

## First Sunday of Lent: Sunday of Orthodoxy

### The Icon of Christ Called to Restoration (John 1:43-51)

#### **Glory be to Jesus Christ!**

During the season of Lent, Christians all over the world are focused on prayer, penance, fasting, and doing both corporal and spiritual works of mercy. However, on the first Sunday of Lent, being the Sunday of Orthodoxy, our Byzantine Christian approach has thought it necessary to celebrate the Orthodoxy of faith; particularly icons in our experience of faith. At this point, I am sure that some might mutter “why does the Church have to be dogmatic all the time?” or “it’s always about icons with these Eastern Christians”, or “why aren’t we doing anything more practical?”

When we consider the icons adorning the walls and iconostasis of our Churches, the first things that comes to mind is how beautiful and ornate it is. Many of us forget that there is a significant amount of prayer and spiritual effort taken into writing an icon (probably of Lenten proportions); mostly because it is not a mere image. Like Scripture and the Sacraments, the icon serves as a point of encounter between God and man, and through the message the icon wishes to convey; man is astonished and taken by its salvific message. If the Sacraments are “doors to the sacred”, the icon is legitimately the “window”.

When we talk about icons, we cannot escape one pertinent point: The Incarnation of our Lord. If we consider our *troparion* for today, today’s feast day insists on the reality of the Incarnation. In fact, the coming of Christ in the flesh is the foundation of the veneration of icons. Christ Incarnate is the essential icon, the prototype of all icons. If He is the image of the Living God, then we have to be the icons of the Living Christ! Perhaps the real questions we should ask of ourselves is “can we be icons of the Living Christ, and how”?

Today’s Gospel; centred on Jesus’ encounter with Nathanael, may give us a clue to these questions. Jesus says to Nathanael, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you”. Nathanael, overwhelmed by this revelation, declares: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Jesus replies that Nathanael will see “greater things” than these powers of long-distance sight – “... you will see Heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man”.

These words open a vast field of meditation for all of us. We will never know what Nathanael was up to under the fig tree. It could have been a moment of temptation, perplexity, grace, or simply one of rest. However, it seems that the Lord would not have

mentioned it had it not been a decisive moment i.e. a turning point in Nathanael's life. Each and every one of us have had moments where we were "under the fig tree" i.e. the gym, school, church, the workplace, the marketplace, gatherings etc. – critical moments, in which the invisible Jesus, sees us, and intervenes. Do we accept or repel the intervention? If we do accept this intervention, do we just sit on our laurels or do we keep working hard to keep this intervention "alive"?

It is perhaps here that we see the link between Jesus' interventions in Nathanael's life (and ours), and my initial reflections on the icon: It is an opportunity for us to rediscover who we really are, and what we are made for. Lent is a decisive moment and turning point; not merely to repent and believe in the Gospel, but for us to truly achieve what we were created for: To be an "icon" of Christ. However, to truly be an "icon" of Christ is not to merely be a "pretty picture" as some of us would inaccurately presume. To be an "icon" of Christ is to be firmly grounded and rooted in Christ; through the Mysteries of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. And of course, our behaviour too, must be Christlike. As an example, St. John Chrysostom once said that it is useless to abstain from meat if we are going to devour our fellow man!

From Nathanael's example, we now know that Lent is the opportune time to rediscover our baptismal vocation to become an "icon" of Christ (cf. Galatians 3:27). It is a radical wake-up call to exit our comfort zones and to reconnect with Christ through our intensified active participation in the Church's corporate prayer and worship, spiritual and corporal works of mercy, and fasting.

The spiritual exercises that we undertake during Lent are meant to prepare us for a lifetime of authentic discipleship and Christian living; which admittedly, can become more and more challenging these days for all of us; given the rather "iconoclast" tone that society has adopted in its' worldview. However, we must not despair if we fall – God's mercy surpasses everything, and He will continuously "restore" us back to His intended state if we seek Him sincerely and continuously. Remember, as the Holy Father Pope Francis once said, God does not stop forgiving - It is we who have stopped asking for forgiveness!

So, as you respond to the call of "come and see", come out of your "fig tree" and stake your claim what He has promised to those who believe: "You will see greater things"!