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Finding the Deep Heart during Great Lent (Archimandrite Zacharias Zacharou)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



The grace of God has gathered us together today at the heart of Great Lent in order to express to the Lord our longing for His salvation, for the acquisition of the spirit of wisdom and for understanding of His commandments.

Holy Scripture, however, warns us: 'It is impossible for a heartless man to purchase wisdom.' [1] What is the 'heart' for us as Christians, and what kind of man can be called 'heartless'?

The heart of every man is fashioned by God in a special and unique manner. [2] It is unrepeatable and makes up the core of the human hypostasis. [3] Man becomes truly great when he draws near to God with his 'deep heart' [4], because there, within him, is 'the place of spiritual prayer' [5] and the 'battle-ground of spiritual struggle'. [6] True theology and knowledge of God are inseparable from the sensation of the deep heart. This is why the word of God assures us that the 'hidden man of the heart' is 'of great price before God'. [7]



The calling of the Lord is addressed to man's heart, 'the spiritual centre of the person'[8] which has the ability to lay hold of eternity, so that he might 'recognise his Prototype - the Living God'.[9]

A man who cannot feel his heart has, in the place of the luminous dwelling-place of God, just a pump that sends blood to the body. He is heartless, he cannot acquire wisdom. Only when man has a divine and noetic sensation in his heart is he truly alive before God. Otherwise his nature is divided: his heart seeks one thing, his scattered mind another, while his unbridled body obstinately pursues the satisfaction of its needs and passions. When the mind is separated from the heart, it is dispersed through its senses into the created world, 'tossed to and fro, carried about with every wind'[10] of imagination and easily captivated by demonic energy and delusion. Without being guarded by the governing mind at its threshold, the heart remains hardened; its earth brings forth only evil thoughts, which drown the incorruptible seed of the word of God[11]. It becomes, then, a den of every vice. Sin, as a spiritual event, is committed secretly in the depth of man's heart.

If our body and our spirit are to become a place of the manifestation of the glory of God, so that we may truly celebrate our personal Easter, we need to find our deep heart. The mind scattered in vain and mindless cares must return and unite with

the 'body most interior to our body',[12] our heart.

The Holy and Immaculate Church, treasure house of gifts of the Holy Spirit, sets out the period of the Holy Fast as a light which dawns over and redeems the remaining time of our life. Great Lent is for us a great opportunity, a privilege, which God gives us to cooperate with him, in order to re-ignite the grace which we received through Holy Baptism and to quicken our heart.

This period helps us to offer our own small part to God, for example in the fulfilment of the commandment of fasting. Fasting humbles our body and spirit so as to make space in the heart for the visitation of grace. This grace unites us with the other members of the Church, so that we may also become partakers of the gifts of its stronger members, the Saints.

According to Father Sophrony, fasting refines the heart and makes it 'clairvoyant'[13] through grace and able to receive spiritual wisdom. Saint Silouan teaches in the same spirit that fasting is beneficial,[14] when combined with abstinence, watchfulness, stillness and other virtues. Its main power is, however, drawn from humility.

In the beginning of the healing process recommended to us by the Church during the Lenten period, the mind is gathered from the world in which it is dispersed through the senses and enters into the heart. The mind unites with the heart in a new vision: God becomes the centre of all things and man humbly turns towards Him.

The spirit of repentance dredges our depths and makes manifest that which is concealed within our heart. Then we see our true state as if through the eyes of God. Just as sin is committed in the depth of the heart, so repentance also occurs in the heart, the innermost place of our spirit. Repentance heals and strengthens our nature through the grace of God and gives birth within us to an uncontainable surge of longing for God.

During Great Lent, the Holy Church endeavours to instil and intensify in us a strong impetus towards repentance, through fasting, rich services inspiring contrition, prostrations, bending of the knees and all of her other exploits. The Church's purpose is to inspire burning prayer, which purges us from the passions and sows within us the holy pain of divine love, so that neither in our mind nor in our heart will there be left any other thought than hatred for the sin that so easily besets us and flaming desire for the Saviour God. The central point of such repentance is to keep the covenant which we made at our Baptism that, from now on, we will be

dead to sin and alive to His word and commandments.

During Holy and Great Lent the Church desires to make us partakers of the word of the Lord, 'I was dead and behold I am alive forevermore,' giving us the opportunity to receive a small taste of death through fasting, confession, giving alms and, more generally, through asceticism. By means of suffering during Lent, we become like unto and kindred to Christ Who is suffering^[15] in this world and the power of His Resurrection is imparted to us, so that we, as light-bearing children of the Church, may sing on the chosen and holy day of Easter: 'Yesterday I was buried with Thee, O Christ, today I rise with Thee.' In the measure in which we participate in the suffering and self-emptying of Christ, we shall also receive the wealth of His gifts and the grace of His Resurrection.

