

Anthony Bloom - An introduction to Lent

AN INTRODUCTION TO LENT **Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh**

Contrary to what many think or feel, Lent is a time of joy. It is a time when we come back to life. It is a time when we shake off what is bad and dead in us in order to become able to live, to live with all the vastness, all the depth, and all the intensity to which we are called. Unless we understand this quality of joy in Lent, we will make of it a monstrous caricature, a time when in God's own name we make our life a misery. This notion of joy connected with effort, with ascetical endeavour, with strenuous effort may indeed seem strange, and yet it runs through the whole of our spiritual life, through the life of the Church and the life of the Gospel.

The Kingdom of God is something to be conquered. It is not simply given to those who leisurely, lazily wait for it to come. To those who wait for it in that spirit, it will come indeed: it will come at midnight; it will come like the Judgement of God, like the thief who enters when he is not expected, like the bridegroom, who arrives while the foolish virgins are asleep. This is not the way in which we should await Judgement and the Kingdom. Here again we need to recapture an attitude of mind which usually we can't manage to conjure up out of our depth, something which had become strangely alien to us: the joyful expectation of the Day of the Lord - in spite of the fact that we know this Day will be a Day of judgement.

It may strike us as strange to hear that in Church we proclaim the Gospel - the 'good news' - of judgement, and yet we do. We proclaim that the Day of the Lord is not fear, but hope, and declare together with the spirit of the Church: 'Come, Lord Jesus, and come soon' (cf. Rev. 22.20). So long as we are incapable of speaking in these terms, we lack something important in our Christian consciousness. We are still, whatever we may say, pagans dressed up in evangelical garments. We are still people for whom God is a God outside of us, for whom his coming is darkness and fear, and whose judgement is not our redemption but our condemnation, for whom to meet the Lord is a dread event and not the event we long and live for. Unless we realise this, then Lent cannot be a joy, since Lent brings with it both judgement and responsibility: we must judge ourselves in order to change, in order to become able to meet the Day of the Lord, the Resurrection, with an open heart, with faith, ready to rejoice in the fact that he has come.

Every coming of the Lord is judgement. The Fathers draw a parallel between Christ and Noah. They say that the presence of Noah in his generation was at the same time condemnation and salvation. It was condemnation because the presence of one man who remained faithful, of just one man who was a saint of God, was evidence that holiness was possible and that those who were sinners, those who had rejected God and turned away from him, could have done otherwise. So the presence of a righteous man was judgement and condemnation upon his time. Yet it was also the salvation of his time, because it was only thanks to him that God looked with mercy on mankind. And the same is true of the coming of the Lord. There is also another joy in judgement.

Judgement is not something that falls upon us from outside. Yes, the day will come when we will stand before God and be judged; but while our pilgrimage still continues, while we still live in the process of becoming, while there still lies ahead of us the road that leads us towards the fullness of the stature of Christ, towards our vocation, then judgement must be pronounced by ourselves.

There is a constant dialogue within us throughout our lives. You remember the parable in which Christ says: 'Make your peace with your adversary while you are on the way' (Mt. 5.25). Some of the spiritual writers have seen in the adversary not the devil (with whom we cannot make our peace, with whom we are not to come to terms), but our conscience, which throughout life walks apace with us and never leaves us in peace. Our conscience is in continuous dialogue with us, gainsaying

us at every moment, and we must come to terms with it because otherwise the moment will come when we finally reach the Judge, and then our adversary will become our accuser, and we will stand condemned.

So while we are on the road, judgement is something which goes on constantly within ourselves, a dialogue, a dialectical tension between our thoughts and our emotions and our feelings and our actions which stand in judgement before us and before whom we stand in judgement. But in this respect we very often walk in darkness, and this darkness is the result of our darkened mind, of our darkened heart, of the darkening of our eye, which should be clear. It is only if the Lord himself sheds his light into our soul and upon our life, that we can begin to see what is wrong and what is right in us.

There is a remarkable passage in the writings of John of Kronstadt, a Russian priest of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, in which he says that God does not reveal to us the ugliness of our souls unless he can see in us sufficient faith and sufficient hope for us not to be broken by the vision of our own sins. In other words, whenever we see ourselves with our dark side, whenever this knowledge of ourselves increases, we can then understand ourselves more clearly in the light of God, that is, in the light of the divine judgement. This means two things: it means that we are saddened to discover our own ugliness, indeed, but also that we can rejoice at the same time, since God has granted us his trust. He has entrusted to us a new knowledge of ourselves as we are, as he himself always saw us and as, at times, he did not allow us to see ourselves, because we could not bear the sight of truth.

