

The meaning of love

Gospel: Matthew 25:31-46. *When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.*

“Inasmuch as ye have done *it* unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done *it* unto me”.

In this third Sunday of the Triodion Period, our Church remembers the day of Judgement, that is the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ

The commemoration is a remembrance in the Church of this event! The Gospel passage of today is a reminder of that day of Judgement. The Evangelist emphasizes the measure by which we shall be judged. In most icons of the Last Judgement, we see on a table a Balance to weigh our works, along with the Holy Bible. Today the Church opens the Scriptures to read this passage of the Last Judgement. And what we heard was clear, in that we will be judged on the measure of mercy, that is "love."

Love is a word that is often misused and misunderstood. The scriptural passage emphasizes the words of our Lord Jesus that "Inasmuch as ye have done it..." There is no meaning for the word love in abstract, but rather in action. The words of scripture divide us into sheep and goats according to our "works of love." The measure then is doing or not doing works of love.

It is a common mistake to restrict love just to affections and emotions, and even much less than that, to words and claims. How widespread and how cheap is this (latter) kind of love. The work of love is free from all this. We may have feelings of hatred sometimes towards a person. But if we behave with him in kindness and love, we transform our hatred into love. On the other

hand, we may carry in us the kindest feelings towards a person, and we may be emotionally attached to him, but our works of love toward him are null.

Clearly, love means to put others first, and selfishness is exactly the opposite, that is to put myself first and others last. "I love someone" does not mean that I have feelings for that one, but that I want and I desire to put him first, and love him more than I love myself, and wish his welfare before my welfare. This is the true work of love, the criterion by which we will be distinguished (separated).

In today's Gospel passage, the sheep and goats heard the same words from the Lord, and they encountered the same life circumstances (poor, imprisoned, thirsty, etc.). What is strange is that both parties called upon God using the same word "O Lord." What distinguished one party from another is what they had and had not done, what they were careful or careless to accomplish in regards to their brothers. In fact, what is meant in the Gospel by "love" is the "works of love", for we really cannot love God unless we serve his brothers. Offer to God a work of love!! God is in His heaven and he does not need anything. So let's love Him by offering our works of love to Him. God accepts our love if we serve those whom He loves and those for whom he died and was resurrected, that is our brothers. That's why the Apostle said: "Whoever says that he loves God and does not love (serve) his brothers is a liar."

What then forbids us to perform acts of love? Why can't we feed the hungry? Is it because we are greedy and we like to keep the excess of our food to ourselves, and only to ourselves? Why can't we give a

drink to the thirsty? Is it because we prefer to spill water in our houses rather than give it away? Why can't we clothe the naked and house the homeless? Is it because we care only about our clothes and the world of Fashion which has enslaved us, and the vanity that carries us away from thinking about others?! Why don't we visit the prisoners? Is it because we claim to be loving but think it is not our business to visit them?! And enough for us are our worldly and daily cares, and running after our personal interests does not leave any room for us to care about others.

Why? Many questions the Gospel asks today, and the reality of life asks repeatedly, and the answer is the same: "Are we for ourselves or for others?" Are we for the works of love or for introversion and the work of selfishness?!

If we read "One-Hundred Sayings on Love" by Saint Maximos the Confessor, we will be surprised by what he says about love being the state of passionlessness. In other words, passions destroy love. Passions are the love of the self, the self-gratification, self-interests, etc. which forbid us from doing the work of love and place us in the company of the goats.

Lent comes as a movement of abstinence, leading us to abandon our selfishness. It purifies the old man and builds the new. It is a change of direction and a repentance.

So we see how Lent goes hand in hand with the works of mercy, and mercy presents itself in various shapes. Lent was conceived for us so that we could learn how to love. Lent is a tool that nourishes in us the feeling

of self-sacrifice, and the acceptance of the rights and existence of others. The purpose of Lent is to make us see others with our eyes, and not to be ignorant of their beautiful presence. Lent is a return to the real Paradise. Man in his selfishness defines his "paradise" by his selfish interests, while Lent helps us to realize that the service of others is the life of the "true" paradise.

In Lent we give up our deceiving desires, we abstain from interests that lead to our demise, we learn the work of love, and we free ourselves from the tyranny of passions and desires.

Lent leads us to the meaning of love and teaches us the "works of love."

Amen.