

TO SEE OUR REWARD

The next Sunday of the pre-Lenten season is the *Sunday of the Last Judgment*. On this day we read in the Gospel lesson, Matthew 25:31-46, the conditions upon which we will be judged by Jesus Christ. We see, therefore, the conditions of the reward for our righteousness. We see what we must do in our lives on earth and are challenged to undertake a lifestyle which will bring us to eternal life on the day of Jesus Christ's Second Coming—the day of universal and eternal resurrection.

For I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed Me, I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you visited Me, I was in prison and you came to Me... Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, My brethren, you did it to Me (Matthew 25:35-36, 40).

On this we are judged. By recognizing Christ in those around us and by treating them accordingly, we attain salvation. We see Christ. We see ourselves. We return to the Father who shows us His Son in the least of our brothers and sisters.

TO SEE GOD'S FORGIVENESS

On *Forgiveness Sunday*, the last of the pre-Lenten Sundays, we contemplate our separation from God—our expulsion from paradise. The services for this day continually resound with this theme as recorded in Matthew 6:14-21. We find ourselves cast out of paradise, sitting outside in the darkness and apart from the God Who is the source of Life and Light. We are weeping. We desire forgiveness. We seek mercy. And so we must ourselves forgive and be merciful.

If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Matthew 6:14, 15).

The whole of Great Lent, as the whole of life, is a movement toward resurrection in paradise. We may enter only if God forgives us our sins—and God will forgive us if we forgive others. With forgiveness not only in mind, but in action, we enter the season of Great Lent.

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PRE-LENTEN SUNDAYS





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We know that we are approaching the beginning of Great Lent when we hear at the Sunday Divine Liturgy the reading from Luke 19:1-10 concerning Zacchaeus, the tax collector. The *Sunday of Zacchaeus* is the first of the pre-Lenten Sundays which takes us, step by step, to the beginning of Great Lent and, ultimately, to Pascha.

TO SEE JESUS

We begin with this particular lesson because Zacchaeus himself begins his repentance with a simple desire: he wanted to see Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ was passing by and a great crowd had gathered. Zacchaeus wanted to see Christ, but the crowd was great and Zacchaeus was short, so he climbed into a tree, thereby enabling himself to look at the Master above the heads of the crowd. Christ saw him, called him down and visited his house—much to the shock of those who knew that Zacchaeus was a great sinner. But Zacchaeus repented; he returned four times as much as he had stolen, gave the remainder of his possessions to the poor, and became a true disciple of Christ.

The message of this lesson is clear: everything begins with the simple desire to see Christ. Nothing can happen without this desire. We must desire to see Christ as well. This is our

first step toward the approaching Great Lent and Pascha.

TO SEE OURSELVES

Nothing begins without the desire to see Jesus Christ, and when we truly see Him, then and only then are we able to see ourselves. This is the second step in our approach to Great Lent and Pascha and the theme of the second pre-Lenten Sunday.

The Gospel reading for this, the *Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee*, is taken from Luke 28:10-14. Two men went to the temple to pray—a publican and a pharisee. The pharisee was a very religious man. He fasted, prayed, and gave away ten percent of his goods. Yet, he boasted about his accomplishment, and as a result, he was rejected by God. The publican, on the other hand, was truly evil—a genuine sinner. He sought to make a change in his life, however, by confessing his sinfulness and begging God for mercy. As a result, he was justified and accepted by God.

Like the Pharisee, we too are filled with pride and boastfulness; unlike the publican, we often refuse to acknowledge our sinfulness, confess it, and beg for mercy.

On this Sunday we are invited to take a deeper look inward, to search the depths of our souls,

and beg for mercy. We are called, through our vision of Jesus Christ, to acknowledge our sins and to fall down before the face of God in repentance, making the publican's prayer our own: "God be merciful to me, a sinner!"

TO SEE WHAT WE MUST DO

Having acknowledged our sins and sought the Lord's forgiveness, we now see that we are called to action. We must return to God, our Father, Who willingly and lovingly accepts us if only we make the slightest motion to return home to Him. This is the theme of the third pre-Lenten Sunday.

In the Gospel lesson for the *Sunday of the Prodigal Son*, Luke 15:11-32, we are presented with a young man, who against his father's advice, had taken all of his possessions and wasted them through foolishness. As a result, he had to resort to caring for pigs and found himself sharing the food which the pigs refused to eat. However, "he came to himself" and remembered life as it was at his father's house. He returned home, hoping only to be accepted as a servant. His father ran to meet him, kissed his son, clothed him regally, and celebrated his return with much festivity for, in the words of his father, "my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."