

FORGIVENESS SUNDAY

“If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses...”

(Mark 6:14-15)

In the Orthodox Church, the last Sunday before Great Lent – the day on which Lent is liturgically announced and inaugurated – is called Forgiveness Sunday. On this last Sunday before Great Lent, the last day that traditionally Orthodox Christians eat dairy products until Easter, the Church remembers the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise. God commanded them to fast from the fruit of a tree (Gen. 2:16), but they did not obey. In this way Adam and Eve and their descendants became heirs of death and corruption.

Why is it that the Church wants us to begin Lenten season with forgiveness and reconciliation? These questions are in order because for too many people, Lent means primarily, and almost exclusively, a change of diet, the compliance with ecclesiastical regulations concerning fasting. They understand fasting as an end in itself, as a “good deed” required by God and carrying in itself its merit and its reward. But, the Church spares no effort in revealing to us that fasting is but a means, one among many, towards a higher goal: the spiritual renewal of man, his return to God, true repentance and, therefore, true reconciliation.

The Church spares no effort in warning us against a hypocritical and pharisaic fasting, against the reduction of religion to mere external obligations. As a Lenten hymn says: “In vain do you rejoice in no eating, O soul! For you abstain from food, but from passions you are not purified. If you persevere in sin, you will perform a useless fast.”

Forgiveness stands at the very center of Christian faith and of Christian life because Christianity itself is, above all, the religion of forgiveness. God forgives us, and His forgiveness is in Christ, His Son, Whom He sends to us, so that by sharing in His humanity we may share in His love and be truly reconciled with God. Indeed, Christianity has no other content but love. And it is primarily the renewal of that love, a return to it, a growth in it, that we seek in Great Lent, in fasting and prayer, in the entire spirit and the entire effort of that season. Thus, truly forgiveness is both the beginning of, and the proper condition for the Lenten season.

The Kingdom of God itself is a Kingdom of Peace and Love, of reconciliation with God and, in Him, with all that exists. The hymns of that Feast petition God to “open to us the doors of Paradise.” We know why we shall fast and pray, what we shall seek during the long Lenten pilgrimage. Forgiveness Sunday: the day on which we acquire the power to make our fasting – true fasting; our effort – true effort; our reconciliation with God – true reconciliation.

(Above excerpt from Department of Religious Education of the Orthodox Church in America.)