

The Last Judgment

Last week, the holy Church provided us with a parable of great hope, demonstrating the great love and patience of the father in his jubilant embrace of his repentant son. Today, during the Triodion period of preparation for Great Lent, the Church provides us with a more somber and fear-provoking picture, a motivator for repentance, that of the dreaded Last Judgment. We read in the Gospel according to St. Matthew (25: 31-46):

When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink. I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.

Parents, who are charged with nurturing, instructing and caring for their children, generally employ techniques that mix encouragement, rewards and “positive reinforcement”, along with chastisement and application of consequences. All parents can attest to times when their children do not respond to positive encouragement and the incentive of rewards, becoming obstinate and stubborn. To break through the hold of such obstinacy, (which can be an impediment to necessary growth and learning), punishment, in the spirit of love, is sometimes necessarily applied. As children grow to become adults, the capacity to process information, enable recall, and the ability to project future rewards and consequences, increases.

A good example of how vigilance and sacrifice is encouraged by the motivation to attain future rewards is seen in the field of athletics, particularly in preparation for the highly coveted Olympics. This requires a long-range outlook. Young athletes begin training at a very early age, and make huge sacrifices in lifestyle, applying incredible amounts of time and energy into focused training, shunning counterproductive habits, and submitting to an ego-pounding professional coach. Their source of positive “motivation”, their hoped-for reward, is an Olympic medal. In the spiritual life, God’s holy saints are sometimes referred to as spiritual athletes, who too make great sacrifices, exercise great vigilance, and are motivated by the “prize”, a reward granted by God’s mercy, eternal life in God’s kingdom.

The rest of us are weighed down by pride and our passions, which cultivates a disposition of obstinacy, stubbornness, lassitude and self-justification. God, in His mercy, (like a good and responsible parent), employs the means of chastisement and provides a necessarily painful reminder of possible future consequences. Another contrasting example that can be extracted from recent world news, showing the power of motivation based on the fear of consequences, can be seen in far away Japan, at the Fukushima nuclear power plant that suffered a tsunami-induced catastrophic disaster 5 years ago this month. Several of the reactors suffered an immensely catastrophic meltdown, with the (continued) potential to release extreme levels of radiation that could adversely affect many millions of lives. There is a massive effort currently underway, employing thousands of personnel, resources and scientific knowhow, to contain the damage and limit the potential spread of deadly radiation. Experts believe that this decommissioning process of securing plant safety will take a minimum of forty years. If the effort is compromised or diminished, the consequences could be horrendous to millions of people and even future generations. (This unfortunate event served as a “reality check”, a “wake up call” to the nuclear regulatory and safety industry, to relook at current safeguards and contingencies.) This is a clear example of motivation and vigilance that is driven by avoidance of future, dire consequences.

In today’s Gospel reading, we are also presented with a spiritual and relevant “reality check”, a “wake up call”, that is timely. As we embark on the soul-strengthening journey of Great Lent, we are offered a powerful, fear-provoking, motivation for repentance. The Last Judgment is also referred to as the “Dreaded Judgment”. Why dreaded? ...Precisely because of its FINALITY. The unfortunate souls on Christ’s left hand will be, after this day, forever banished from God’s kingdom, with no possibility for future repentance or change in outlook. This day is unavoidable for each and every one of us. It will come. Will we have sufficiently repented? Will we be shown mercy as a recompense for the mercy shown to others? Will we lack selfless good works, necessary for our salvation? What will our eternal destiny be? The very thought of being committed to a state of eternal, Godless agony should evoke great and penetrating fear in us! May this fear be a powerful motivator for action, action **now**. If we put things off, saying... I will pray later. I will go to church later. I will do good deeds later. I will repent later,

the parable that relates to the rich farmer should jolt us into accepting that, like the rich man, tomorrow may never come.

But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee.

Luke 14: 20

Our Saviour calls us to be vigilant ...now. Deferment, delay and compromise nullifies vigilance, and places our souls in peril. Let us be mindful of the words from our morning prayers:

Of a sudden the Judge shall come, and the deeds of each shall be laid bare. But let us cry out with fear in the midst of the night: Holy, Holy, Holy art Thou, O God. Through the Theotokos, have mercy on us.

(HTM Prayer Book)

May the fear of dreaded, eternal consequences, a state of Godless, endless agony, motivate us to take soul-saving action **now** to recruit God's mercy, bringing us to the cleansing and resurrection of our passion-laden souls! Like the father of the Prodigal Son, our heavenly Father lovingly awaits our return.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit!