

February 27, 2020

Greetings to all the faithful of St. Andrews,

Christ is among us!

Lent is at our doorstep, knocking and inviting us to leave our comfort zone and travel on a journey. This journey leads us to the Cross, the Burial and the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus on the third day. This order is important. One must go through the Cross and death in order to experience the Resurrection.

During this season of Lent we attempt to focus more on our inward life as opposed to creature comforts. We seek to increase our acts of mercy toward others (alms), Communion with God (prayer) and sacrifice (fasting). In Matthew 6:1-18 we are presented with this triad of Almsgiving (6:1-4), Prayer (6:2-15) and Fasting (6:16-18).

These things are related to the life of righteousness which was mentioned earlier in the Gospel (Matt. 5:20): *For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

A child of the Heavenly Kingdom must remember that God is the one who will judge us at the end when Christ comes to judge the living and the dead. We should not seek validation before the time. Matt. 6:1: *Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.*

This notion of waiting for God's judgment is taught by the Apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 4:1-5: *This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.*

Matthew undoubtedly had the judgment scene of 25:31-46 in mind when he wrote chapter six, in which we see that care for the needy is the criterion for judgment. Note that in Matt. 6 almsgiving is listed before prayer and fasting and that it outranks them, so to say. Prayer and fasting are matters relating to the individual believer and God, whereas almsgiving is related to ourselves and others. Almsgiving, i.e. caring for those in need, is so essential that the attitude implied by it is a kind of a precondition for true prayer. Prayer fashions us, but an attitude of mercy toward others is the soil in which prayer takes root. The lack of this concern for others is selfishness, which invalidates prayer, private and communal, and causes divisions and not unity. Paul addresses this problem in 1 Cor. 11:17-34. God's Judgment will be determined by whether or not we have been merciful to others. Even though others owe us the debt of love and have not paid it to us, we are nonetheless expected to forgive this debt, which is in keeping with what we owe God. Matt 6:14: *For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.*

Forgiveness, showing mercy, is at the heart of the Faith and should be cultivated in the heart of all believers, even as we enter to pray “in secret” where we receive our reward from God and not men (Matt. 6:6).

This notion of mercy, forgiveness, being released from debt, is prefigured in the Old Testament teaching regarding the year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:8-55), which is the year when those who were enslaved to debt were to be forgiven and released by their creditors. The book of Leviticus teaches that this Jubilee year was meant to remind the ancient Israelites that as they were released from bondage in Egypt, they were obligated to release their brothers and sisters from their bondage. In the same way that God dislikes lending at interest he also dislikes the propensity of us humans to keep others in slavery to debt, either financially or spiritually.

Regarding fasting, the value which it possesses is in relation to God's Kingdom, where we look to him to feed us at his inexhaustible table. Prayer and fasting are related to the debt we owe to God. God is the only One who saves and judges. He alone gives rewards and will not smile on those who arrogantly wear their religion on their sleeves, so to say, by making a spectacle of their almsgiving, prayer, and fasting.

As we move on our way through this Lenten Season, let us focus more on our inward life as opposed to the outer. Let God alone see our acts of mercy toward others through almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, expecting God alone to reward us as he smiles down on us who have him at the center of our heart.

Yours in Christ,

Fr. Herman