

28/02/2023

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



My dear brother, Metropolitan Gerasimos of San Francisco,

Reverend Fathers,

Beloved sisters and brothers in Christ,

On this evening, when entering upon our journey of Great Lent, I would ask each and every one of you to look as deeply as possible into your hearts. Search out your motivations, and set an intention for these next 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 fulfill some requirement to partake of Holy Week and Pascha.

As the priest prays at every Divine Liturgy: Οὐδείς ἄξιος... No one is ever worthy.

We endure the privations of Great Lent and Holy Week in order to raise the 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 the ineffably precious gifts of love, compassion, mercy and forgiveness.

We call this service: the Vespers of Forgiveness. It is the first of the Vespers of Contrition, which mark the end of the day on Sundays in Lent, and the beginning of Monday.

Through our prayers this evening, we will all be called to offer forgiveness and receive forgiveness. Offering pardon to others is difficult; accepting it from others, though, is oftentimes even harder. Because we do not normally see ourselves as

needing forgiveness. And this is a great mistake that robs us of the potency of this service and others like it.

If we examine our hearts with any degree of honesty and integrity, we will acknowledge our need to receive not only God's forgiveness, but forgiveness from our fellow human beings as well. Sometimes, though, we may not have the opportunity to seek out that forgiveness for various reasons – either the person has moved far away, or they have passed on. Regardless, though, we can still set the intention to receive and 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.[*]

And that is why this evening is so important, my friends. Here, tonight, on the very eve of the Great and Holy Fast of the Forty Days, 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, and which we commemorate on Holy Tuesday evening? 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 at the beginning of the Fast, with only one task to fulfill: to forgive and to accept forgiveness; from one another, and from God.

All our fasting, our praying and our almsgiving are manifestations of our inner disposition. They are externals that should depend on our internal spiritual state. And the basis for everything is love; for God is love, ὁ Θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν.[‡]

May this Great Lent be a journey of love for all of you, as well as a path to forgiveness of yourselves and of others. So that you may know the gentleness and peace of God's forgiveness, and walk in the newness of life, as you travel toward Holy Pascha, and the inevitable and much-desired encounter with the Lord in eternity.

Amen.

Καλή Σαρακοστή, και Καλό Πάσχα!

Photo: Kostas Petrakos

[*] Luke 23:34.

[†] Luke 7:47.

[‡] I John 4:8

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