

4th Sunday of Lent

"I Believe: Help My Unbelief!" (Mark 9:17-31).

One day a father brought his sick son to Jesus with the faint hope that Jesus could cure him. He said to the Master, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a dumb spirit." The father went on to say that the malevolent spirit possessing his son would torture him. On many occasions the boy had thrown himself into the fire and almost burned to death. At other times he had fallen into the water and nearly drowned. He was a tortured, afflicted person. He would wallow on the ground and foam at the mouth. The father was desperate in his search for a cure. He had sought out the best medical treatment but with no success. Finally he had brought his son to the disciples. Even they could not help. The father's complaint to Jesus is poignant: "... and I asked your disciples to cast it out and they were not able."

"Bring Him to Me."

Jesus said to the father, "Bring him to me." One of the great secrets of life is to be found in these words, "Bring him to me." When we have a sickness or a problem, we Christians always have someone to whom we can go. "Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden," said Jesus, "and I will give you rest." How many cries for help we hear every day! If we try to help them alone, we are helpless. But if we believe in Jesus, it is our mission to bring them to the true Helper. As parents, friends, employers, fellow workers, we can be His middlemen, His helpers. All who need help will find real help only in Him. But before we can bring others to Christ, we must bring ourselves to Him. We must let Jesus strengthen our faith. We must let Him break the power of sin in our lives and set us free. We must let Him perform the miracle of salvation for us. Then we cannot help but bring others to Him.

"How Long Has He Had This?"

Jesus dealt with the father in a beautiful and tender way. He began with the question, "How long has he had this?" Of course, Jesus knew! The question was asked only to give this father the courage to speak out the story of his long sorrow. Jesus was in effect saying to the father, "I am interested in your problem. Tell me about it." The very fact that the father found a sympathetic listener helped lift the burden. There is great healing power in having someone to listen who sincerely cares and understands. Here lies part of the great value of prayer. We have a God who loves us and wants us to pour out our problems to Him. The father responded to the Master's question. He poured out his heart to Jesus, and gave vent to the bitterness that had poisoned the happiness of his home all these years.

"If You Can Do Anything..."

As the father told his sad story the boy had another attack. Looking at the gentle face of the Galilean, the father pleaded, "If you can do anything, have mercy on us and help us." The most important word in the man's appeal for help was "if-"if you can do anything." One can understand why the father had some doubt as to whether Jesus could help him. He had been disappointed so many times. His little boy had epilepsy since childhood. Like any father, he had left no stone unturned to heal the boy. He had carried him hopefully to every doctor he could reach. He had purchased every new drug on the market. He had carried him to the synagogue to be prayed for. He had even brought him to Jesus' disciples. All these had failed. Each time he met with disappointment. It was only natural for the father to have some disbelief.

A person can have so many problems, so many disappointments, so much bitterness, so many frustrations that after a while, he begins to doubt not only the existence of God, but also the existence of anything good.

It is possible for the pile of sorrow to become so great that we lose hope and, losing hope, we lose God. Such was the condition of the father when he said to Jesus, "If you can do anything, have pity on us and help us."

"If You Can Believe."

Jesus countered with another "if." "If you can believe; all things are possible to him who believes." He suggested that the father's faith had a lot to do with the whole situation. The problem says Jesus is not whether I have the power to heal; the problem is whether or not you believe I have the power. For "all things are possible to him who believes." God's power is limited only by our faith.

Faith has no power by itself. It is only when it clings to Christ that it lays hold of the tremendous power of almighty God. If you screw a pipe to a water main and turn a handle, the water flows out through the pipe and fills the empty vessel. Faith itself is as empty as the hollow water pipe, but when it becomes the connection between almighty God and empty man, the fullness of His grace flows through and fills the emptiness.

It is our faith in Christ that determines the amount of power we shall receive from Him. The size of our cup of faith can be large or small. We shall have just as much purity, just as much peace, just as much wisdom or gentleness, or love, or courage, or hope as the size of our cup of faith will hold. If we are not getting what we need from Christ, instead of blaming Him, we need to take a good look at the condition and the size of the cup we bring to Him. "If you can believe! All things are possible to him who believes." Scientists believed they could split the atom before they actually split it. There were those who said it could never be done, but it was. There is power in faith when it is based on science. There is even greater power in faith when its object is God. The magic of believing stimulates a wonderful power flow within us. It tunes us in to the mind of Jesus. It connects us to the greatest source of power in the universe: "You shall receive power," promised Jesus, "when the Holy Spirit has come upon you."

"I Believe; Help My Unbelief!"

Jesus performed two miracles. He not only healed the epileptic boy; He also increased the father's faith. From saying, "If you can do anything," the desperate father reached the point where he could say, "I believe." And yet it was not a change from unbelief to complete belief. His one-sentence prayer, "Help my unbelief showed that he did not possess complete and absolute faith. He expressed and acted on the faith he had, but he did not hide his doubt. He was honest with Christ. No person believes perfectly. In every person there is a mixture of faith and doubt. But the important thing is whether we let ourselves be controlled by the faith we have or by our doubts. Miracles happen not because of perfect faith, but rather because of imperfect faith in the perfect Christ.

Prayer

Lord, we believe. We believe that You are the greatest miracle that ever happened on earth. We see how You healed the epileptic boy and so many others. We see how much You cared for people — how gently You treated the troubled father, how You increased his faith. Lord, we acknowledge that the size of our cup of faith is small. Increase it — we pray — that our lives may be filled with your peace, power and love. Amen.

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT: FEAST OF ST. JOHN (CLIMACUS),

AUTHOR OF THE LADDER OF DIVINE ASCENT

Why St. John Climacus in Lent?

The fourth Sunday of Great Lent, the Holy Orthodox Church calls our attention to one of three people honored with a Sunday in Lent, namely: St. John Climacus, whose principal feast day is March 30, the day of his birth in heaven. So, why St. John Climacus in this Great and Holy Time of Lent? It is about both our ascetic struggle, practicing strict self-denial as a measure of personal and spiritual discipline - penitence and fasting, and God's healing grace, strengthening us and enabling us to grow toward perfection. He is honored by the Holy Church as a great ascetic and author of the renowned spiritual work called "The Ladder" (Climacus means ladder in Latin; the Greek word is Klimatikos). This famous book is about the thirty stages by means of which Christians can reach moral perfection. St. John's commemoration on this fourth Sunday fits well with the theme of the moral and spiritual discipline required of a Christian. To this day Orthodox monastic communities read it every Lent (some monks will have read 50 or 60 times in their lives) because it addresses a belief they share with those who preceded them that:



...given the right conditions and preparation, a man may even in this life work his passage upward into the actual presence of God, and there, if God so chooses, he can receive a direct and intimate knowledge of the Divine Being. Such knowledge is not the automatic or the guaranteed conclusion of a process. It is not like the logical outcome of a faultlessly constructed argument. There is no assurance that a man will come to it at the end of a long journey. But to many it was a prize and prospect so glittering that all else looked puny by comparison; and, besides, there were tales told of those who, so it seemed, had actually been granted that supreme gift of a rendezvous. (from the Preface to The Ladder of Divine Ascent, p. xvii)

Each chapter or step on the ladder describes a virtue. Together they describe the progress of spiritual struggle, which leads to glorification. This spiritual journey towards perfection is not something that can be achieved in one go, "for no-one can climb a ladder in one stride," it requires time, patience and diligence. The purpose of this work, is to teach that the reaching of salvation requires difficult self-denial and demanding ascetic deeds. "The Ladder" presupposes, first, a cleansing from the impurity of sin, the eradication of vices and passions in the old person; second, the restoration in humans of the image of God.

St. John Climacus realized in his own life the ideal penitence on which we should fix our eyes during Lent. As such, 'Let us honor John, angel upon earth and man of God in heaven', as we sing at celebration of Vespers. Cease never to intercede on our behalf, O John.

Steps or Rungs on the Ladder to Heaven

The *Scala* consists of 30 chapters, or "rungs",

- 1–4: Renunciation of the world and obedience to a spiritual father
 - 1. Περί αποταγής (On renunciation of the [world](#), or [asceticism](#))
 - 2. Περί απροσπαθείας (On detachment)
 - 3. Περί ξενιτείας (On exile or pilgrimage; concerning dreams that beginners have)
 - 4. Περί υπακοής (On blessed and ever-memorable obedience (in addition to episodes involving many individuals))
- 5–7: Penitence and affliction (πένθος) as paths to true joy
 - 5. Περί [μετανοίας](#) (On painstaking and true repentance, which constitutes the life of the holy convicts, and about the Prison)
 - 6. Περί [μνήμης θανάτου](#) (On remembrance of death)
 - 7. Περί του χαροποιού πένθους (On joy-making mourning)
- 8–17: Defeat of vices and acquisition of virtue
 - 8. Περί αοργησίας (On freedom from anger and on meekness)
 - 9. Περί μνησικακίας (On remembrance of wrongs)
 - 10. Περί καταλαλιάς (On slander or calumny)
 - 11. Περί πολυλογίας και σιωπής (On talkativeness and silence)
 - 12. Περί ψεύδους (On lying)
 - 13. Περί ακηδίας (On despondency)
 - 14. Περί γαστριμαργίας (On that clamorous mistress, the stomach)
 - 15. Περί αγνείας (On incorruptible purity and chastity, to which the corruptible attain by toil and sweat)
 - 16. Περί φιλαργυρίας (On love of money, or avarice)
 - 17. Περί ακτημοσύνης (On non-possessiveness (that hastens one Heavenwards))
- 18–26: Avoidance of the traps of asceticism (laziness, pride, mental stagnation)
 - 18. Περί αναισθησίας (On insensibility, that is, deadening of the soul and the death of the mind before the death of the body)
 - 19. Περί ύπνου και προσευχής (On sleep, prayer, and psalmody with the brotherhood)
 - 20. Περί αγρυπνίας (On bodily vigil and how to use it to attain spiritual vigil, and how to practice it)
 - 21. Περί δειλίας (On unmanly and puerile cowardice)
 - 22. Περί κενοδοξίας (On the many forms of vainglory)
 - 23. Περί υπερηφανείας, Περί λογισμών βλασφημίας (On mad pride and (in the same Step) on unclean blasphemous thoughts; concerning unmentionable blasphemous thoughts)
 - 24. Περί πραότητος και απλότητος (On meekness, simplicity, and guilelessness, which come not from nature but from conscious effort, and on guile)
 - 25. Περί ταπεινοφροσύνης (On the destroyer of the passions, most sublime humility, which is rooted in spiritual perception)
 - 26. Περί διακρίσεως (On discernment of thoughts, passions and virtues; on expert discernment; brief summary of all aforementioned)
- 27–29: Acquisition of [hesychia](#), or peace of the soul, of prayer, and of [apatheia](#) (dispassion or equanimity with respect to afflictions or suffering)
 - 27. Περί ησυχίας (On holy stillness of body and soul; different aspects of stillness and how to distinguish them)
 - 28. Περί προσευχής (On holy and blessed prayer, the mother of virtues, and on the attitude of mind and body in prayer)
 - 29. Περί απαθείας (Concerning Heaven on earth, or Godlike dispassion and perfection, and the resurrection of the soul before the general resurrection)
- 30. Περί [αγάπης](#), [ελπίδος](#) και [πίστεως](#) (Concerning the linking together of the supreme trinity among the virtues; a brief exhortation summarizing all that has said at length in this book)