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Sunday Sermon 1st of March 2020 By His Eminence Archbishop Serafim of Zimbabwe



“On this day, we remember the banishment of Adam from the joys of paradise. O Christ our God, through your ineffable compassion, deem us worthy of the joys of paradise and have mercy on us, as the only loving One. Amen.” (Extract from the Triodion).

With this characteristic hymn, our Church emphasizes the meaning of today’s feast of Cheesefare Sunday which is dedicated to the loss of paradise due to the disobedience of the fist created people, Adam and Eve, that is our common forebears of the whites and of the blacks and of the yellow races, namely of all people. So, if our common distant ancestors had remained faithful to Gods’ commandments, namely to his instructions, then the world which we live in today would been Paradise.

However, the reality in which we live, is quite different. We live within the hellish confines of wars and social problems, we live with the coronavirus, hunger and poverty, lack of security and generally with social injustice, we live with the

problem of racial discrimination and with the destruction of the environment, we live with the problem of hatred and malice of fanaticism and indifference to the problems of our neighbour. We live in an age in which materialism restricts our capabilities for a creative spiritual course. Sin reigns everywhere. Our only hope is to follow the example of our Saints, to live their lives, to be reborn spiritually through our repentance, so that we might become the light of the world.

With the fall of man, which is known as original sin, pain and sorrow became part of our lives. We taste hell on a daily basis. Through their disobedience, the first people are as much responsible for this situation as is the complicity of the devil, as too are all of us who continue unrepentant on the path of disobedience and sin.

At one time the benevolent God became a man in the form of Jesus Christ, in order to lead us again to lost paradise. So, if disobedience to God led man to withdrawal from paradise, then our obedience to God's commandments will lead us again to Paradise. The distinctive sign of the divine commandments of Jesus Christ is pure love and a kind disposition to forgive each other. This is why today's Gospel extract, it is clearly stressed by our Lord Jesus Christ "if you forgive people their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive you your trespasses. (Matthew 6:14-15).

Through our pure love towards our fellow human beings, we became worthy of the majesty of God's love, which is expressed through the realisation of our hope for salvation, that is our sharing in the beauty of Paradise.

However, in order to reach living the status of love, we need preparation through our prayers, fasting, charity, repentance, confession, the Services of the Salutations and the Presanctified Liturgies, the Gospel and Epistle extracts and all the other hymns of our Church. Through this perspective, then, our Church aims to direct us using today's feast, which continues through the entire Great Lenten period and is concluded with the Holy Services of Holy Week and the Resurrection of our Lord.

This is why in one of the hymns of today's feast we chant:

"The arena of virtues is open. Let all who are willing to compete enter, girding themselves for the noble contest of the fast. For those who genuinely compete will be deservedly crowned. Let us do battle with the enemy. Let us take on the armour of the cross, having faith as an invincible rampart, prayer us our breastplate, and charity as our helmet. Instead of a sword, let us have fasting; it cuts out all evil

from our hearts. Whosoever does this shall on the Day of Judgement be given by Christ, the King of All, the true crown".

(Verse from the Praises – Triodion).

Today's Gospel extract moves within this same spirit from Saint Paul's letter to the Romans where he stresses with clarity what we should avoid in our daily lives in order to become true soldiers of Christ: "Let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the full armour of light. Let us walk properly as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfil its lusts" (Romans 13:12-14).

By referring in summary to some aspects of love and fear, pain and suffering, we can better understand the importance of our spiritual preparation which our Church wants us to follow. The source of our love must be God's love. This means that love is a gift (grace), which does not expect a response or a reward. Therefore, it is pure and selfless. When you give love and your love is not pure and selfless and you expect to receive something, that is, when you expect to be rewarded and to benefit personally from the love which you give, to profit just like the merchants who advertise and sell their products, then your love is in some way "commercial" and then you are hurt and disillusioned. This is why love, as is emphasised in Holy Scripture "[Love] keeps us away from any sort of fear."

You must face fear exactly where you feel fear. In a situation of worry, you must find some other significance to absorb you, otherwise sorrow will crush you. Namely, what is required from the sorrowful one is some other occupation, which will give meaning to his life. The thought of indifference in life and finally the inclination towards suicide of the disillusioned and bitter one, is overcome when his life begins to take on a meaning. Also, if you want to be redeemed from sorrow you must bear in mind that worse things can happen in your life. Only by being grateful for what you already have, can you be grateful for life and give thanks to God. Finally, in order for us to be able to overcome our sorrow, we must remember the favours of life and the mercy of God's benevolence.

