

THE FORGIVENESS SERVICE, THE ASHES, & THE BEGINNING OF LENT

As Jesus asked Andrew and John, so I ask you as we begin our Lenten Journey, "What do you seek?" As I have said for many years, Lent is more about what you seek, what you hope to gain, than what you will give up.

In Advent and Epiphany our focus is primarily on God drawing near to us in Christ and manifesting who He truly is, but His initiative calls us to respond. In Lent we give our response. In Lent, in light of His saving acts as the Bridegroom coming and laying down His life for His Bride, we are called to draw near to Him and to lay down our lives for Him in reply, through which we gain the true Life that He gained for us. Of course, we are to do this at all times, not just during Lent, but throughout the year we tend to lose sight of that Life, to stop cherishing and treasuring it, and other things slowly take its place.

At the end of the Lenten journey we will celebrate the great foundations of our Faith, especially the Resurrection, and that indestructible Life that burst forth from the grave will be restored to us anew as our greatest Treasure. But we must prepare for that. We must strip away those selfish and worldly desires and pursuits that tend to push our True Life to the background and usurp it and take its place on the throne of our hearts.

That's in part the purpose of Lent. We are going on a journey to the Promised Land of Life in God, and as with any journey, you have to leave behind where you have been if you hope to get to where you want to go. The place we begin is by being washed in forgiveness, by acknowledging our sins against each other and seeking forgiveness, and by being quick to forgive the sins of others against us. The Service of Forgiveness allows us to enter Lent with a clean canvas on which the Lord can paint His masterpiece.

Adam was expelled from Paradise, and in Him the whole human race as well. Here, at the beginning of our Lenten journey, we return to that dreadful reality. That is why in the Orthodox Church Forgiveness Sunday is also called Expulsion from Paradise. In Lent, we are being sent out into the desert, so to speak, into the wilderness, not to wander aimlessly but to remember the alienation caused by our sins and seek anew the forgiveness and reconciliation and fullness of Life in God, the communion with God that is ours in Christ, through all of His saving acts on our behalf. And that forgiveness is what we ask for, receive, and give in the Forgiveness Service at the beginning of Lent.

We are a body, members of one another, and our sins, even those unknown to others, affect everyone in the Body. There is a story in Joshua 7, after the conquering of Jericho, that is not a pretty story. They were told that when they conquered Jericho they were to utterly destroy it except for the gold and silver and bronze and iron which were to go into the Treasury of the Lord. Everything else was devoted for destruction, and absolutely nothing was to be kept for personal gain. But when they went into the next battle, they were routed by a much smaller army because Achan had secretly kept some of the spoil of Jericho for himself. His sin affected the whole people of God. There is nothing that is secret to the Lord, nor is there any such thing as private sin that affects only me.

The reality is that all of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. And even after being forgiven and brought into God's family, every one of us has at times tried to take back to ourselves some of the spoil that was devoted to destruction when we came to Christ. Therefore, all of that is washed clean as we seek forgiveness from each other and give forgiveness to each other in the mercy of God in the Service of Forgiveness.

Then on Ash Wednesday, although observance of that has not generally been part of Eastern tradition, an optional service is done in the EOC, as part of the Liturgy of Presanctified gifts on the first Wednesday in Lent. In that service, we receive the cross of ashes on our foreheads as a reminder of our mortality, although the practice is done somewhat differently than in most western traditions. In our tradition, the ashes are applied early in the service and worn throughout, then as each person comes up for the Presanctified Gifts of communion, the cross of ashes is washed off and anointing oil in the form of a cross is applied in its place. Jesus said, "*When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. ...But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you (Matt. 6:16-18).*" As the oil is applied, a prayer is said for joy and gladness in God's presence to replace any spirit of heaviness, and for His love to burn fiercely in the person's heart throughout the Lenten journey and remain.

Sometimes I wonder if the Goth community understands the world better than many Christians do. We live in a death-denying culture, and I wonder if some of the Goth attraction is in part a rebellion against the futility and hypocrisy of much of our death-denying society. Products touted to curb the aging process are a multi-billion-dollar industry. Hollywood sets the stage with many seasoned stars sporting so much plastic that they are hardly recognizable. And the materialism that typically goes along with all of that is held up as the goal of an extended life – more stuff. The Goth culture rightly reacts to all of this and sees the world as nihilistically dark and futile. "*All is vanity,*" still says the Preacher.

There is actually an Orthodox Christian sub-culture organization as well called *Death to the World*, which challenges orthodox people to remember that this world is dead to us by virtue of our baptisms. And yet, how often many of us get caught up in the whirlwind of worldly pursuits and accomplishments and the accumulation of stuff, all of which will pass away with the world when the world is dissolved with fire and made new.

Into that very sentiment the last few verses of our Gospel reading for the ashes service reverberate with profound authority.

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

We receive the cross of ashes as a reminder of all of this. This world holds nothing lasting for us. We do not put our hope in it nor in the flesh, but in the Lord who is eternal and who gives us everlasting life. The real treasures are not the allurements and enticements of this world. The real treasures are eternal. In fact, ultimately there is only one Treasure, the Triune God; all other eternal treasures flow from the Trinity. Every one of our bodies will return to the dust and be buried in the ground if the Lord tarries in His return. Therefore, as we receive the ashes, we are reminded, *"You are dust, and to dust you will return; therefore, put your trust in the Lord, for all who die in Him are raised to everlasting life."*

So, that is the more sobering reason that we receive ashes, to remind us of our mortality and our hope in Christ. However, there is an even more dynamic way of thinking about the ashes. How are ashes made? By fire. Ashes are created when something is on fire. So, you could also think about the ashes on your head as a sign that the fire of God's presence is burning in you. Ashes are actually used as fertilizer, to help make beautiful plants and flower gardens. In other words, from something being on fire, something beautiful is made. So, the ashes on our heads encourage us to be so on fire with the life and love of God that we leave "ashes" everywhere we go, that those ashes may fertilize everyone that we encounter and cause them, and us as well, to become beautiful flowers in the garden of the Lord. Then, as the ashes give way to anointing oil later in the service, the priest prays that the Holy Spirit will do just that - cause the love of God to burn in us, as it has in Saints throughout history.

It is good to acknowledge our sins with a repentant heart and receive and give forgiveness. It is also good to be reminded of our mortality and that this world is no longer our home. But it is especially the goal of the Lenten season to return us to the Life and Love of God, His for us and ours for Him, and for that Life and Love to burn ever brighter in our hearts. May God give us grace to that end!