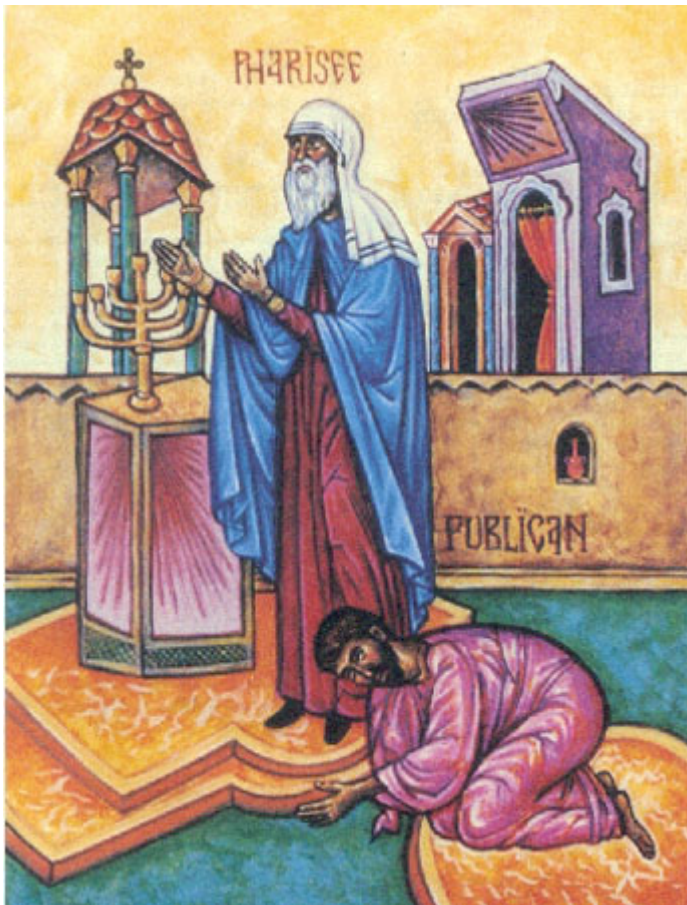


The Tax-collector and the Pharisee and the Lenten Triodion (Archimandrite Vassilios Papavassiliou)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



There is more to Lent than fasting, and there is more to fasting than food. This principle lies at the heart of the Lenten Triodion, the main hymnbook of Lent. Lent is without doubt the richest and most distinctive season of the ecclesiastical year. The Lenten services, the spiritual lessons of the Triodion and the biblical readings for the season invite us to simplify our lives and to immerse ourselves in the 'bright sadness' of repentance. Written for the devout Christian, the Triodion is full of warnings against pride and hypocrisy - the ultimate spiritual sins to which religious folk are so susceptible.

Orthodox Lent begins on 'Clean Monday', seven weeks before Pascha, when Orthodox Christians celebrate the Lord's Resurrection. But before Lent begins, it is announced in advance, and this preparation for Lent is made above all through the Lenten Triodion, which makes its appearance in the liturgical life of the Church three weeks prior to Lent, on the Sunday of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee. The hymns of the Triodion remain a regular feature of the Church's liturgical life until the end of Holy Week.

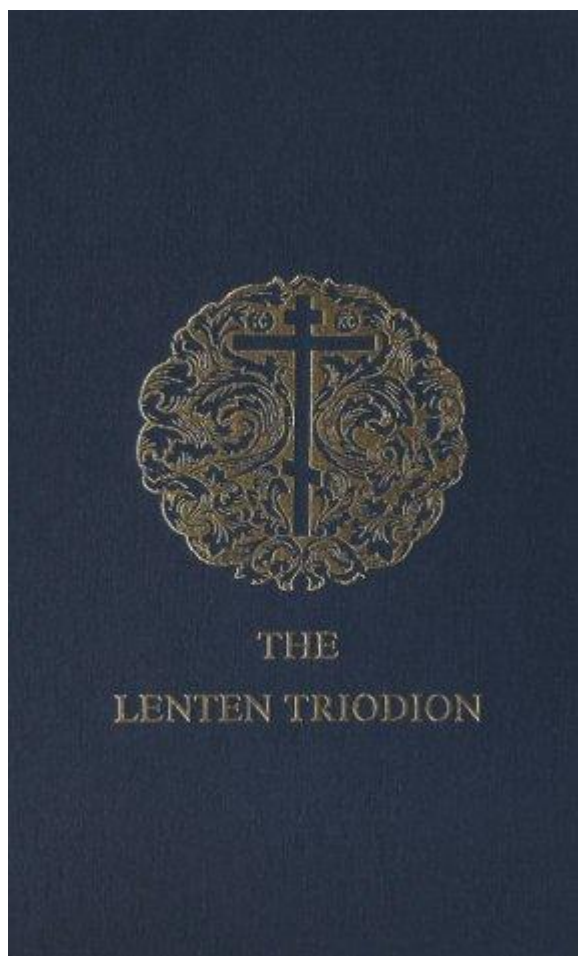
It is no coincidence that the announcement of Lent begins on the Sunday of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee. Not only the hymns of the Triodion, but also the appointed Gospel and Epistle Readings for the season, play an important part in preparing Orthodox Christians for Lent. The lessons of the entire liturgical life of the Church from this point warn Orthodox Christians to avoid hypocritical fasting, to fast spiritually as well as physically, to abstain from wrong-doing, from pride, from judging one another.

The first lesson is today's Gospel Reading, and the main hymn for the day echoes the Gospel lesson:

Let us flee the proud speech of the Pharisee; and let us learn the humility of the Tax Collector, as with groans we cry to the Saviour: Be merciful to us, for you alone are ready to forgive".

