

Sermon Sunday Pharisee and Publican

[II Tim. 3:10-15 (§296); [Luke 18:10-14 (§89); Publican – Pharisee; persecution

CHRIST IS IN OUR MIDST !!

It's that time of year. This day we have opened the Lenten Triodion.

And today we hear the parable of the Pharisee and Publican. The Pharisee was the ideal church member. If we had one such here we would likely count ourselves blessed. He tithed EVERYTHING. We'd probably put him on the building committee. He was a mostly virtuous man. One thing he lacked: humility.

The Publican was a tax collector, for the occupying Romans. Tax collectors got rich by padding what was required of them, and pocketing the difference. They were despised. People knew they were on the take. They were the worst of public officials. In people's minds there were several heinous sinners who were esteemed higher.

When the good religious people looked at Pharisees and Publicans, they considered the former to be the virtuous good guys and the latter to be garbage.

He who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.

We are just a few weeks from Great Lent. In the first week we will hear the Great Canon of St. Andrew. One of the tropari will

say of this Pharisee that he said “I thank Thee, O God” ... and words of madness. What makes his words madness?

He compares himself to others and he uses that to feel that it is something he himself has accomplished.

As Kyril of Alexandria observed: No one who is healthy ridicules the one who is sick; rather he is concerned lest he contract the sickness. Nor does a soldier in battle praise himself for not being among the wounded. He recognizes that his fellow warrior could have well been him. No athlete at a game pins the metal on himself, but waits for the official to do it.

By approaching God with pride, the pharisee brings condemnation upon himself: “Everyone that is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord” (Proverbs) “Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight.” (Isaiah)

The Pharisee comes to the Great Physician, and goes away unhealed. For He said to God, “I don’t need you; I’ve got this handled myself. Though he had the external signs of piety, yet it was polluted by his pride. In his pride, he forgets to ask for God’s mercy – and he goes away without it.

The publican came to the Physician and acknowledged his sinfulness and opened his wound before God asking for mercy. It is he that is healed. As Metropolitan Kallistos Ware said: “The Publican was not self-satisfied and longed for the inner change of mind: Repentance. Unless we learn the secret of the Publican’s inward poverty, we shall not share in the Lenten springtime.

As we prepare for the race that is coming, let us not compare ourselves to others. For us fasting, or giving alms may be easy; others may struggle with it. That they struggle and persevere means that they receive the medicine that our ascetic tools provide. It is best that we only discuss how we are doing with a trusted friend, someone who we can allow us to hold ourselves to account. Beyond this, the temptation to pride is great – and pride pollutes the fast.

The Sunday of the Pharisee and Publican should give us pause to consider who it is we are "thankful that I am not like..." . . . and how much we are exactly like that person.

But as Christians, we have no lasting City, no permanent nation. Our nation is with the Kingdom of God that we invoked at the beginning of this Liturgy. It is there that our home is. It is there that we must use the coming Great Lent to journey back to.

God left His home and humbled Himself and took on our flesh for our salvation. Let us emulate His humility, and cooperate with Him in our salvation.

So, we have opened the Lenten Triodion. Those who were here last night sang the Hymn "Open to me the doors of repentance" . . . while we know His doors are always open, our own tend to get stuck in forgetfulness or neglect. This week there is no fasting. This is unlike the other three fast free periods in that it celebrates no feast. Its purpose is to draw down our supply of meat so there will not be any left to go bad as we begin our abstinence. So, do not use this time as an excuse for indulgence, but rather let us use this time to prepare ourselves for the contest ahead.