Here again, judgement becomes joy, because although we discover what is wrong, yet the discovery is conditioned by the knowledge that God has seen enough faith, enough hope and enough fortitude in us to allow us to see these things, because he knows that now we are able to act. All this is important if we want to understand that joy and Lent can go together. Otherwise the constant, insistent effort of the Church - and of the word of God - to make us aware of what is wrong in us can lead us to despair and to darkness, until finally we have been brought so low that we are no longer capable of meeting the Resurrection of Christ with joy, because we realise - or imagine that we realise - that the Resurrection has nothing to do with us. We are in darkness, God is in light. We see nothing but our judgement and condemnation at the very moment when we should be emerging out of darkness into the saving act of God, which is both our judgement and our salvation.

The Orthodox Church introduces Lent with a series of preparatory weeks in which the readings of the Gospel lead us step by step from outer darkness, as it were, to the point of judgement. I would like to remind you quickly of these stages.

The first, dramatic stage in which we find ourselves consists in the fact that we are blind and yet are unaware of our blindness. We are in darkness and are unaware that this darkness is within and around us. Our eye is dark and darkens all that is inside us, while we remain unaware of it. The first reading from the Gospel that confronts us with this aspect of our preparation for Lent is the story of Bartimaeus, the blind man at the gate of Jericho, a man who either had lost his sight or was born blind, but was left there in the darkness, in the outer darkness. There was no light for him, there was no life for him, either, and there was no joy for him. He probably had come to terms with his distress. He continued to exist, since he could not live. He continued to exist day after day thanks to the cold, indifferent charity of passers-by.

But one thing made his misery both dramatic and tragic: he lived in the time of Jesus. More than once Bartimaeus must have heard of this man of God who had come to the world, who was healing and renewing people and things, a man who had opened the eye of blind men, who had given sight to the man born blind. The presence of the possibility of salvation, of an impossible healing, must have made his darkness even darker. Possible it was, if God came his way, yet impossible, because how could he find the itinerant preacher and healer who never was still, never in the same place?

How could a blind man keep pace with him? Darkness came into his awareness because there was a possibility that he might see. His despair became deeper than ever before, because there was hope. And so, when Christ came near him he could ask for healing from the very depth of his despair and from the very depth of a total, passionate longing for salvation. The coming of God had made him aware of darkness as he had never been before, aware as never before of the tragedy which he lived.

This is the first step, which we must accept and which we find so difficult to accept: we must face our true situation, not consoling ourselves with the thought that we have some sort of life within us that can replace divine life. We must accept that we are in darkness as far as the light of God is concerned. And then we must do something about it. First of all we must become aware of the fact that without light we are lost, because the darkness in which we are left is death, the absence of God. But when it comes to doing something, there are two things that stand in our way.

First of all, we will not act unless we are aware that we are in a desperate situation. If we are not aware that it is really a question of life and death, of the only thing that matters, then we will do nothing. We will pray God to do something. We will hope that even though we are not even praying, he will come and act. But it is only out of a sense of deadly urgency that we can begin to act, like Bartimaeus, whom no one could stop from crying out, shouting for help, since he knew that this was the decisive moment. Christ was passing by. In a minute he would be gone and the darkness would become permanent, irremediable.

Another thing that prevents us from doing something is the way we are afraid of people. I remember a man in prison who told me how marvelous it was to be found out, because, as he said, 'So long as I had not been found out, I spent all my time, and my effort, trying to look as though I was alright. The moment I was caught I felt, "Now I can choose: I can either remain what I was, a thief and a cheat, or else I can change. Now I am free to become different, and no one will be any more surprised than they were to discover that I was a thief."

As long as you have appearances to maintain it is terribly difficult to change, and this is what the parable of Zacchaeus, which follows the story the Blind Man, brings out so clearly. The problem of Zacchaeus was this: he wanted to see Christ. Would he take the risk of being ridiculous or not? To be ridiculous is a lot more difficult than to be disapproved of, because when we are sharply disapproved of we can hide behind our own pride. We feel that we stand against the whole world, even if this world is so small that it is not even worth noticing. But to be laughed at, to be ridiculed, is something which is beyond the courage of most of us.

