



Orthodox Mission of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

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<http://EntranceMission.org>

That Which Hides Beneath the Surface Week of February 5, 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

On Sunday we begin *Triodion*. Our time of earnest self-examination and penance draws near. And as in every year prior to the beginning of the Great Fast we begin our spiritual journey by hearing the Lord's Parable of the Publican and Pharisee (Luke 18:10-14).

We all know it. In the temple one day were two men: a Pharisee and a Publican. The Pharisee was earnest and sincere in his adherence to the law and the traditions of his fathers. He prayed; he fasted; he tithed; he kept the commandments to the letter; externally, he was the very model of piety and religious purity. He even gave thanks to God for the progress he thought he had made in his religious struggle, saying with undoubted sincerity and zeal: "God, I thank You that I am not like other men - extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector; I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess." Thinking that he was in good standing before God, he stood at the front of the temple, hands upraised in prayer, unaware of what hid beneath the surface of his prayers and actions.

In contrast, there stood another man, a Publican, at the rear of the temple, so ashamed of himself that he dared not even raise his hands, let alone his head in prayer. Thinking perhaps of the money he had stolen, the lives he had hurt or even ruined through extortion and the traitorous actions of collecting

money for the Roman oppressor, he could only utter a single plea, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” He had no delusion about his standing before God. He could not impress God with his fasting; he could not point to the tithes he had made or defend himself with his great love for and adherence to the commandments. He, the Publican, had nothing to offer; nothing. He prayed the only prayer possible, “God be merciful to me a sinner.”

The shock of the parable came at the end, when our Lord pointed out that this man, the Publican, the sinner, would go back home justified before the other. Those who heard the parable would have most likely been deeply offended; for the Pharisee would have been seen as the “good guy” in first century Palestine, while the Publican would have surely been seen as the “bad guy.” Externally, the Pharisee appeared to be the servant of God, while the Publican appeared to be hopelessly lost. The difference between them, however, was that the one took pride in his place before God, while the other did not; the Pharisee thought he had earned God’s favor; the Publican knew he could only rely on the mercy of God, for without the mercy of God, he, the Publican, was indeed lost.

I have met many people in the course of my service as a priest and pastor that had the heart of the Pharisee, but very few indeed who had the heart of the Publican. To be honest, we are each in both categories, capable and ready on the one hand in our delusion to point to our spiritual pretenses – our fasting, our prayers, our vows, our works, our attitudes, our external adherences to the letter of the law – as if they could somehow justify us before God. But then the Lord in His wisdom and love intervenes on our behalf: we hear the truth in criticism from another that reveals our hypocrisy, or we are sent the grace of misfortune, sickness or suffering of one sort or another that shakes us up and brings us to our senses, allowing us to see the truth about ourselves, as did the Publican, that we really have no virtue, no work, no righteousness within us at all that can make us worthy of God’s approval. We see at those times that we have nothing to set before God at all, and then we pray from the heart, “God be merciful to me the sinner.” This simple prayer, spoken once from the heart, is worth more than the recitation of a thousand prayers or the keeping of a thousand fasts if we do those things in the spirit of a Pharisee.

This simple parable is so very rich for so very many reasons. But this year let us hear it, Brothers and Sisters, with the intent to recognize what hides beneath the surface of our own spiritual externals. Let us put aside the prideful notion of the Pharisee that we could in any way earn the favor or approval of God; and, let us take upon ourselves the humility of the Publican who saw the truth about himself clearly; and, like him, seeing that truth, the truth of our sin and the corruption it brings upon us and others, let us say from the heart, “God be merciful to me the sinner!”

In Christ our true God,

+Fr. Elias

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