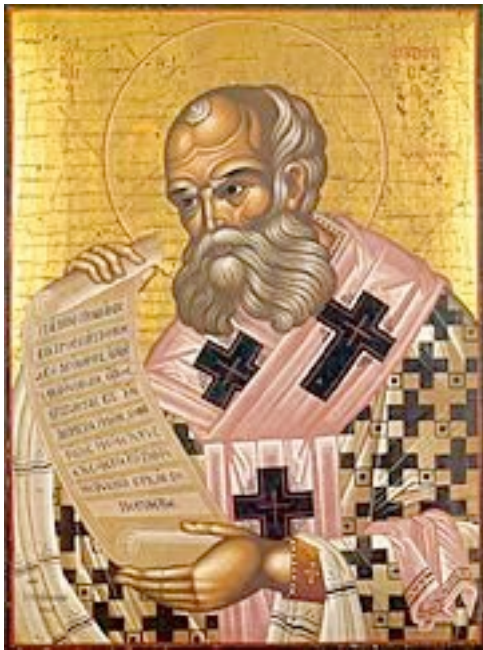


Preparing for Great Lent

Why did Jesus come? To save us from death and show us the way back to paradise and eternal life. How did he save us? Through his Incarnation as fully human and fully God. It was his humanness that allowed Him to sanctify our corrupted human bodies so they could be transfigured for their resurrection. His body was sacrificed on the Cross, He suffered a most horrible death, was buried, but then He descended into Hell to liberate all who had died before, returned in a transfigured state to further teach His disciples so they could establish His Church, and then He ascended into Heaven and sent the Holy Spirit to empower the Apostles. With the guidance and power of the Holy Trinity, they went about the task of establishing the Church here on earth.

Christ established the Church so that we could all have a place to help us purify our bodies and souls so we could learn to live according to His commandments and then join Him in eternal life in heaven. He knew we were all sinners, so He gave us the sacraments beginning with Baptism and Chrismation which begins our life in Christ. He showed us the life of repentance with which includes Holy Confession and Holy Communion where we can regularly be cleansed of our sinfulness and nurtured with His Blood and Body as Holy food for our nourishment for our soul. He also established Holy Unction, Marriage, and Ordination. The Church has also established a liturgical cycle to help us lead the kind of life that will help us return to paradise and to live eternally with Christ in heaven.

This month we celebrate the life of Athanasius the Great on January 18th. He was the Patriarch of Alexandria, one of the great centers of early Christianity. He was one who was key in the First Ecumenical Council which gave us the Creed we recite to this day. He defended the two natures of Christ, that as fully human and fully God. For Him, if Christ was not both fully human and fully God, then Christ could not save us humans. He had to have a fully human body to sanctify it as was the teaching of the Apostles.



At the time of Athanasius, the Church faced many heresies as well as the flourishing of Monasticism. The period of martyrdom had ended. At this time thousands flocked to the desert to purify themselves so they could live in union with God. Athanasius knew that there was only one universal Church and that the monastics and the other believers were all part of the same Church but had different paths to prepare themselves for their entry into heaven. He emphasized that the monastics

show us the highest moral path to God, but they are specially chosen for this path. It is a path of virginity which they freely choose along with a permanent withdrawal for the

normal society. This is not a path for everyone as it is beyond our normal nature and the requirement of Christ. Those who are married have the same aim and goal as the monastics, and must in a similar way purify their being so that their souls will be in control of the body so they can model the life of Christ and that of the angels. The Church provides for them as well in the liturgical cycle of the Church.

For those who were married he emphasized the need to follow the liturgical cycle of the Church. The monks show us the virtue of withdrawal for our spiritual growth. The Church provides a time for withdrawal temporarily from the normal life to work on the purification of our body and soul much like the monks do in a continual way. The Great fast leading up to Pascha was one such period. By following the traditions of Christ's Church we will be guided along the path to our salvation.

If we think about our future, our own death and ascension into the eternal life, we know life will be more like the angels. This is the life that monks try to emulate as this is the state in which we will return to paradise. In heaven, we will not have bodily passions or worldly cares. So, to prepare ourselves to live this future perfected life, we need to work now on checking the control that our body seems to have over our soul which is the primary cause of our sinfulness. Athanasius taught his followers that they must periodically retreat from the normal worldly life. Christ showed this with His periodic withdrawal, and His fasting and prayer. Mostly, we are driven by our bodily desires and for comforts of this world all of which perish at our death. We truly should have more interest in what will provide for us an eternal life with Christ in heaven.

Athanasius teaches that this is the purpose of the Great Fast of Lent. Through fasting, we withdraw from our normal activities. We quiet ourselves and restrict the foods we eat so we can develop control over our body's demands. It is like going to a spiritual athletic club or a resort spa where we go to get in shape and lose weight. The difference is that the Great Fast period is for our spiritual development instead of our physical well being. In addition to controlling and limiting our food during the Great Fast, we should reduce our social activities so we can quiet ourselves and devote more time for prayer and become more reflective of the world we are preparing to enter in heaven. It is also a time when we extend our heart to our neighbors who are in need and open our purses and volunteer our time to help those in need to live fully God's commandment to love our neighbor. It is a time of forgiveness and reconciliation as we try and reconcile our differences. It is a period where we aim to fully practice the commandments of our Lord, to love God with all our hearts, and to love our neighbor as ourselves, including loving our enemies.

The period of Lent begins with the preparatory four Sundays of which the first occurs on January 28th. Here is the schedule:

Jan. 28 Publican and the Pharisee and the week that follows is fast free.

Feb. 4: Prodigal Son - normal fast week follows.

Feb. 11: Meatfare or Judgment Sunday - A week with no meat follows.

Feb. 18: Forgiveness Sunday - the Lenten fast follows.

Feb. 19: Great Lent begins - Clean Monday.

It is a good time to discuss the period of Lent with your family and Parish friends to see how you can make this upcoming Lenten season one of withdrawal, reduced social activity, and a time to work on your soul and body for its purification and your salvation for a union with God. We Orthodox call this theosis. While we are saved by the grace of God we are required to exercise our own wills to align our soul's will with God's will and to live His commandments. Since we have the tendency for sin, and because of our culture, we are continually stimulated by our bodily and earthly desires, this period is an important one for those of us who have chosen the path of marriage.

Charles W. Joiner, Jr.
Saint George Greek Orthodox Cathedral
Greenville, SC