

Not *my* Lent but *our* Lent... Forgiveness Sunday.

(Matthew 6:14-21)

“May He who came to the world to save sinners strengthen us to complete the fast with humility; may He have mercy on us and save us.” (St John Chrysostom)

Most people would be familiar with the designation of today as *Cheesefare Sunday*. As with last Sunday, Meatfare, the fare segment of the word derives from the Old English verb *faran* - to go. Thus, *farewell* = go well. Last week, meat and meat products went from our diets; today, dairy products and eggs.

Perhaps many would be less familiar with another name for today, that is, Forgiveness Sunday. Often we think of the Great Lent in terms of what “I am doing.” A Lenten question so often heard, especially amongst western Christians, is “What are you giving up for Lent.” Notice the *you*, one never hears “What are *we* giving up for Lent.” However, it is precisely the communal aspect of the Fast that is emphasized in the term, Forgiveness Sunday. We cannot experience a Lent truly beneficial to our souls if we attempt the discipline in isolation from others.

The first step in appreciating a communal Lent is to seek the forgiveness of others and to offer forgiveness in return. And the process of *asking* and *giving* has to be genuine; it has to be *heart-felt*, that is, it has to arise from the very centre of our being.

During the Middle Ages, there were holy monastics who would say the Lord’s Prayer in fear and trembling. They regarded it as the most dangerous prayer a Christian could say. There were even some who regarded the petition as so problematic that they would not even say the Lord’s Prayer!

When one considers it, they had a point....“ *Forgive us our trespasses* – (so far so good) *as we forgive those who trespass against us* ” – (now here is the problem). We are asking God to forgive us as we forgive. Yet, how do we treat others – do we keep an account of the wrongs done to us; do we place limits on our forgiveness depending on by whom, when and why we have been offended.

While the “non-sayers” adopted one extreme position, is it any worse than our parroting such a sublime prayer without considering the consequences of what we are saying.

St John Chrysostom reminds the people of Antioch that their willingness (or otherwise!) to forgive is so important that it is a condition for Holy Communion. “Have you argued with someone and hold ill will towards him? Don’t approach Holy Communion! Do you want to approach? First reconcile yourself with him, and then come near the Blameless Mysteries!” (Homily 20, *On the Statues*)

Tonight, after the Vespers of Forgiveness, or the Evening Liturgy, the priest and the faithful customarily ask each other’s forgiveness. That in some churches this is not done says much of the attitude with which some clergy and people approach the Fast.

Last Saturday, the day before Meatfare Sunday, we prayerfully remembered the Faithful Departed. Likewise, during Lent, the second, third and fourth Saturdays are especially set aside for memorial services and prayers. Again these days impress upon us the *communal* aspect of Lent – the dead were and continue to be members of the same Household

of the Faith to which we belong. These days are also sobering reminders of the inevitability of death, heralds of our own mortality.

Tomorrow, is often called Clean Monday, and is the first day of the complete Lenten Fast. The newsletter of an Orthodox parish in America puts it well, “The Orthodox guidelines for fasting include no meat allowed after Meatfare Sunday and no eggs or dairy products after Cheesefare Sunday. These guidelines exist not as a Pharisaic “burden too hard to bear” (Lk 11:46), but as an ideal to strive for; not as an end in themselves, but as a means to spiritual perfection crowned in love. The Lenten services themselves continually remind us of this. The Lenten services also make the undeniable point that we should not pride ourselves with external fasting since the devil never eats and fasts continuously!”

At the conclusion of tonight’s holy service – Vespers or Divine Liturgy (or Monday’s first liturgical prayers) as we leave the church, it is customary to wish each other a Blessed Lent, in whatever language we are comfortable. Once more, we are expressing the often forgotten fact that we undertake our Lenten journey as a community, not simply as individuals.

Today, it is customary to prepare dishes based on eggs and dairy products. A similar custom was common in the West for this coming Tuesday, popularly called Pancake Day, for obvious reasons. English speakers often call it Shrove Tuesday, from the Old English verb *to shrive*, meaning to absolve, or receive absolution, in confession. In the Latin Church, it is the last day for a pre-Lenten reconciliation.

May this Great and Holy Lent be for each of us, and for our Faith Community, a time of many blessings – not a burden but a joyful journey.

Blessed Lent, Καλή Νηστεία, صوم مبارك

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