

Homily on the Sunday After Theophany 2008

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the time of first monastic St. Anthony, when monks filled the desert in the 4th century and righteousness flowered like a magnificent life giving garden in the barren valleys of death, there was a certain disciple of St. Anthony, known for his great sanctity and his unbelievable asceticism and self-denial. He was able to raise the dead, heal the sick and to drive out evil spirits. Great was his boldness and life in Christ, one that few could ever dream of possessing. Shortly before he died, his face began to shine like the sun in all its strength. He called for his disciples and they were amazed and affrighted by the sight. The great man of virtue exclaimed to them, “Behold, St. Anthony has come to lead me to heaven....” After a few moments he cried out again, “Behold, the choir of the Prophets are here....” His face began to become even more luminous as he confessed “Behold, the choir of Apostles has come....” Engulfed in greater and greater heavenly sweetness, the Saint seemed to begin to speak with someone. The fathers gathered around him asked him who he was speaking to. The Saint replied that he was asking the Angels for more time to repent. With this, the Fathers surrounding him were struck dumb with wonder, and said, “Father, certainly, you have finished repenting and have attained your goal of the Kingdom....” As he heard these words, his face was enveloped with an unbearable brilliance and those who stood by trembled with fear as the Saint confessed “Behold, the King of Glory, the Lord of All, Christ our God has come... and my brothers, the only thing I know now is that I have not even

begun to repent.” At this, there was a brilliant flash of lightening and the room was filled with ineffable fragrance as the Saint gave his soul into the hands of the Lord.

In today's Gospel, we hear of our Lord, who after his baptism by John in the Jordan and the temptation by Satan in the desert, came to Capernaum to begin His public ministry. Amazingly, the very first word that came out of His mouth was a simple, clear command: “Repent.” He said “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” Indeed, the ONLY way that we enter into this Kingdom He speaks of is through the gates of Repentance.

Repentance is a beginning that never has an end. It is a infinite journey towards God and away from oneself, away from ones' own self centered reasoning so as to embrace the wisdom found in the commandments of God. It is not only the door and gate but also the highway on which we travel to God. Repentance is a crossing over from death to life. It is a contrite and broken heart that God will not despise. And, if we truly are repenting, St. Silouan tells us that we will “readily bear every affliction that comes to us—voluntary or involuntary” for by faith we know that it is through these afflictions and temptations that we find purification and healing from sin and death.

The word repentance in Greek is 'metanoia' which literally means a transformation of our mind and of our view of the world, of ourselves and of those around us. This transformation happens not because we enact some kind of individual resolution. No, rather it is a transformation that comes about through an Encounter with the Living God.

When we encounter Christ personally it is only through this that we can begin to see ourselves as we really are. After the Prophet Isaiah saw the Lord on His Throne, he exclaimed with trembling “Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips...for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Host.” Indeed, time after time in the New Testament, we see many people meeting our Lord Jesus Christ and through this real and personal encounter they come to realize the reality of sin in their own life...and almost more importantly are granted the strength and courage to work for a change. The Samaritan women at the well, after meeting Christ and having all of the secrets of her heart revealed, puts it very well when she went to tell others about the Lord by saying, “Come, see a man who told me all things that I ever did.”

It might be said that the greatest spiritual problem today is that we do not recognize sin and we are not aware of our true spiritual state...or even indifferent to it. We may THINK that we know but really, it is, as St. John the Evangelist tells us in the Gospel, that ONLY the Holy Spirit that can reveal the reality of sin to us and all of its terrible consequences. (Sadly, often the first inclination is to refuse to take responsibility for sin, whether it be our own or even that of our world. We like Adam in the Garden are the first to blame others for our own sins and shortcomings and as a result we too, like Adam, are separated from God because of it.)

