

HOMILY By His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America At the Vespers of Contrition



Beloved sisters and brothers Christ,

On this evening, when we re-enter our Lenten journey in its fullness, I ask all of you to look as deeply as possible into your hearts. Search out your motivations, and set an intention for the remainder of these Holy Forty Days. Each of us has been blessed by God and received grace to travel through Lent, but our destination may not be as obvious as you might think.

We do not go through these days of abstinence in order to merely fulfill some requirement to partake of Holy Week and Pascha. Lent is not about achieving some level of merit or worthiness. As the priest prays at every Divine Liturgy: Ούδεὶς ἄξιος... No one is ever worthy.

We endure the privations of Lent and Holy Week in order to raise our awareness of our ultimate dependence upon God, and our interdependence with one another. Fasting does not so much prepare us to receive, as it prepares us to give.

To give of ourselves to our Creator and God, and to give to one another gifts ineffably precious: love, compassion, mercy and forgiveness.

We call this service: the Vespers of Contrition. These services mark the end of the day of the Sundays in Lent, and the beginning of Monday. These special Lenten services invite us to examine our hearts with honesty and integrity, and if we do so, we will acknowledge our need to receive not only God's forgiveness, but also to grant and to receive forgiveness with one another. And we may not always have the opportunity to seek out such forgiveness. Perhaps, the person has moved far away... Perhaps, they have passed on... But we can set the intention to receive, and also to give the very first thing that our Lord uttered from the Cross of His ineffable sacrifice:

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.[*]

Here, tonight, we can set the intention of our hearts to be vessels of forgiveness. To receive and to give. And it is all dependent on our love.

Do you remember the story of the sinful woman who anointed Jesus in the house of Simon the Pharisee, which we commemorate on Holy Tuesday evening, the Matins of Holy Wednesday? The Lord said this of the forgiveness granted unto this notorious sinner:

"... her many sins are forgiven, because she loved much! But, if you are forgiven just a little, you only love a little." [†]

You see, my friends, it is love that seeks forgiveness, and it is love that forgives. And here we are in the midst of the Fast, with only one task to fulfill: to forgive and accept forgiveness; from one another and from God.

All our fasting, all our praying, all our almsgiving, are nothing more than manifestations of our inner disposition. They are external signs that depend on our internal spiritual state, whose basis – whether we know it or not – is love. For God is love; ὁ Θεὸς ἀγάπη ἔστιν.[‡]

I pray that this Great Lent may be a journey of love for all of you. May it be a path to forgiveness - of yourselves and of others. In the gentle knowledge and peace of God's forgiveness, may you always walk in newness of life, forgiving others as you have been forgiven by the power and sacrifice achieved on Golgotha. And as you all know so well, the journey does not end at the Cross, but begins afresh at the empty Tomb, whose glories we shall celebrate at Holy Pascha.

Amen.

Καλή Σαρακοστή, καὶ Καλό Πάσχα.

[*] Luke 23:34.

[†] Luke 7:47.

[‡] I John 4:8

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