

Sermon Sunday of St. John Climacus

Heb 6:13–20, Eph 5:9–19; Mark 9:17–31, Matt 4:25–5:12 2

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit:

CHRIST IS IN OUR MIDST!!

Today's Gospel happens shortly after Transfiguration. It starts out with a puzzling comment. A crowd is pressing and there is an argument coming from the scribes. This is how it often is: the evil one seeks to exploit divisions among us to try to undo what we are trying to accomplish in healing, in coming together in the unity of the Faith. . . And indeed there is dirty work afoot. In the midst of our work as The Church, there are those who along with the evil one sews the seeds of anger.

And there is a young lad who is possessed. Jesus does not take a magical approach and rush to heal him. Instead He starts by addressing the father and his needs: needs that he doesn't even know he has, because his attention has been on getting help for his son. He asks a question of his father: How long has he been like this? The answer goes to illustrate that it is not because of a particular sin that this child is possessed.

The father is in despair. Jesus does starts by addressing this despair. The problem with his son has been going on for a long time. He has asked help of Jesus' disciples, and they were unable to help. The faith of the disciples was still young, immature – growing, but not yet full. Jesus' rebuke will echo in His conversation with the father, for the disciples also were in that “I

believe, help Thou my unbelief” place.

This father asks help of Jesus in the subjunctive mood “IF you can do anything...” Jesus immediately confronts this “IF YOU CAN HELP!!?? All things are possible for the one who faiths. (and we must mention here that convincing yourself that all things are possible is not what Jesus is talking about. He is talking about a living faith.)

The father recognizes his despair and cries to Jesus: I believe, help Thou my unbelief (I faith, help Thou my unfaith). His faith, like the disciples was not full. He had been seeking help for his child for many years. Part of him had given up. His confession was an honest admission of his immature faith and his despair. And in his confession he comes to humility.

And so Jesus commands by His word as the Word of God; He does for this young man what he could not will himself; then as a Man he reaches out to take the hand of the youth. And restoring him to his father, Jesus commends to His disciples: Prayer and Fasting. And by extension we are warned against our own passions. St Gregory Palamas tells us that even if our body is not involved, we can still sin in our minds.

And so we begin this 5th week; some of us have grown weary of the prayer and fasting, just as this father had grown weary of seeking help for his son. Yet we are told we must pray and fast. Through fasting our very hunger pangs are transformed from a bodily passion to a prayer to God.

And so Jesus again tells them that the Son of Man must be killed and on the third day He will rise again. This did not fall well on the disciple's ears; it did not fit their pre-conceived notions. Their faith was not yet full enough to hear and understand what He was saying.

Sleepers awake, and rise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.

When the Light of Christ shines on us, it illumines our souls; it also shows us what was hitherto hidden in the darkness. We must expose those things and bring them to Christ for healing and in this way cleanse ourselves. But we must take care how we do this. We must be careful not to create a scandal by focusing on other people's sins. The prayer of St. Ephraim asks God to show us our own sins and not to judge our brother.

Be not drunk with wine: This is also something we pray for in the prayer of St. Ephraim: Sobriety. (sometimes this is translated as "chastity") But sobriety is not in abstinence from wine. Wine is given to gladden the heart — not for intoxication. Isaiah says that we can be drunk, but not with wine. We can be drunk with our own passions. The sobriety being asked for is a watchfulness ... as we sing the Psalm at Presanctified: Set a watch, O Lord before my mouth. Indeed, the Apostle Paul commends to us the hymns and Psalms as a way of sobriety. Here is part of the richness of our faith that as we have learned the hymns and Psalms, we take them with us as we face our week.

We catechize ourselves through the hymns. This is why it is important to sing our hymns. We teach ourselves the faith by listening and singing.

For as we sing the Cherubic Hymn for Presanctified we note that “Lo the King of Glory enters, Behold the mystical sacrifice, is upbourne fulfilled.” At Holy Saturday the Cherubic Hymn tells us “the King of kings and Lord of lords draws near to be sacrificed and given as food to the faithful.”

It has been a difficult Great Lent, full of the noise of war, blame, anger.

The Church sets before us this Sunday an ascetic model: St. John Climacus. He lived most of his life at St. Catherine’s Monastery in Sinai, becoming its Abbot. He reminds us that we should not despair, but to keep moving towards the mercy of God. He said: “Do not be surprised that you fall every day; do not give up, but stand your ground courageously. And assuredly, the angel who guards you will honour your patience.” One of the reasons he found his place here this Sunday is that we are about to embark on the 5th week of Great Lent. We will have the “Before I perish utterly, save me” PreSanctified Liturgy; we will have the full Great Canon along with the life of St. Mary of Egypt; we will have an extra PreSanctified Liturgy and the Akáthist Hymn. For those of us on the Olde Calendar, we also have the feast of Annunciation this week. We need the encouragement of such an ascetic to help us through this week. And though he was an ascetic, he did not do many of the ascetic works that we often hear about other saints doing. Rather he sought humility. He wrote his Ladder of Divine Ascent towards the end of his life as a way of passing on the accumulated wisdom of his journey – passing on what had been passed on to him. He wrote of the need for prayer and fasting. He wrote of the need to avoid gluttony and self-indulgence.

He was a man of humility. . . . and this is what our monasteries need. . . this is what our Church needsthis is what our country needs. . . this is what our world needs. Without humility, none of the virtues is of any good. We like to imagine that we don't need humility. Humility is not how our culture understands life; it is not how our corporations operate; it is not how our political parties see their task. And, lately we do not see enough of it in the Church. For us, life should be convenient. We do not want to be troubled. And we bring this attitude with us wherever we go. . . . including in our relationship with God. . . . and, as we shall see this week, in our relationship with ourselves.

Without humility we are like the son trapped with his disease and his demon. Without humility we are the despairing father who can't fix his son. Without humility we are the disciples who are upset that THEY couldn't cast the demon out.

In the hymns of Vespers this week we are given the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Indeed those of us who went to Vigil or Matins have already heard the beginning of these.

We meet all sorts of people along the Jericho Road, and some of them are victims whose only claim is that they have need. Along the Jericho Road we meet people who think that life is what they can take and what they can exact, what they can demand from us or from others. We also meet along the way people who feel that religion is one thing and the cries of humanity are another. (Rev Henry Durham)

The hymns this coming week take a different approach. They invite us to consider ourselves the man who fell among thieves, and Christ as the Samaritan Who comes to save us from death. We will hear in the Great Canon: I am the man who fell among thieves, even my own thoughts; they have covered all my body with wounds, and I lie beaten and bruised. But come to me, O Christ my Saviour and heal me.

We are invited by the hymns to consider that we are our own worst enemy. Our thoughts and passions have beaten us up and robbed us. Yet Christ comes to heal our self-inflicted wounds and to bind them up and to heal them.

He, the eternal God comes to us and offers Himself. His sacrifice is not temporary as sacrifices were in the past. Since He is eternal, His sacrifice is eternal. Therefore His sacrifice is both for all times, and beyond all times.

Let us take to heart these words and see how we injure ourselves far worse than any enemy. Let us accept Christ as He comes to bind our our self inflicted wounds and heal us.

To Him be all glory honour and worship, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.