The warning to flee pride is given to us not only in words, but also in practical terms. On most Wednesdays and Fridays throughout the year, Orthodox Christians fast - that is, they abstain from meat and dairy, and usually fish, wine and oil also - but during the week following the Sunday of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee, these fast days are abolished. Many Orthodox Christians make the mistake of thinking that we are absolved of fasting during that week in order to gorge on meat and dairy before Lent begins, but this is not the reason at all. Indeed, if this were the reason, the Church would have appointed the following week - the week before Cheeseweek (when we begin abstaining from meat but continue to eat dairy as we prepare for the ascetic feats of Lent) - to abolish these fast days. The reason the Church abolishes the Wednesday and Friday fast the week after the Sunday of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee is to warn us to not imitate the Pharisee who boasts before God, "I fast twice a week." Thus the Church reminds us - not only through the lessons of the Gospel and of the Triodion, but also through its injunction to not fast in that week - that it is better to not fast and be humble than it is to fast and be proud.

Thus the Sunday of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee gives us the very first lesson of Lent: physical fasting is the means to an end, not the end itself. If our fasting makes us prideful and arrogant, we are better off not fasting at all.



The Lenten Triodion

This is something of which we are reminded time and again in the period leading up to Lent. We are reminded that fasting must be, above all, a fast from sin. Take for example this hymn, which is heard just a few days before Lent:

“In vain do you rejoice in not eating, O soul! For you abstain from food, but from passions you are not purified. If you have no desire for improvement, you will be despised as a lie in the eyes of God, you will be likened to evil demons who never eat! If you persevere in sin, you will perform a useless fast; therefore, remain in constant striving so as to stand before the Crucified Saviour, or rather, to be crucified with the One who was crucified for your sake”

Again we are reminded that fasting is not the be all and end all of Lent. If the fast is not a means to improving our spiritual lives, if we fast from food but not from sin, then we are no better than devils! The demons do not eat, but they are no closer to

God for it. This is why, only a week before Lent, we hear the lesson from St Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, "Food will not bring us closer to God" (1 Cor. 8:8). This is echoed in the Triodion:

"The Kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and abstinence with holiness".

Being aimed at the devout practicing Christian, the hymns of Lent never cease to re-iterate the warning that Christ gave to His apostles: "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt.5:20). We must fast not only from food but also from criticising and judging others, from slander and gossip, from pride and vanity. The Triodion spells this out quite plainly:

"While fasting physically, brethren, let us also fast spiritually. Let us loose every knot of iniquity. Let us tear up every unrighteous bond. Let us distribute bread to the hungry and welcome to our homes those who have no roof over their heads, so that we may receive great mercy from Christ our God".

"Let us observe a fast acceptable and pleasing to the Lord. True fasting is to put away all evil, to control the tongue, to forbear from anger, to abstain from lust, slander, falsehood and perjury. If we renounce these things, then is our fasting true and acceptable to God".

"Come, O faithful, and in the light let us perform the works of God; let us walk honestly as in the day. Let us cast away every unjust accusation against our neighbour, not placing any cause of stumbling in his path. Let us lay aside the pleasures of the flesh, and increase the spiritual gifts of our soul. Let us give bread to those in need, and let us draw near to Christ, crying in penitence: O our God, have mercy on us".

"The season of the holy Fast is now at hand. Let us begin it with good actions; for it is said, fast not for strife and debate".

These hymns are inspired by a stern warning given to us in the Old Testament (Isaiah 58: 4-7):

“If you fast for quarrels and fights, and smite the humble with your fists, why do you fast for me as you do today, for your voice to be heard in your cry? I did not choose this fast, nor a day for a person to humble his soul. Even if you bend down your neck like a ring, and spread under you sackcloth and ashes, you shall not because of this call it an acceptable fast. I did not choose such a fast, says the Lord. But untie every bond of iniquity, unfasten the knots of hard bargains, send the bruised away with remission, and cancel every unjust account. Break your bread for the hungry, and lead the poor who have no shelter into your house: if you see someone naked, clothe him, and you are not to disregard the relations of your own seed”.

It is significant that the day before Lent begins we hear this lesson from St Paul's Epistle:

“Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall”. (Rom. 14: 3-4)



Lenten Meal

While the Church invites us all to fast, it also warns those who fast to not judge those who don't; and those who do not fast to not judge those who do. Because while the Church offers a general rule of fasting to all (no meat, no dairy, and most of the time no fish, wine or oil) it is not realistic to expect everyone to be able to

fast with the same rigour. Different conditions of life and health play a part in one's ascetic effort. What is important is not how rigorously we fast, but to what extent, if any, does fasting improve our spiritual life, and whether we fast according to our own strength and ability. An elderly woman with many health problems cannot fast as rigorously as a young man in the peak of his physical condition, but that does not make the former's fasting less valuable than the latter's. The old woman may fast only from meat, while the young man abstains from dairy and fish also, but the old woman eats frugally and simply, gives what little money she has to the poor, spends many hours praying, and does not criticise or judge others; while the young man, all the while observing the dietary rules of the fast, gorges on soya cheese, crab, prawns and the like, spends money on himself rather than give to others, and yet criticises others for not fasting. Such a "fast" serves no spiritual purpose at all.

Therefore, the Triodion again gives us a stern warning about passing judgement on those who do not fast or who fast less rigorously than us.

"Consider well, my soul: do you fast? Do not despise your neighbour. Do you abstain from food? Do not condemn your brother"

This is why the season of the Triodion - the period of preparation for Lent - begins with a lesson in humility, with the Parable of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee. Lent is thus announced as a quest for humility, which is the beginning of true repentance, and the root and strength of the Lenten effort.