

Monday, February 27, 2012

The First Day of Great Lent

To the Very Reverend and Reverend Clergy, the Venerable Monastics, and the Christ-loving Faithful of the Orthodox Church in America.

Beloved in Christ:

“Enter again into Paradise!” So the Holy Church sings in the kontakion at Lent’s mid-point. At a time of year that coincides with college students’ “spring break” – an occasion for riotous and prodigal indulgence in the pigpen of the passions – the Church offers us a very different image of paradise. Fasting, vigil, silence and prayer, denial of self and generosity to others: these are the labors by which we are invited and commanded to regain our true, paradisaal home.

In the three weeks that have led us to this great and solemn first day of the Fast, the Church has set before our spiritual eyes themes of exile. When our ancestors in the faith were led to captivity in Babylon, they wept; they hung up their lyres and said, “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither” (Psalm 136:4–5). The Prodigal Son, at the eleventh hour, was given the grace not to forget his father’s house, and so he set his feet on the path of return. Our father Adam and our mother Eve chose exile and hardship for themselves and all their descendants through their disobedience, and yet they – and we with them – are shown the way home: we see the doors of repentance thrown open, and our loving Father in heaven keeping watch for our return with open arms.

In Holy Scripture, Jerusalem, the heart of the Promised Land and seat of the Temple, typifies the dwelling place of God among men. When the time came for our Savior to be received up, “He set His face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). Making his way to the earthly Jerusalem, He was advancing toward suffering and ignominious death. Yet, “for the joy that was set before Him, He endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2). Cast out of the city, suffering outside the gate, He sanctified the people through His own blood. Therefore, the Apostle tells us, we also must “go forth to him outside the camp, bearing His reproach. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the one to come” (Hebrews 13:12–14).

The exiles in Babylon refused to forget Jerusalem. Yearning to return to the land given by God to Abraham, they would not make themselves at home in Babylon. The holy Prophet Daniel and the Three Youths obeyed the dictates of their conscience, even in the face of harsh recrimination from a legal system hostile to righteousness. When opportunity arose, they did not shrink from speaking the truth to those who opposed it and, against all odds, God rewarded their faithful witness (v. Daniel 3 and 6).



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If we wish to return home to our Father's house, we first must face the fact that, no matter where we live, we are exiles. This means that if we strive to follow Christ, if we endeavor to pray and fast, to avoid idle talk, to silence our thoughts and find stillness in our hearts, to love our neighbors and our enemies, and to speak the truth without judgment to a crooked and perverse generation, then we must expect to suffer the same mockery and hatred from the powerful of this world that Christ suffered when He walked the earth. For He is the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith," and He gives us the grace we need to prepare for the abuse that awaits us, whether at the hands of men or from the devil and his angels. We must ready ourselves for the fight by laying aside "every weight and sin which clings so closely" (Hebrews 12:1). Great Lent is a strenuous period of training that makes us fit to persevere in a long and arduous trek home.

But the ascetic struggle of Lent is truly a foretaste of Paradise! The world pretends to offer happiness, but this is deception; in reality it gives us only a foretaste of hell. For too many Christians, though, the spiritual senses have grown so dull that the hellish pleasures of the world are more attractive than the Edenic delights of the Church and the Kingdom. We have lost the memory of Paradise; we have forgotten the spiritual Jerusalem; we have made for ourselves a comfortable home in this foreign land. So how then can we make a commitment to follow Christ to Jerusalem? What will motivate us to continue walking along the hard and narrow path to our true home?

"Do you want to be made well?" Our Savior addressed this question to the man who was paralyzed thirty-eight years (John 5:6). A similar question could be asked of us: "Do you want to go home?" The answer is not a foregone conclusion. "Do you want to return to your Father's house? Do you want to leave the pigpen of the passions? Do you want to be washed clean, filled with light, robed in dignity, and transformed with the glory of God?" Whether we know it or not, we respond yes or no to these questions every day of our lives, every hour, every minute. One moment we may set our face toward Jerusalem – to the cross that awaits us there, and to the joy and glory that come only through the cross – but the next moment we go running back to our comfortable passions and delusions. We waffle and vacillate, reassuring ourselves that before time has run out we will surely have made an irrevocable commitment to Christ.

And we hardly spare a thought for the alternative – it is too fearful to face. The captives in Babylon, the Prodigal, even Adam himself – for all of them, exile came to an end; they returned home; they entered again into Paradise. But last Sunday we were warned of the perilous alternative to repentance: unending exile from God and those who love Him. For no one, neither man nor angel, nor even God Himself, can force us to return from the foreign country against our will. God's arms are opened wide to embrace us – but He gives us the freedom to turn away. His face is warm with love and mercy – but we may close our eyes. Then nothing will be left for us but darkness, confusion, and never-ending despair.

In our Father's house are many dwellings, and Christ has gone ahead to prepare a place for us. He will come again and take us to Himself, that where He is, we may

be also. We know the narrow way He has trod. He Himself is the way, and the truth, and the life (cf. John 14: 2–4). If we are with Him, we have nothing to fear! At the last and great Day, at the end of the age, we will behold the New Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride for her husband (cf. Revelation 21). With joy we will enter in to celebrate an eternal Pascha – God with us and we with Him. He shall wipe away every tear from our eyes, and at long last we shall be home.

With every blessing for a peaceful and holy Fast, and with love in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, featuring a large, stylized initial 'J' with a crossbar that loops back to the left. The name 'Jonah' is written in a cursive script to the right of the initial.

J O N A H  
Archbishop of Washington  
Metropolitan of All America and Canada