Can you imagine a bank manager in a small town climbing a tree in the midst of a big crowd, with all the boys whistling, pointing at him with their fingers, making cat-cries and the rest, just for the sake of meeting Christ? Well, that was the position of Zacchaeus, the rich man. But for him meeting Christ was so essential, such a question of death and life, that he was prepared to disregard the ridicule, the humiliation, attached to his action - and he saw Christ.

There are two ways out of our dependence upon human opinions and human judgements. We must either do what Zacchaeus did, accept humiliation because it is essential to be saved, or we can let our hearts be hardened, and accept the pride that will negate the judgement of others. There is no third way. There is only the spontaneous oscillation which we all experience, knowing what is right, knowing what is wrong, and never deciding for either right or wrong because whenever we turn to the wrong we are afraid of the judgement of God, while whenever we turn to the right we are afraid of the judgement of men. Pride or humility are the only two paths by which we can leave this situation. And then there is the problem of God's judgement. The story of Zacchaeus shows how we can oscillate between the judgement of men and the judgement of God.

Now comes the opportunity for another move. Isn't it time, when we are confronted with life and death, for us to judge ourselves and not be completely dependent upon others? We see this in the Publican and the Pharisee - the first, sharp, definite judgement which is both human and divine,

because both coincide. If we ask ourselves how it is possible that the Pharisee could be so proud in spite of knowing so much about God and things divine, how it was that the Publican could be so truly humble in spite of being simple, I think we can find the answer in this: the terms of reference for the Pharisee were found in the law, the letter of the law. One can always be right as far as the law and the letter is concerned. One can always fulfil rules and commandments. One can always have 'done one's duty' and feel irreproachable.

The terms of reference of the Publican, however, were different. He was not a good man. What he knew of the law was this: certain aspects of the law condemned him because he knew what he was like. Certain other aspects of the law he could use in order to extort whatever he wanted out of other people. The law for him was a powerful, cruel, hard instrument in his hands or in the hands of God. And as he knew life, he knew perfectly well that the only salvation from the law was human mercy, human compassion, a human approach and attitude to one another. That was the only thing that could save a debtor from prison or save an extortioner from the judgement of the magistrate: a human touch. And so his terms of reference were in tension between a law which was inexorable, implacable, always a power that could not be fulfilled because he was too weak for it and, on the other hand, a law that could be used with such cruelty against others - and then the human relationship that could redeem all.

The Publican's terms of reference were people, his neighbours, including that invisible neighbour, God. This is why he could stand at the threshold of the temple and beat his breast, though hopelessly: in spite of all the logic of things, he knew that in his world of hard, cruel, implacable men there were moments when all things become possible, for a man can be a man even when he is hardened and cruel. And so it was with God. The law was there to condemn him, but God was 'someone'. He was not only the law-giver. He was not only the one who made sure that the law is observed. He was free within his law to act with humanity. This knowledge made the Publican humble before God, because his terms of reference contained hope, and the object of his hope was mercy, pity, charity. This made all things possible, in spite of the fact that it is so humiliating to be loved and to be saved by love.

The same truth appears in another way in the next parable, that of the Prodigal Son. Here again we find two men, one who is righteous and another who is unrighteous. The Prodigal Son is in a way another aspect of the Publican, and the elder brother is the same as the Pharisee. But here we are confronted not only with the tension between a law that is objective, and therefore dead, and mercy, which is subjective because alive and personal, but we are confronted with the theme of sin itself. What does it mean to be in sin? It can be clearly defined in terms of the short conversation between the son and the father at the beginning of the parable. And if you want to put it in words more modern and cruder than the Gospel, it really amounts to this: 'Father, I want to live, and you stand in my way. As long as you are alive the goods are yours. Die, for all intents and purposes. Let us suppose that you are already dead. I have no time to wait until you die in fact. Let us agree that as far as I am concerned I have no father left, but I have his goods because I have inherited them'.

This is the sort of speech which we find, with the same or perhaps lesser hardness, on so many occasions between children and parents, between people who are related to one another in one way or another. It really involves saying: 'As a person you do not matter. You stand in my way. The only thing that is of value to me is what I can get out of you. And so that I may get all I can from you, you must surrender even your existence. You must accept not to be'. This is sin, sin with regard to God, and sin with regard to man. With regard to God we are happy to take everything he gives and then turn him out of our lives. We are happy to go into a strange country to spend all he has given, while denying his existence with the same ruthlessness with which, in Holy Week, the soldiers covered the eyes of Christ so he could not see, so that they would be able to laugh at him more freely.

