

Approaching Holy Week  
March 29, 2015

It was the fifth Sunday of Lent, years ago, when I heard a sermon that remains in my mind. Archbishop Iakovos, then retired, was here for some reason. He did not preside at the Liturgy that day, but he spoke afterwards, talking about Holy Week, only a few days away. He said, "Make it your Holy Week."

I got it. The Church can call it Holy Week; I can call it Holy Week, the service books may show a heading, "Holy Week," but it isn't Holy Week, unless you make it Holy Week. It involves two dimensions.

There is a mental dimension. We need to put our mind in the right place. I thought about this mental arena as I was reading part of the poem that we chanted this past Friday. The poem is known as the Akathist Hymn to the Virgin Mary, and in one verse it calls us to renew our minds, saying, "Let's be estranged from the mundane, transporting our mind unto heaven" The words remind me of St. Paul's admonition to the Christians of Rome, "Be transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Romans 12:2).

The sacred story needs to be in our thoughts and in our reading each and every day. We are in the home stretch of Lent; this coming Saturday is Lazarus Saturday, the introduction to Holy Week. Here begins the chronology of the Lord's last days in His earthly existence. Orthodox tradition has a set of prescribed Bible readings for every day of the year, but this practice is never more important than it is for Holy Week.

We read in the Scriptures depictions of heroism and cowardice, political intrigue, jealousy, sorrows and joys, greed, misguided expectations, fear and anger, tears. Ultimately we read of God's love... we read of death's defeat.

The hazard in Lent is that we see it as something to get through, rather than a sacred renewal of body and spirit. Renewal always begins from within, from a change in the way we think about things. The word for repentance in Greek is "metanoia," literally meaning a change of mind. Telling and retelling the story is part and parcel of this spiritual renewal. The mental journey to Jerusalem is where we relive vicariously the ultimate expression of God's love.

Today's gospel reading leads into Holy Week. We read here that the Lord began preparing His disciples for the end. It is particularly disturbing that two disciples, the brothers James and John, misinterpret it all. They go to Christ and ask Him for places of honor- seats on His left and right- when He comes into glory. We see their request as a power play; perhaps a call for recognition- in Biblical terms, the sin of vainglory. Jesus gently corrects them, saying that there is a price to pay for this glory. Then He gathers all of the disciples to teach them that He did not come into this world for self-aggrandisement, but rather for service. "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be

slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The physical dimension is there, too. Fasting is a small but essential part of this. If nothing else, fasting on these holy days reminds us that they are special; it physically connects us to the story.

But there is much, much more. One powerful hymn was sung today near the end of the Matins (Orthros) service. It is one of my favorites, so permit me to read it.

"The Kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and ascetic practice and holiness; therefore rich men will never enter it, but only those who place their treasures into the hands of the needy. This is what David the Prophet teaches when he says, 'Righteous is the man, who is merciful day in and out, who delights in the Lord. He walks in the light; he will not stumble.' All of this was written for our edification, that, while fasting, we do acts of kindness; and the Lord will give us, instead of earthly gifts, the things of heaven" (translated by Fr. Seraphim Dedes).

The hymn borrows from Romans 14:17. It asks for something more than a renewal of the mind. It demands more than fasting from food; instead it calls for works of charity. "While fasting, we do acts of kindness; and the Lord will give us, instead of earthly gifts, the things of heaven." Ultimately the events of Holy Week are not simply for us; they speak to the world around us, and nothing quite exemplifies this speech as do works of charity. Love is the ultimate sermon.

"Make it your Holy Week." Do so by the mental remembrance of the Lord's story, and also by fasting and charity. Make it your Holy Week.

Fr. Stephen J. Callos  
Sts. Constantine & Helen Greek Orthodox Cathedral  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio

\* \* \*

Text: Mark 10:32-45

At that time, Jesus taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles; and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and scourge him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise." And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him, and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to

them, "What do you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" And they said to him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant of James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."