

PASCHAL LETTER, 2013

Beloved Christians, Clergy, Monastics and Laity, Brothers and Sisters,

Christ is Risen!

On the Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee, we sang, *Let us flee vaunting and learn humility.*¹

On the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, we sang that we have *squandered the wealth* which God gave us, and we beg that He *receive [us] as one repentant.*²

On the Sunday of the Last Judgment (Meat-Fare), we pray that God, before Whom *the river of fire floweth* will *deliver me from unquenchable fire and deem me worthy.*³

And, on Forgiveness Sunday (Cheese-Fare), we pray that God, our *Guide unto wisdom, Bestower of prudence, Instructor of the foolish, and Defender of the poor* will *establish and grant us an understanding heart*, adding: *have mercy on me who have fallen.*⁴

With these pre-lenten Sundays guiding us, we enter the arena of the Forty Days Fast, where we will discover in fact just what kind of spiritual wrestlers we are.

On the first lenten Sunday we celebrate the victory of Orthodoxy over heresy, the victory of the Christ of the Gospels over the multiplicity of “christs” fabricated by men who were - and are - in *delusion*; and we pray to be forgiven *for our failings*, linking this (without any explanatory comment) to our reverence for the *all-pure ikon* of our Saviour.⁵

On the second Sunday, Saint Gregory Palamas Sunday, we address Saint Gregory Palamas *as a mind standing before the Primordial Mind* and we ask him to *direct our mind to Him [God].*⁶

On the third Sunday, at the exact center of the Forty Days, we observe The Worship of the Precious Cross, praying that God will *grant unto the faithful victory over adversaries* while preserving the *commonwealth* of the Church⁷ and we also remember that the *flaming sword* that guards *the gate of Eden* is *no longer . . . for a strange extinction hath come upon it, even the*

¹ Kontakion, Tone 4, Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee, p. 143. All quotes and paraphrases are taken from *A Prayer Book for Orthodox Christians*, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston, 2005.

² Kontakion, Tone 3, Sunday of the Prodigal Son, p. 143.

³ Kontakion, Tone 1, Meat-Fare (Judgment) Sunday, p. 144.

⁴ Kontakion Plagal of Tone 2, Cheese-Fare (Forgiveness) Sunday, pp. 145-146.

⁵ First Sunday of the Fast, Sunday of Orthodoxy, Dismissal Hymn, Tone 2, pp. 147-148.

⁶ Second Sunday of the Fast, Saint Gregory Palamas, Dismissal Hymn, Plagal of Tone 4, p. 148.

⁷ Third Sunday of the Fast, the Worship of the Precious Cross, Dismissal Hymn, Tone 1, p. 149.

Tree of the Cross - and we end by singing that our *Saviour didst appear unto those in Hades, saying: Enter ye again into Paradise.*⁸

On the fourth Sunday, the Sunday of Saint John of the Ladder, we sing that Saint John raised up a sacred ladder of words by which he leads us, *from the purification that cometh through godly discipline unto the light of divine vision.*⁹

On the Thursday of the Fifth Week, we chant the great Kanon of Saint Andrew of Crete. Is it not an amazement that this remarkable Hierarch could assume so great, so deep, so wide, a knowledge of Scripture in his congregation? And we sing, confronted by the Kanon's careful construction of scriptural examples and scriptural warnings, *My soul, my soul, arise! Wherefore dost thou slumber? The end is drawing nigh, and thou shalt be troubled. Arouse thyself, therefore, that Christ God may spare thee; for He is everywhere present and filleth all things.*¹⁰

Everywhere, throughout the Forty Days Fast, we are warned to *wake up!*

On the Saturday of the Akathistos Hymn, we sing *Seeing Him receiving the form of a servant in thy womb, I stand in awe and cry to thee, Rejoice, thou Bride unwedded.* And here, as always, everywhere, the veneration we offer to the Theotokos points simultaneously in two directions: to the unfathomable humility of God Who descends unto us through her womb - and that, by God's own election - and then points to the corresponding need on our part to answer to the humility of this God, with our own humility.

On the fifth Sunday, the Sunday of Saint Mary of Egypt, we observe a woman overwhelmed, as we are overwhelmed, by passions which she cannot discipline herself to evade. For all the dereliction of her youth, we sing, all the same, that *In thee the image was preserved with exactness, O Mother; for taking up the Cross, thou didst follow Christ.*¹¹

We continue to sing, to this woman whose pertinence to the human predicament has undoubtedly never paled, *Thou who once of old wast filled with all manner of fornication, art now seen today to be a bride of Christ by thy repentance.*¹²

Lazaros Saturday beckons us to join the crowd in Jerusalem that welcomes Christ with joyful hosanna's, welcoming Him Who was reputed to have raised Lazaros of Bethany from the grave. We sing: *we also, like the children . . . cry to Thee, the Vanquisher of death, hosanna.*¹³

⁸ Third Sunday of the Fast, the Worship of the Precious Cross, Kontakion, Grave Tone, p. 149.