-We must acknowledge that pain has a dialectic and double dimension. That is, according to how close we feel ourselves to be to God, the condition of pain will also function accordingly in our lives: negatively when we find ourselves far away from God and positively the closer we find ourselves to God. Pain can crush you but it can also strengthen you.

Also, sorrow can soften your soul. It teaches you to forgive and understand yourself and others better. At some time a pain, a tribulation can prove itself to be a kindness as much as for our personal lives as well as for the social whole to which we belong. With the experiences of pain we become witnesses of the truth. Within our pain and worry we must find positive aspects. In order for worry to be overcome, patience is needed. Jesus Christ's testimony is clear: "Those who endure, in the end will be saved".

Our "ego", when it is far away from God has the tendency to work as man's enemy and is expressed as "selfishness" turning man towards whatever is negative, which finally leads to desperation, disappointment and destruction The other strength that man has within him is God's grace which leads you to the protection of life, and a creative progress. As a means of life it is not beneficial to return to and persist in a sorrow of the past, that is, to a grievous, piteous situation. In order to overcome your worry, you must have internal spiritual footholds, like faith, patience and love. In order to have these footholds, you must be close to God. And you are close to God when you live according to His divine commandments.

Those who depend on others are usually children; adults who want to be supported by others are like immature children, which the science of psychology characterizes as insane.

Through our participation in the holy life of our Church we have hope for the lost Paradise. This participation is expressed with our Christ-centered orientation which our church invites us to follow because as is emphasized in today's Gospel extract "for where your treasure is there will your heart be also" (Matthew 6:21).

So in today's Sunday, our church reminds us of the exile of the First created people from Paradise, it reminds us of the tears of the First created ones and it invites us to vigilance and struggle because we are also in danger of being exiled from Paradise. One of the means which is emphasised to us by today's Gospel Extract in order to avoid expulsion from Paradise is Fasting which begins tomorrow with our entry into the phase of Great Lent. Fasting is never an intention but a means to an end. However it always has noteworthy intentions: the transformation and theosis of man. Fasting is our effort to keep ourselves far away from the source of evil. In this way we establish true fasting when we avoid -condemnation and not well-meaning criticism which is based on events, when we abstain from anger and lies and not on our insistence on the truth. The true meaning of fasting does not simply refer to abstinence from certain foods. There are times when we fast for a few day and consider ourselves prepared to receive Holy Communion. However, fasting on

its own, without confession, has no value. We might not eat meat, but our behaviour may be the cause of disputes in other people. There are times when we fast from some provisions and inside us we allow hatred and vengeance to nest. This is why in the Old Testament it is persistently emphasized that we cannot fast and simultaneously eat away at our fellow human being's flesh with our hatred against them. These forms of fasting constitute the hypocritical fasting which today's Gospel extract refers to: it is a fasting which is of no benefit. It is a fasting which is isolated from two great virtues which with fasting, are also emphasized in today's Gospel Extract. The one virtue that is linked to true fasting is forgiveness; to forgive those who have wronged us. The other virtue is charity; to help our fellow human beings whenever we can and not to become enriched with material wealth, but with spiritual treasures, as is charity. Besides, every illegal and unjust wealth is a fire which scorches and a beast which devours. Consequently, the true essence of fasting presupposes the forgiveness of others as well as charity and generally our support towards all our fellow humans beings, Greek and non-Greeks, Whites and Blacks, young and old.

This is why fasting from foods and hatred in the heart are things that are incompatible and create hypocrisy. Hypocrisy can lead to exploitation and to easy gain but it also certainly leads to expulsion from Paradise.

Forgiveness is the key which opens the door which leads us to the Kingdom of God. Jesus Christ's word is clear: If you forgive the sins of people, He tells us, then the Heavenly Father will also forgive you your sins .If however you do not forgive the sins of people then your Heavenly Father will also not forgive your sins. In this way the path is opened for the harmonious co-operation of people within society. Good relations with others means a restraint of our ego. This is also the only way that we can become worthy of Paradise.

— Source: Greek Orthodox Archbishopric of Zimbabwe / Facebook