The same is so often true of our relationships with people. And this is also sin. This is the very point: to rule the other out because he doesn't matter. What matters are things - and the use I can make of them. And then there is another aspect in this parable: hunger, distress, loneliness, all those things which we so hate in life, and yet which come to us as our only salvation, because as long as we are surrounded with comfort, we don't notice our true situation. We prove unable to move inward and to see that we are lonely in the midst of this crowd and that we are poor in the midst of all this richness. It is important for us to realise that all that comes our way which is bitter, which is hard, which is difficult, which we hate with all our greed and with all our fear - that is our salvation. To be deprived is essential for us. And if we are not deprived, we must learn to deprive ourselves to the point of becoming aware that we are face to face with the living God in the final, total nakedness and dereliction which is man's condition when he does not hide behind things. We misjudge our situation so badly in this respect.

There is a beautiful passage in the Tales of the Hassidim translated by Martin Buber, in which he tells about a man, a rabbi, who lived in appalling misery and yet every morning and every evening thanked God for his generous gifts. One of those who heard his prayer said to him, 'How can you be so hypocritical? Don't you see that God has given you nothing?' And he said, 'No, you are mistaken. God looked on me and thought, "This man, to be saved, needs hunger and thirst and cold and loneliness and illness and dereliction." And he has given me these things in abundance'.

This is the true, Christian attitude, the attitude of a believer for whom the soul really matters. And this is what the return of the Prodigal Son to himself shows us. It also shows us another thing. The Prodigal Son comes back, having rehearsed his confession, and says: 'I have sinned against heaven and against thee. I am no longer worthy to be called thy son. Let me be like the hired servants'. But the father does not allow him to say the last words.

Each of us can be a prodigal son, a prodigal daughter, an unworthy son, an unworthy daughter, an unworthy friend. What no one can do is to adjust himself to a relationship, however worthy, below his rank. No one who is an unworthy son can become a worthy hireling. We cannot step down from our birthright, from the right which love gave us in the first place. And therefore we are not to look for compromise and for legal readjustments with God and say, 'I can't give you my heart but I will behave well. I can't love you but I will serve you', and so forth. This is a lie, a relationship which God is not prepared to accept and will refuse to accept.

The last step on our way towards Lent is one which is shown to us in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. It sets before us the following problem: what are we going to judge and to be judged about? And the answer is absolutely clear. In all this process of judgement we may have thought that we will be judged on whether we have a deep knowledge of God, whether we are theologians, whether we live in the transcendental realm. Well, this parable makes it absolutely clear that God's question to us, before we can enter into any kind of divine reality, is this: have you been human? If you have not been human, then don't imagine that you will be able to become like God-become-man, like the God-Man Jesus, who is the measure of all things. This is very important, because the type of judgement which we are constantly making is a falsified judgement. We notice how pious we are, how much knowledge of God we have, questions belonging to the realm of what an English writer has called 'Churchianity' as contrasted with Christianity. But the question which Christ asks us is this: Are you human or sub-human? In other words, are you capable of love or not? I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was naked, I was in prison, I was ill. What did you do about it? Were you able to respond with your heart to my misery, were you able to respond at a cost and with all your humanity - or not?

At this point we must remember what we have said before concerning the Pharisee and the Publican. Christ does not ask us to fulfill the law. He will not count the number of loaves of bread and of cups of water and the number of visits we pay to hospitals and so forth. He will measure our heart's response. And this is made clear from the words of Christ in another part of St John's

Gospel, where he says, 'And when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, we are unprofitable servants'. The doing means nothing. We become human at the moment when, like the Publican, like the Prodigal Son, we have entered into the realm of broken-heartedness, into the realm of love which is a response both to divine love and to human suffering. This cannot be measured. We can never, on that level, say, 'I am safe. I will come to the judgement and be one of the sheep', because it will not be a question of whether or not we have accomplished the law, but whether this law has become so much ourselves that it has grown into the mystery of love. There, at that point, we will be on the fringe, on the very threshold of entering into that spring of life, that renewal of life, that newness of all things, which is Lent. We will have gone through all these stages of judgement, and will have emerged from blindness and from the law into a vision of the mysterious relationship which may be called 'mercy' or 'grace'. And we will be face to face with being human.

But we must remember that to be human does not mean to be 'like us' but 'like Christ'. With this we can enter Lent and begin to experience through the readings of the Church, through the prayers of the Church, through the process of repentance, that discovery of the acts of divine grace which alone can lead us towards growth into the full stature of the likeness of Christ. I have brought you to the gate. Now you must walk into it.

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