

The first of these is the Parable of the Lost Sheep [Luke 15:3-7]: “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

The Parable of the Lost Coin [Luke 15:8-10] follows immediately: “Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

These are wonderful parables that serve as images of our heavenly Father rejoicing when He “finds” a sinner who has returned to Him through repentance. This “rejoicing” links together these two shorter parables with the masterpiece to come that closes out this trilogy of repentance-oriented parables. For the father of the parable will command his household to “make merry” with the return of his wayward son [Luke 15:24, 32]. Repentance is not simply a time of hand-wringing, regret and guilt. It is the beginning of a new life and an open-ended future that is a radical change in direction from the “no exit” of sin and alienation from God. The somber and stultifying atmosphere of sin is driven away by the “breath” of the Spirit, which “blows where it wills.” Of course, repentance is hard work—for old habits die hard—but sustained by the grace of God and the promise of salvation, the entire process to this day is most perfectly described by Saint John of the Ladder as “joy-creating sorrow.” Remorse for the past devoid of forgiveness will only produce sorrow—if not despair. The acceptance of divine forgiveness produces joy—both for God and the sinner. A profound awareness of God’s gift of salvation as the only meaningful release from the sorrow of sin led to the “gift of tears” of the saints. Their weeping was the expression of an inner joy that was overwhelming.

If (or As?) we squander our “inheritance” from our

heavenly Father, we resemble that representative figure of the prodigal son. We too, then, “journey into a far country” there to waste our wealth in “loose living” [Luke 15:13]. Unlike the prodigal son, though, we can do this without moving a step away from our homes. We need only retreat into the seemingly limitless space of our imaginations where fantasies entice us with unattainable visions of “self-realization” or “pleasure.” Then, there are the murky recesses of our hearts; uncharted territory that if not filled with the grace of God will “fill up” with “inner demons” that will eventually frighten us by the sheer audacity of temptations we never thought ourselves capable of entertaining. Or, perhaps a bit less dramatically, there are “the pods that the swine ate” [Luke 15:16], symbolic of philosophies and worldviews totally foreign to the Christ-centered life of the Church. The end result will be an emptiness and desolation that will exhaust our own inner resources. Our humbled minds and bodies will begin to search elsewhere for more satisfying nourishment. Anyone in such a predicament will only hope to be blessed—as was true of the prodigal son—with that mysterious process that leads to repentance, described simply as “he came to himself” [Luke 15:17]. Then, in words that have an urgency far greater than in an entire book of theology, we too may cry out, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants” [Luke 15:18-19].

We all know what follows: the compassionate father who runs to embrace his son in love; the clothing of the son in festal garments; the orders and preparations for a sumptuous banquet of joy; and the solemn words, “for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found” [Luke 15:24]. As this parable repeats itself endlessly until the end of time, with its finely etched descriptions of sin, repentance and redemption, we continue to witness some of the “mini-resurrections” that make up the meaningful dramas of everyday life.

Sunday of Meatfare of the Last Judgment

Commemorated on [March 3](#)

Today's Gospel reading is Matthew 25:31-46, the parable of the Last Judgment. It reminds us that while trusting in Christ's love and mercy, we must not forget His righteous judgment when He comes again in glory. If our hearts remain hardened and unrepentant, we should not expect the Lord to overlook our transgressions simply because He is a good and loving God. Although He does not desire the death of a sinner, He also expects us to turn from our wickedness and live (Ezek. 33:11). This same idea is expressed in the prayer read by the priest after the penitent has confessed his or her sins (Slavic practice).

The time for repentance and forgiveness is now, in the present life. At the Second Coming, Christ will appear as the righteous Judge, Who will render to every man according to his deeds" (Rom. 2:6). Then the time for entreating God's mercy and forgiveness will have passed.

As Father Alexander Schmemmann reminds us in his book GREAT LENT (Ch. 1:4), sin is the absence of love, it is separation and isolation. When Christ comes to judge the world, His criterion for judgment will be love. Christian love entails seeing Christ in other people, our family, our friends, and everyone else we may encounter in our lives. We shall be judged on whether we have loved, or not loved, our neighbor. We show Christian love when we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit those who are sick or in prison. If we did such things for the least of Christ's brethren, then we also did them for Christ (Mt.25:40). If we did not do such things for the least of the brethren, neither did we do them for Christ (Mt.25:45).

Today is the last day for eating meat and meat products until Pascha, though eggs and dairy products are permitted every day during the coming week. This limited fasting prepares us gradually for the more intense fasting of Great Lent.

THE FAST BEGINS

The Sunday of the Last Judgment is also known as Meatfare Sunday because it is the last day before Pascha on which the eating of meat is allowed. On the next day the fast begins, first from meat and meat Products and a week later from fish, milk and eggs and their products as well. The Church prepares us gradually from the stricter discipline of Lent. What is fasting? What is the purpose and value of fasting?

In a talk entitled "The Benefits of Fasting as a Spiritual Discipline," George Christakis, Professor and Chief of Nutrition at the University of Miami Medical School, gave this simple definition of fasting: "Fasting is eating sparingly and abstaining from certain foods." Dr. Christakis spoke about the physical as well as the spiritual benefits of fasting. People today are discovering that, quite apart from religious purposes, periodic and balanced fasting has significant benefits for the whole person in terms of losing excess weight, and in terms of acquiring self-control and a sense of physical and emotional well-being. According to Dr. Christakis about 45% of American adults and 15% of their children are overweight. Much of the excess weight is due to the overeating of meat products which have high animal fat and cholesterol levels. Abuse of food and drink in American society results in 60-70% of the chronic diseases, chief among them heart disease. The human body needs a right diet to function properly. Nutritionists have discovered that a balanced fasting diet of fruits, vegetables, and grains is by far a healthier diet than the heavy cholesterol foods most of us eat.

Fasting is not an end in itself but a means to an end. For a Christian there is no food that is ritually clean or unclean. Jesus said: "The things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these are the things that make a person ritually unclean" (Mt. 15:18). **THUS FASTING FROM FOODS IS A SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE WHICH MUST NECESSARILY BE ACCOMPANIED BY FASTING FROM EVIL.** One of the hymns chanted on Meatfare Sunday puts it this way:

Consider well, my soul: do you fast? Despise not your neighbor. Do you abstain from food? Condemn not your brother... May Christ lead you without stumbling into His Kingdom.

Matin Hymn, Meatfare Sunday.