

REPENTANCE WITH FERVOUR

In this newly opened Triodion period, the Holy Church provides a necessary means of preparation, a setting of our attentions towards a goal, of healing and strengthening, for Great Lent. Specific parables are provided to encourage us to focus on the essential need and goal of repentance. The first such parable comes from the Gospel according to St. Luke (19: 1-10):

And Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. And, behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus, which was the chief among the publicans, and he was rich. And he sought to see Jesus who he was; and could not for the press, because he was little of stature. And he ran before, and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him: for he was to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up, and saw him, and said unto him, Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for today I must abide at thy house. And he made haste, and came down, and received him joyfully. And when they saw it, they all murmured, saying, that he was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner. And Zacchaeus stood, and said unto the Lord: Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken anything from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold. And Jesus said unto him, this day is salvation come to this house, forasmuch as he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.

At the time, the land of Judaea was an occupied state. The occupiers, the Roman Army, extracted heavy taxes from the people. Taxes were collected by chosen individuals amongst the occupied population, who received protection by the powerful Roman Army. These tax collectors, so called publicans, were generally unscrupulous, taking advantage of their own people, pilfering resources for themselves, even from the poor and destitute. As such, they were loathed and detested by the people, who considered them betrayers and morally bankrupt. Zacchaeus was not only a publican, but the chief publican in Jericho, (a high profile position that attracted disdain), whose riches were acquired from the blood and sweat of his own people.

Our Saviour was passing through Jericho. By that time, many in Jericho have heard about our Saviour's miraculous healings and profound words of salvation. Throngs of people gathered and followed our Saviour, eager to extract some measure of holiness, grace or direction from this most unusual man of God. Something drew Zacchaeus as well, and it wasn't idle curiosity. Zacchaeus's heart was not at peace, and his conscience was pricking him. He was looking for a change, and believed that this traveling stranger could hold the key. Not being able to see much because of his short stature, he did something that was very bold... he ran ahead and climbed a tree for a better view. This, of course, placed him in clear view of all the people who hated him. This took boldness. What was the driving

source of his boldness? It is the same boldness that was shown by the Centurion who risked his career when seeking out our Saviour to heal his slave, (Matthew 8: 5-10). It was also this boldness that drove the woman with an issue of blood, who was relegated to be isolated from her people, to push forward into the crowd to touch the hem of Christ's garment, (Matthew 9:20). This is the boldness that seeks healing. And, in the case of Zacchaeus, he sought healing of his soul through heartfelt repentance.

Our Saviour, the Knower of all hearts, saw this boldness and desire in the heart of Zacchaeus which shone forth like a bright and glowing light. Christ stops in his tracks and calls out: "Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down." Of course, our Saviour knows his name, as He knows everything about him. Zacchaeus, who is a man of authority and is accustomed to giving orders, responds obediently, without hesitation, and... joyously! Our Saviour enters his home, and, more importantly, enters his heart!

With my background of growing up in the big city, there were certain crass expressions that I recall hearing. One such crude expression related to testing of a person's credibility and sincerity of intent: "Put your money where your mouth is." This was offered as a challenge, to see if action corresponds to stated intention. After Zacchaeus welcomed our Saviour into his home, (and his heart), he made an extraordinary commitment, (in effect, putting his money where his mouth is): "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken anything from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold. " Zacchaeus knew about all the many ways in which he acquired money through deceit, and, undoubtedly, knew that fulfilling this vow will result in the loss of virtually all his riches! Yet, his desire for healing, through repentance, superseded any desire to retain his wealth, (which were acquired through corrupt means).

In the collection of customary prayers said before Holy Communion, St. Symeon the New Theologian offers the following words in his prayer:

For with the oil of compassion, Thou dost cleanse and render shining all those who repent with fervor.

Zacchaeus' extraordinary reversal is presented to us as a glowing example of **repentance with fervor!** The parable also illustrates how God's mercy is drawn to a repentant spirit, particularly a fervent one.

It shouldn't be surprising that the people surrounding this encounter in Jericho were left murmuring, perhaps a bit confused, over our Saviour's special attention towards the lowest and most despicable man in their community. The subsequent fervent and sacrificial vow of repentance expressed by Zachaeus should remind them, and us all, that it is the spirit of sincere repentance that attracts God's attention, God's grace, and God's mercy! Yes, we beseech and supplicate God in our daily prayers, continually yearning for His mercy and attention. May we endeavor to present to our Lord a genuinely repentant spirit!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, may we work to acquire the boldness of Zacchaeus, climbing the tree of the Cross, and offering to our Saviour a fervent commitment of repentance, and thus, going from the abyss of being lost, to the eternal embrace of Christ, Who always seeks to rescue us!

Repent! The Kingdom of God is at hand!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit!