

Fourth Sunday: St. John of the Ladder

By Archbishop Andrei of Novo Diveyevo

Two Gospels were read today. The first was about the healing of the one possessed. The disciples of Christ asked Him when they were alone: “Why could we not cast him out?” And the Lord said to them, “This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting” (Mk. 9:28,29). This is as if a reminder that now is the time for prayer and fasting — Great Lent. During the three weeks before Great Lent, we were shown the ways of repentance of a Christian who returns to his Father. And when Great Lent approached, with its hymns and prayers which were given to us during the Church readings of these past four weeks, we should have studied and understood ourselves. And when we understood ourselves, then involuntarily we should have come to a feeling of humility: “But Lord, what am I going to do? Lord, Thou seest how feeble and weak my will is. I constantly yield to the will of the prince of this world. Help me!” And I begin to weep.

This is why the second Gospel, about the Beatitudes, was read. These commandments show us what to do: step by step, as if rung by rung. This is why the Church this Sunday commemorates St. John of the Ladder, who wrote his spiritual work called “The Ladder,” which shows us what to do, how one virtue leads to another, like rungs on a ladder. In a spiritual sense, these steps are the Beatitudes. He who abides in spiritual poverty will surely weep because of his infirmity, and he who weeps because of his infirmity is already meek. In relation to his brother he will be indulgent and will always strive for mercy, for help in order to create peace which the Lord requires in our hearts. And he will not be afraid of persecution and will not think of how to take vengeance on those who harm him. No, he will always have this feeling: “Lord, I am weak, help me!”

This is why, after the Church gave us at the end of the first week of Lent the direction where we must go (into Orthodoxy), during the second week of Lent, the Sunday following the Sunday of Orthodoxy, she revealed to us the feeling of a man who already enters into spiritual endeavors; and he has before him the new principle of a man such as Gregory Palamas, who was renewed not only spiritually, but also physically.

And after showing us Gregory Palamas, the Church brought us to Golgotha. She showed us the Lord’s Cross, which we have venerated for the whole week. Those who were in church, and even those not in church, saw mentally before them Golgotha. We saw the wise thief and the thief who reviled Christ; and we saw Christ Himself Who pronounced His last words: “Into Thy hands I commend My spirit!” (Lk. 23:46).

This mood of Golgotha has remained with us. And we, who saw the reviling thief and the wise thief, should have determined: What are we to do? And seeing the long-suffering thief, we accepted in our hearts: “Lord, I will be long-suffering. But how am I to do this?” Live according to the Beatitudes. There is no other way. And this long-suffering, of whatever kind it may be, will cause us to suffer, but at the same time will give us blessedness not only in eternity, but even here, in the midst of our suffering, while we endure. To be poor in spirit, humble, to weep for our

sins, meekly to endure offense, to wish peace to everyone, to wish everything good, to endure persecutions for Christ — all this is difficult. But at the same time it is also joyful. This is the only way to true happiness; and this is the shortest way.

So what is the matter? Let us make this step right now, this very moment. Everyone these days fights for happiness. But we don't even have to fight (unless with ourselves) and we will be blessed. May God bless you to this step.