2 21 16

***THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK***

***“for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”***

On this first Sunday of the Triodion we again hear the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee. With the Great Fast only 3 weeks away, the Church is trying to prepare us by giving us the key which will open the door to making all of our Lenten efforts bear fruit. The Pharisee was well aware of the three pillars of the Spiritual life that are common to all major religions- Fasting, Almsgiving, and Prayer. He said ***“I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.”*** Of course the third pillar is evident as he went to the temple to pray.

We often think of the Great Lent as a time of fasting, however we must learn two things from this parable if our fasting is to become fruitful. First, our fasting cannot be separated from almsgiving and prayer, if it is to be effective. Fasting should be an act of compassion and an act of obedience to our Lord, who said “Love your brother as you love yourself.” Before we criticize the Pharisee we must ask ourself- do we give a tithe (that is 10% of all that we earn) to help our mother, the church and to those who are in need. Fasting must be combined with almsgiving to bear fruit. Similarly, if fasting is not combined with prayer it will have no effect except to make us irritable. The purpose of fasting is to give wings to our prayer by denying ourselves so that we can focus on God.

Second, we learn that not all prayer is truly prayer. The Pharisee teaches us that prayer does not become true in words but rather in the content and intention of the heart. As we stand before God, we must have a sense of total dependence, a sense that we can do nothing without His help, and that we are all sinful and unworthy-even to stand before Him. We must also come with the confidence that, in spite of everything, He has a burning love for us, and that He will indeed save us. That is why ***“the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven..”*** We must first recognize our sickness- for if we do not think we are sick why do we come to the Great Physician in prayer? Do we need a physician to boast of our health? We only need to think of the fact that our Lord has loved us to the point of suffering, of being spit upon, and of dying for us. How do we love Him back? Is it only in words or do we try to please Him with our thoughts and with our actions. Do we love Him by loving those around us- even the unlovable and despicable. Do we judge them or do we pray for them? True prayer can only come from the Holy Spirit, and yet the Spirit cannot dwell in a proud heart. Beloved, let us have this attitude of the publican, for we are all publicans before our most pure Lord. He drew near with confidence, because he knew our God as a God of love, as a God who desires all men to be saved, and above all a God who is humble. We must have the same three attitudes and our fasting, our almsgiving, and our prayer will carry us into the heavens.