We may say in protest that we do not have any noticeable or serious sins and/ or that we don't really know what repentance is. And yet, the answer for all of this is simple: Seek God! We must seek the God of our Fathers Who was manifest

in the Flesh at Bethlehem and was baptized by John in the Jordan without ever changing Who He always was and is: the Eternal Son and Word of the Father, Light from Light, True God of True God, Jesus Christ. We must seek to know the Light and Life of the world because, as St. Ignatius Brianchaninov tells us, “the mind can [only] see its sins when the grace of God touches it. Darkened by the fall, the mind of itself is not capable of seeing them. The sight of our sins and our sinfulness is a gift of God.” If we do not seek to know Christ with all our heart through prayer, the Church's Sacraments, and living an Orthodox Christian Life, we will never be able to understand what sin REALLY is, what its eternal consequences are, and why repentance is so critical.

St. John Chrysostom explained that is necessary to repent, “not merely for one or two days but throughout one's entire life.”¹ Repentance is the cleansing bath that cleanses our souls from the daily dirt of sin and of the passions. It is important for us to freely be able to admit our weakness, faults and shortcomings for as one modern Orthodox commentator explained: “Just as the strength of God is revealed in the extreme vulnerability of His Son on the Cross, so also the greatest strength of man is to embrace his weakness....To be flawed is the illogical, perhaps supernatural characteristic of humanity [through] and in which one can encounter God.”² Astoundingly, it is through our failings and sins that we come to be able to properly seek and to come to know God, for He is the one who saves us.

God is the God of the perishing, not the strong. God has chosen the weak

¹Repentance and Confession in the Orthodox Church. pg. 5.

²Repentance and Confession in the Orthodox Church. pg. 5.

and foolish things of this world to shame the mighty and wise. St. Silouan tells us that “through repentance we shall all, everyone of us, be saved. Only those who refuse to repent will not find salvation³” for frighteningly, St. Isaac tells us that “he who is destitute of repentance is destitute of future delight” in the after-life. (“The meaning of the word repentance is this: continual and intense supplication which by means of prayer filled with compunction draws near to God in order to seek forgiveness of past offenses, and entreaty for preservation from future ones⁴”)

It is through our prayers at home and within the Church together that we come into contact with the Living God. From this contact, we often find ourselves at a loss, seeing the poverty of our fallen condition and our need of restoring the communion that has been broken...not only with God but with those around us as well. Confession re-establishes this bond between God and man. Confession brings healing, hope and life. It is not a juridical pronouncement but rather a healing release from the past which grants us great hope for the future. St. John Chrysostom asks us “Have you committed a sin? Then enter the Church and repent of your sin...For here is a Physician, not a Judge; here is not an investigation but remission.⁵”

“Confession is not a matter of being let off, or a clearance; but rather it has the force of healing, and of making us whole.⁶” That is why we in the Church have such a great hope and have no need to despair over anything that has happens to us. As Elder Porphyrios tells us, “In the Church which possesses the saving

³St. Silouan the Athonite. pg. 347.

⁴Homily 70. St. Isaac of Syria.

⁵Repentance and Confession in the Orthodox Church. pg. 13.

⁶Ibid. pg. 15. Paraphrase

sacraments there is no despair. We may be deeply sinful. But we make confession, the priest reads the prayer, we are forgiven and we progress towards immortality, without any anxiety and without any fear....”

Therefore, let us not despair. Let us put our hope in the One Who made us and Who longs to save us if we will only cooperate and patiently endure. Let us never abandon the Physician Who is able to do exceedingly, abundantly above all that we ask or think, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We can recall the Saint at the beginning of this sermon who saw the Lord and was convinced of only one thing. In His first public word, the Lord uttered that one, clear command, opening the door of the Kingdom to all people. And now, we too, in the midst of all of our busy lives and our families and friends and work must truly have concern for one thing. If we were to die today, let us hope that we will not die with deep remorse, wondering why amidst all of our activities in life we did not find time to make the effort to do one thing. Repentance: It is a life that is lived; It is a journey that is taken; It is a command from above this world from the Creator to the Creature; It is the door to the Paradise that we all truly seek. If we wish to enter, let us all begin again today. Amen.