



Orthodox Mission of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

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Open Unto Me the Doors of Repentance, O Giver of Life! Week of January 21, 2018

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

It occurs to me every year at this time that the Gospel lesson we heard on Sunday could be called the “harbinger of Lent.” Just as the first robin in our back yards brings the first indication of the coming of Spring, so also does the lesson on Zacchaeus Sunday bring the first indication of our approaching time of renewal. With the hearing of the story of Zacchaeus from St. Luke’s Gospel, we know that Great Lent is approaching; it is just around the corner; it is time for us to begin to “put aside every sin and weight that clings so closely”, as St. Paul says in his epistle to the Hebrews, and begin to “run with perseverance the race that is set before us.”

Above all, Great Lent is a time for repentance, and it is the story of Zacchaeus that shows us clearly what that means. It is for that reason that the Holy Fathers undoubtedly appointed the lesson for the Sunday before the beginning of the Lenten texts from the *Triodion*, our use of which begins this coming Sunday. The story of Zacchaeus shows us how we are to approach the Lord in our repentance AND how we are to treat those among us who repent of grievous sin.

First, St. Luke makes it clear that when Jesus approaches Zacchaeus, He approaches one who has already repented. He does not come to Zacchaeus to rebuke or call him to repentance; He comes to be with one who has already put aside the sin that held him captive. Luke reports that Zacchaeus spoke to the Lord in the *present* tense about his repentance: “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I *give* to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of

anything, I **restore** it fourfold.” This is significant, because Zacchaeus spoke in the **present**, not the **future** tense. He did not say, for example, that he **would** give half of his goods to the poor; nor that he **would** restore that which he had defrauded. He said rather, *I give to the poor, and I restore what I have defrauded from any one fourfold*. When we come to confession during Great Lent or any other time, Brothers and Sisters, we should come like Zacchaeus, having already repented; in other words, like him, having already put aside the sin that has weighted us down and having already taken the steps necessary to make whatever restitutions are possible. True reconciliation is possible only when forgiveness is met with repentance. The possibility that God gives each of us to be reconciled to Him by means of our repentance and His merciful forgiveness are truly the greatest of Gifts and Graces! Great Lent which approaches is our time to avail ourselves of these Gifts and Graces freely!

There is, however, a second message to this story as well. And that message is has to do with the way in which our Lord treated Zacchaeus in contrast to the way in which the onlookers in the crowd would have treated him. Zacchaeus, it must be remembered, was engaged in truly the most despicable of livings. St. Luke says that he was a “tax collector” and “rich.” In other words, Zacchaeus had taken money on behalf of the oppressing armies of Rome; he was a traitor to the people among whom he lived and worked, taking from them, defrauding them and passing on a vast portion of what he took to the invading armies that oppressed his very people. His actions might be compared to a person in our time who supports or funds terrorists. But St. Luke reports that he had repented of his sin, and as such, the Lord goes out of His way to invite Himself to the house of Zacchaeus, to the great disapproval of the religious authorities and the people who witnessed the Lord’s action. Although his sin was truly horrific, the forgiveness of God met Zacchaeus in his repentance and reconciled him with the Lord God. Our Lord’s action is one that people have difficulty reproducing in their lives. We seem to be all about punishment and retribution; but, very seldom do we see examples in our culture of acceptance and forgiveness of those who repent. We, Brothers and Sisters, must follow the very example of our Lord in our own time. We must meet those who repent with forgiveness and acceptance. And to those who persist in their sin against us, we must meet them with the offer of forgiveness even to them, turning the other cheek to those who would harm us, so that they can see the great alternative of the Christian way: forgiveness and repentance, which alone leads to reconciliation with God and with one another.

If Zacchaeus demonstrates the Grace of forgiveness and repentance, then it is the Gospel Lesson for this coming Sunday that demonstrates the way in which each of us should approach God. It is the Publican from our Lord’s parable of the Publican and the Pharisee that we will hear this coming Sunday that shows us clearly the need for us to come before Him in humility.

Brothers and Sisters, let us prepare for the approach of the Springtime of Great Lent. Let us do so with repentance, like Zacchaeus, and let us show steadfast mercy, forgiveness and charity to those in our midst, as did our Savior Jesus Christ!

In Christ our true God,

+Fr. Elias

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