

Help Thou My Unbelief!

Today, on the fourth Sunday of Great Lent, we are presented with the immense grief and suffering of a father, as described in the Holy Gospel according to St. Mark (9: 17-31):

And one of the multitude answered and said, Master, I have brought unto thee my son, which hath a dumb spirit; And wheresoever he taketh him, he teareth him: and he foameth, and gnasheth with his teeth, and pineth away: and I spake to thy disciples that they should cast him out; and they could not. He answereth him, and saith, O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you? bring him unto me. And they brought him unto him: and when he saw him, straightway the spirit tare him; and he fell on the ground, and wallowed foaming. And he asked his father, How long is it ago since this came unto him? And he said, Of a child. And oftentimes it hath cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him: but if thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us. Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth. And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief. When Jesus saw that the people came running together, he rebuked the foul spirit, saying unto him, Thou dumb and deaf spirit, I charge thee, come out of him, and enter no more into him. And the spirit cried, and rent him sore, and came out of him: and he was as one dead; insomuch that many said, He is dead. But Jesus took him by the hand, and lifted him up; and he arose. And when he was come into the house, his disciples asked him privately, Why could not we cast him out? And he said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting. And they departed thence, and passed through Galilee; and he would not that any man should know it. For he taught his disciples, and said unto them, The Son of man is delivered into the hands of men, and they shall kill him; and after that he is killed, he shall rise the third day.

This poor father was consumed in grief. One may say that he was “beside himself!” His immense grief can be broken down into 3 compounding layers. The first layer is the agony of beholding his poor son suffering physically, a source of great distress for any caring parent. Secondly, he was dealing with this alone, likely as a single parent, as no mention is made of the presence of his wife and co-parent. Thirdly, it appeared that no genuine help was available, drawing him into a state of hopelessness. What compounding anguish for this poor father!

Why does our loving God allow for such suffering? Having dominion over demons, why does our Lord allow such suffering and anguish? Let us tap the Fathers for more insight:

Sufferings are bitter medicines with blessed effects. They cure our various sins, especially pride, and humble us.

In our times of deepest grief, we must remember righteous Job who suffered without guilt and, despite that, accepted all misfortunes which piled upon him without grumbling and blaspheming. He lost his property, his herds, his servants, and even his children. One after the other came the messages which informed him of the woes which had come upon him. At receiving every tragic piece of news, he only repeated the wonderful words: *The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. In all this, Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly* (Job 1: 21-22).

Through his sufferings, Job received salvation. However, not all suffering is beneficial to the soul and elevates it, taking it into the Heavenly Kingdom. It is only that suffering which is endured patiently, with gratitude and trust in God, and without grumbling. Those who suffer must have great patience, so that they will be able to see how the bitter green buds on the branches of the virtuous life slowly and gradually, under the care of the warm Sun of righteousness, ripen and turn into sweet fruits of perfection and salvation. Those who suffer must have great patience lest they despair and, because of their impatience, the fruits fall before their due time – sour, bitter, and green. In such a case their suffering is in vain.

We cannot be saved without suffering; how else could we be tested by God for being firm and unwavering in virtue? God arranges many things in life in such a way that man is tempted, so that his free will can be manifested, and he, through the enduring of all trials, can receive salvation.

Archimandrite Seraphim Aleksiev

“The Meaning of Suffering”

The father’s anguish intensified after the disciples could not help his child. What followed was an extraordinary exchange with our Saviour. Christ, the Knower of all hearts, slicing through his anguish, revealed to him the reason why the prior effort didn’t work, namely, that his faith was lacking. The father, finally having his eyes opened to the reality of his insufficient faith, professes sincerely and openly, “Lord, I believe!” But, this is also followed by another extraordinary statement, “Help Thou my unbelief.” This is a profound expression of humility, as he trusted not in himself to maintain his faith, and professed his reliance on the help of Christ! This example of absolute humility is offered to us all to follow and emulate, as we should never be satisfied with the adequacy of our faith. God’s holy saints, true God-bearers, always considered their faith to be lacking and insufficient, despite being blessed with many gifts of the Holy Spirit. This humility yields a fundamental distrust in self, as expounded by St. John Climacus who is celebrated today:

The man of humble mind always loathes his own will as erring, and in his petitions to the Lord with unwavering faith, he learns what he should do, and he obeys.

The Ladder of Divine Ascent (Step 25)

The holy Fathers teach that man has the capacity to acquire virtue. But, man is inherently unable to retain virtue, because of weakness in the human condition. Grace is required to retain virtue, and Grace is attracted to humility.

How to learn to acquire humility? St. John Climacus further states:

The ever-memorable Fathers laid down that the way to humility, and its foundation, is bodily toil; but I would say obedience and honesty of heart, because they are naturally opposed to self-esteem. (Step 25)

Just as disobedience estranged Adam our forefather from God, it is through the salvific process of obedience that we are ultimately reconciled, as humility displaces the soul-threatening, indolent malady of pride. Obedience to God, (“Thy will be done..”), to our Saviour, to His body – the Church, Holy Scripture, Holy Tradition, and the Holy Canons.

St. John offers hope regarding the power, (provided by Grace), of humility:

If the pride of some of the angels made them demons, no doubt humility can make angels out of demons. Wherefore, let those who have fallen take courage! (Step 25)

Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us zealously seek, and work to acquire, holy humility, embedding this prayer into our daily supplications: "Lord, I believe. Help Thou my unbelief."

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