires poetry, and song. It requires the capacity to live and not merely consume.

A deep failure of modernity is its jettisoning of soul stories. Contemporary music is simply insufficient for the soul. The result can be a struggle for the life of the soul – to exist without being swallowed whole by the consumption that surrounds us. “Man shall not live by bread alone.”

The stories of the Christian faith are soul stories. CS Lewis described the gospel as a myth, with the distinction of actually having happened. It is incumbent on Christians in the modern world to be sure that what they offer is the full meat of the Christian tradition and not merely another form of fast food.

Of course, there are other stories. The fathers of the Church did not dismiss the myths of the non-Christians around them. The simple fact is that every shred of knowledge that we possess today about the pre-Christian stories of Greece and Rome exist because Christians preserved them. There are currents within our culture that would largely jettison the study of classical literature, including what was once known as the “canon of literature.” The drive to elevate current political and social understanding over every previous understanding has made it common to neglect important stories for adolescent fiction and the like.

The contemporary landscape argues that we have been making disastrous decisions for several generations. Some are making a case that we have entered a cultural dark age. This judgment is perhaps too pessimistic, but it is not without merit. But it also makes the strong case that Christians need to sing. They need to paint and tell stories. They need to build beautiful temples and adorn them with lives of sacrifice and kindness. They need to nurture the life of the soul, both within themselves and within their children. And make no mistake, they need to sing rather than just listen to songs. They need to speak careful words with great intention rather than just hear them.

*My soul, my soul arise!*

### **The Prayer of St. Ephraim**

**“O Lord and Master of my life, take from me the spirit of sloth, despair, lust of power and idle talk. But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility, patience and love to Thy servant. Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own transgressions and not to judge my brother! For blessed art Thou, unto ages of ages! Amen!”**

**Penitential Verses (Odes 1 to 6) from Thursday's  
THE GREAT CANON OF ST. ANDREW OF CRETE**

**Ode One:**

*Refrain: Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me!*

O Lamb of God Who takest away the sins of all, take from me the heavy burden of sin, and in Thy compassion, forgive me.

I fall down before Thee, Jesus, imploring Thy mercy, for I have sinned against Thee. Take now from me the heavy burden of sin, and in Thy mercy grant me tears of repentance.

Now is the time for repentance and I come to Thee, my Creator. Take from me the heavy burden of sin, and in Thy compassion forgive me.

Having wasted my soul in evil habits, I am empty of the fruits of every virtue and in great hunger. Therefore, I cry to Thee, O my merciful Father,  
"Watch over me and have mercy on me."

**Ode Two:**

Lamech cried, "I have killed a man for wounding me,"  
and a young man for hurting me!"  
How can you hear this, my soul, and not tremble?  
For you too have polluted your flesh and defiled your inward being.

You, my soul, desire to build a tower as a fortress for your lusts as the people of Babel erected a tower to increase their strength. But as he did with them, so will the Creator also overthrow your desires and shatter all your plans.

How well have I imitated those first murderers, Cain and Lamech!  
Through the desires of the flesh I have killed my soul as Lamech a man, and my mind, as once he did a young man. I have also murdered my body as Cain did his brother.

Long ago the Lord rained burning sulfur on the city of Sodom to consume its flagrant wickedness. But you, my soul, have kindled within yourself the fires of hell which now are about to consume you!

I am wounded; I am pierced. See how the Enemy's arrows have sunk into my soul and body! See the bruises, the sores and the mutilations which cause me to cry out -- the wounds resulting from my own passions.

**Ode Three:**

Like Hagar the Egyptian long ago, You, O my soul, are by your own choice a slave and have given birth to a new Ishmael -- your own stubbornness.

You know, my soul, of Jacob's ladder which appeared from earth to Heaven. Why then have you not held fast to the secure rung of piety?

Imitate Melchizedek --that image of royal and priestly life of Christ.

Do not become a pillar of salt, my soul, by turning back to what you have left behind; let the destruction of Sodom fill you with fear, and save yourself in the town of Zoar.

Master, do not reject the prayers of those who praise Thee, but in Thy love for mankind be merciful and grant forgiveness to all who ask in faith.

**Ode Four:**

My fleeting life is full of pain and wickedness, but accept me, O Lord, in repentance and allow me to behold Thy presence. May the Enemy never possess me: may I never fall prey to him.  
O Savior, have mercy on me.

Job, once crowned and regally-attired, abounding in both wealth and virtue, found himself suddenly a beggar, cut off from all his riches and the glory of his kingdom.

Job, whom God deemed more righteous and blameless than anyone else alive, did not escape the traps of the Deceiver, so what will you do, my sin-loving soul, if something unexpected befalls you?

Like the Pharisee I am boastful and my heart is cold; my life I have passed in vanity. My merciful and righteous Judge, do not condemn me with him, but grant me the tax-collectors humility and accept me.

I know, O merciful Lord, that I have sinned and corrupted the temple of my soul, but accept me in repentance and allow me to behold Thy presence. May the Enemy never possess me: may I never fall prey to him.  
O Savior, have mercy on me.

I have become an idol to myself, and in passions have I injured my soul. But accept me now in repentance, merciful Lord, and allow me to behold Thy presence. May the Enemy never possess me: may I never fall prey to him.

O Savior, have mercy on me.

I have never listened to Thy words nor obeyed Thy commands, O Lawgiver. But accept me now in repentance, O merciful Lord, and allow me to behold Thy presence. May the Enemy never possess me: may I never fall prey to him.  
O Savior, have mercy on me.

**Ode Five:**

Imitate the desire of the crippled woman, my powerless soul; come and fall down at Jesus' feet and allow Him to heal Thee that Thy path may lead toward God.

As a deep well of Living Water, O Lord, pour upon me the rivers of life which flow from Thy wounds. Let me, like the Samaritan woman, drink of them that I may thirst no more.

Let my tears, O Lord and Master, be for me a pool of Siloam in which to wash my spiritual senses that I may see Thee, the Light Which existed before time began.

**Ode Six:**

I am the lost coin bearing Thy royal likeness, O Word. Therefore, light the lamp (which is John, Thy Forerunner and Baptizer) to find and renew that which was created in Thy image.

As Joshua subdued Amalek and the lying Gibeonites, arise, O my soul, and subdue the weakness of your flesh, subduing everything which leads your mind astray.

**"My child, you are amassing treasure when you say the Jesus Prayer; it's like putting gold in your wallet."**

**Elder Ephraim of Katounakia**