

The Great Fast: A Time for Recovering a Vision of Christ “To See Christ as He Is” +Archbishop Dmitri (Royster) of Dallas and the South



The Great Fast (*or Lent*) begins with Forgiveness Vespers on Sunday evening. The purpose of Lent for Orthodox Christians, simply stated, is to recover the vision of

Christ that was given to us when we first became children of God at baptism, our birth from above, of water and the Spirit. From the beginning this “spiritual recovery” has been an essential part of the life in Christ and the Lenten season for two reasons.

First, having been baptized into Christ and having put our faith in Him as the only Savior of us all, we find ourselves living in a world that has standards and goals not compatible with our calling as His disciples. We often end up living like pagans, with corresponding cares and concerns, and we consequently try to serve two masters, God and mammon.

Second, at the end of Lent is Pascha (Easter), the celebration of Christ’s resurrection and of our own death, burial and resurrection, for “we are buried with Him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). We “are also risen with Him” (Colossians 2:12). Baptisms, since the Church’s early days, were administered on the eve of Pascha.

Everything that we became responsible for as children of Christ’s kingdom is carefully reviewed and meditated upon during our preparation for the fast. Whatever of the prodigal son remains in our lives, because we have not given “the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard ... and let them slip” (Hebrews 2:1), must be repented of. And we must repent with the confidence that on returning to our loving Father, we will be received with open arms.

The first announcement that the Great Fast is approaching comes on the fifth Sunday before it begins. The theme of recovering the vision of Christ is brought to the attention of the faithful in the story of Zacchaeus the publican in Luke 19. The meditations for the day focus on the desire to “see Christ, who He was” and not some “Christ” of our own making. We hear of Zacchaeus’ overcoming every obstacle to that vision and his resolve to transform his life once he had been in Christ’s presence.

This is the vision that Christians must recover, and we are reminded that once we have acquired it, we must keep it. “If a man love me,” says the Lord, “he will keep my words” (John 14:23). We must see Jesus only, and not have competing masters. When the apostle speaks of “looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith,” he teaches us to see no other if we would run the race of this life and reach the goal of our calling, life with Him in His eternal kingdom (Hebrews 12:2).

Fasting is emphasized during Lent, but the question is sometimes raised, “Is fasting really necessary? Hear the words of Christ Himself: “*When ye fast...*” He said to His disciples, not “*if ye fast.*” And He told the Pharisees: “The days will come, when the Bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days” (Luke 5:25). Just as Christ did not do away with the law of tithing when He accused the

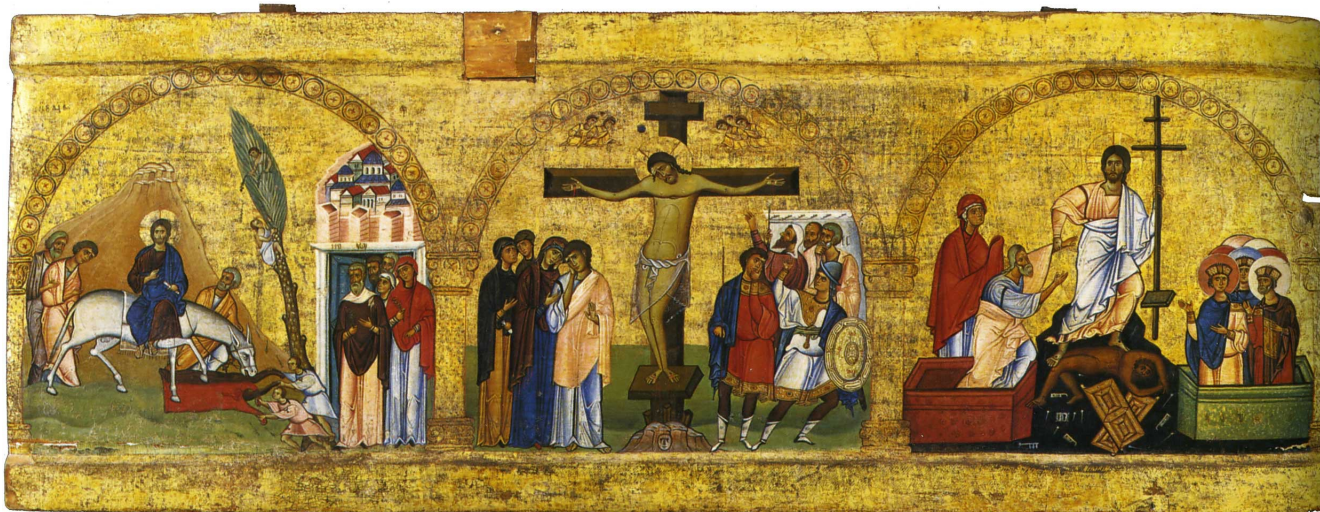
Pharisees of omitting the “weightier matters of the law – judgment, mercy and faith,” neither did He abolish fasting, although He knew that some Christians would misunderstand and abuse the practice.

The fasting prescriptions for Lent in the Orthodox Church have not been modified to suit the spirit of the times. They are not, however, understood to be rules, the violation of which is a sin to be confessed; each person is responsible for what he is capable of and proposes to do. Fasting is not a work that gains merits for us. But it does bring enormous benefits, as the experience of the saints has demonstrated.

The radical change of diet must be a sign of an inner transformation. If there is no consciousness of the need to transform ourselves according to the pattern of Christ, the fast is useless, perhaps even harmful. On the other hand, the fast can help us to bring about the mastery of the spiritual man over the material. Fasting must never be divorced from the pursuit of the spiritual life.

At the beginning of the fast, a hymn at Vespers summarizes our intent and reminds us of our goal:

“Let us set out with joy upon the season of the fast, and prepare ourselves for spiritual combat. Let us purify our soul and cleanse our flesh; and as we fast from food, let us abstain also from every passion. Rejoicing in the virtues of the Spirit, may we persevere with love, and so be counted worthy to see the solemn Passion of Christ our God, and with great spiritual gladness to behold His holy Passover (Pascha).”



*Entry into Jerusalem, The Crucifixion, and Pascha
from the Festal row of an Iconostasis on Mount Sinai,*

(This version has omitted references to movable dates in the year this article was written)