⁹ Fourth Sunday of the Fast, Saint John of the Ladder, Dismissal Hymn, Tone 3, p. 149.

¹⁰ Thursday of the 5th Week, The Great Kanon of Saint Andrew of Crete, Kontakion, Plagal of Tone 2, p. 150.

¹¹ Fifth Sunday of the Fast, Saint Mary of Egypt, Dismissal Hymn, Plagal of Tone 4, p. 151.

¹² Fifth Sunday of the Fast, Saint Mary of Egypt, Kontakion, Tone 3, p. 151-152.

¹³ Lazaros Saturday, Dismissal Hymn, Tone 1, p. 152.

And on Palm Sunday we think of our own baptismal initiation into the Body of Christ as we sing *As by baptism we were buried with Thee, O Christ our God, so by Thy resurrection we were deemed worthy of immortal life.*¹⁴

And in the kontakion¹⁵ for the same day, we turn our attention to the mystifying truth that in some manner beyond our capacity for understanding, Christ is *Being borne upon a throne in Heaven* whilst simultaneously He is *upon a colt on the earth*, and that He is hearing *the praise of Angels* while also hearing the *laudation of the children*. This is not the first time in this sacred season that space and time unwrap themselves from their familiar positions.

Holy Week, which embraces the Church as the accumulated spiritual wealth of the Forty Days Fast, gives us the Bridegroom Matins, again and again reminding us of the freedom and elusiveness of the God Who comes to us and Who comes so unexpectedly, since He is truly *the God Who surprises us*, the God Who takes us by surprise, Who catches us off-guard! Nowhere is the rich interplay between the scripture and the liturgical texts clearer: we sing over and over, and we cannot sing enough, *Behold, the Bridegroom cometh.*¹⁶

This will continue as our theme of themes through the first 3 days of Holy Week.

On Holy and Great Thursday we will sing about *the glorious Disciples who were enlightened at the washing of the feet* - and we will also notice that *Judas the ungodly one was stricken and darkened with the love of silver.*¹⁷

We will also sing about Christ Who is *Taking the Bread into His hands while the betrayer stretcheth them forth secretly and receiveth the price.*¹⁸ These hymns make those who sing them most discerning students of scripture.

On Holy, Great and Good Friday we sing *Thou didst ransom us . . . Nailed to the Cross . . . Thou didst pour forth immortality for men.*¹⁹

On Holy and Great Saturday, we sing *then didst Thou slay Hades with the lightning of Thy Divinity.*²⁰

I am writing these few poor lines having just come from the Vespereal Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great on Holy and Great Saturday, where the refrain, *Thou didst awake, saving me* recurs and absorbs us.

¹⁴ Palm Sunday, Dismissal Hymn, Tone 4, p. 153.

¹⁵ Palm Sunday, Kontakion, Tone 2, p. 153.

¹⁶ Holy and Great Monday, Troparion, Plagal of Tone 4, p. 155.

¹⁷ Holy and Great Thursday, Troparion, Plagal of Tone 4, p. 157.

¹⁸ Holy and Great Thursday, Kontakion, Tone 2, p. 157.

¹⁹ Holy and Great Friday, Dismissal Hymn, Tone 4, p. 158.

²⁰ Holy and Great Saturday, Dismissal Hymn, Tone 2, p. 158 - 159.

Pascha arrives with the simplest and greatest truth, *Christ is Risen!* and we will pray and sing all around that wondrous, unfathomable truth.

Here is another piece from the great Liturgy of the Resurrection, and one that we can take as a truth that heals, a truth that transforms and transfigures everything:

It is the day of Resurrection; let us be radiant for the festival, and let us embrace one another. Let us say, O brethren, even to those that hate us: Let us forgive all things on the Resurrection; and thus let us cry: Christ is risen from the dead, by death hath He trampled down death, and on those in the graves hath He bestowed life.²¹

There it is. There it all is. For family life, for life lived alone in the world; for clergy; for Hierarchs; for monastics, for all mankind: there is the prize to be won by hard effort and self-discipline. For colleagues, co-workers, fellow-students; for friends and neighbours; for enemies, for those who slander and deal with us unjustly: there it is - the bottom line.

And standing in the midst of all this remarkable wealth, we have not even mentioned the paschal Kanon, or the Sermon of Saint John Chrysostomos, the Archbishop of Constantinople the New Rome!

Wealth upon wealth, pouring out as if all the rivers of the world had converged and poured into our minds, our hearts, the grace of the God Who humbled Himself unto our own estate, because He loves us - more than we love ourselves.

In Christ risen from the dead,

+Bishop Sergios of Portland,
Saint Gregory of Sinai Monastery
Pascha, 2013

²¹ Stichera of Pascha, Plagal of Tone 1; Sticheron on Glory; Both now; p. 182.