One further way in which we can find our deep heart during Great Lent is through the continual reading of Holy Scripture. The word of Christ is uncreated Divine Light, which is directed to the deep heart of man, the core of his hypostatic principle. First of all, in order that our heart may open to the word of Christ and receive the grace of repentance, we must have complete faith in the Divinity of Christ. Then the living word of Christ will fall into the hidden depth of our heart as a seed of love which gives birth in our soul to repentance surpassing the measure of ordinary religious conscience.^[16] This experience powerfully convinces us that the teaching of Christ exceeds the level of the ethical and is deifying. The evangelical teaching illumines our inner vision with the resplendence of the word of God and refines a spiritual sensation within our heart, so that from now on not one movement or thought escapes our attention. Abiding in the word of the Lord guides us to observe His Divine commandments and thus, to place ourselves on the way of the Lord, so that He, Who is Himself the Way, becomes our fellow traveller. If we abide in the evangelical word with thirst and fortitude, then, just like Luke and Cleopas, we shall acquire a 'heart which burns within us', ready to receive and recognise the Risen Lord by the fire and sweetness of His love.

The mind descends into the heart when it is crucified through the Gospel commandments. It is healed and unites with the heart. Overshadowed by grace, we are able to renounce all the visible things of the world and to become disciples of the spirit of the incorruptible love of Christ.

The union of the mind with the heart becomes possible through a crucifixion which occurs in two phases. In the first phase, according to the Apostle Paul, a great struggle is undertaken to escape the vanity of the world and enslavement to its lofty prototypes which are an abomination before God: 'the world is crucified unto

me'. In the second phase, all our effort is concentrated in surrendering ourselves completely to the will of God, uprooting the law of sin from our heart and freeing ourselves from our inner slavery: 'and I unto the world'.^[17] The spiritual battle continues until the Gospel word is inaugurated within us as the sole and eternal law of our being. Then we become the temple of God, and we bear within us as a guest, the Spirit of grace, no matter in which external circumstances we may live. All creation becomes for us a Church and a place of presentation before the Living God.^[18]

Father Sophrony discerned in these two stages, two degrees of spiritual freedom. The first degree is our renunciation of the world and relinquishment of power over others. The second degree is perfect freedom of heart which is essential if we are to stand immovable in the presence of the Lord. This is to 'unshackle oneself from the authority of others'.^[19] The perfection of man's freedom is his perfection as a person. This is our perfect fulfilment and our final purpose.

Saint Dorotheos of Gaza and Saint Gregory Palamas interpreted this passage of the Apostle Paul, 'The world is crucified unto me and I unto the world', applying it to the two stages of crucifixion in the life of the monk. Both Fathers also connect the first phase with the renunciation of the sin that so easily besets us in the world, and the second to the inner death of man to sinful passions, that is to say, to dispassion.

How can we avoid sin living in the world which 'lieth in wickedness'?^[20] It is possible only if we learn to live with our heart, accusing ourselves in prayer of repentance and keeping vigilance by invoking the name of the Lord. Through watchfulness, we will find a 'well of water'^[21] and light in the heart which attracts the mind. Malicious suggestions or images will not imprint themselves in the mind and heart, but will easily be despised, because the attraction of the inner man towards the heart will be stronger than any external impressions: 'Because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.'^[22] Without watchfulness, grace cannot be retained in the heart. Spiritual mourning keeps us in constant contact with the Spirit of Life, until the grace of God that accumulates in the heart reaches its fullness. Finally, our new birth in the Holy Spirit is realised.

Christ through His Cross and Resurrection fulfilled the great commandment which He received 'of His Father',^[23] and gave to the faithful 'grace upon grace'.^[24] The person who invokes the Name of Jesus is initiated into the mystery of the Cross and the Resurrection of Christ, and his heart is brought to life and becomes a temple of Divinity. The godly invocation of the Name of Christ quickens the presence of the Eternal God in our heart and imparts to us an especial energy, like a new life which

permeates all our being. The repetition of the Name of Christ not only ceases to be burdensome, but leads us to an increasing plenitude of love and wisdom. Our eyes are opened so that we continually discover new mysteries of the way of Christ and of His unfathomable providence within our everyday life. We are enriched with the experience of eternity.

The season of fasting is a time of work on our heart and a school of voluntary death. The way of the Lord passes through the death on the Cross and the descent into the netherworld of hell unto the life-bearing Resurrection. As we take on voluntary suffering, accepting the trials which the providence of God allows in our life without grudging and with gratitude, we explore through faith the unspeakable mystery of Divine Love, which reaches for our sake unto the depths of hell. Our knowledge of the mystery of Christ will never be complete, if our experience does not contain also the descent into hell.

Faith in the Resurrection of Christ and hope in our own resurrection inspire us to live in accordance with the commandments of God, dead to the will of our flesh. Thus our deep heart will emerge and we will know from experience that we have been transported 'from death to life'.

Only that work which we have wrought within our heart will accompany us into eternity. If we cleanse our heart in this life, then in accordance with the promise of God, we will see His Countenance: 'Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.'[25]

The tragedy of contemporary man is that he lives outside his heart. He thinks, works, speaks, and even loves and prays, outside his heart. This period of Great Lent gives us Christians a great opportunity to enter into our heart and return to it like the prodigal son to his father's house. The vision of our inner hell in the light of the holiness of God and the fervour of His spotless love, provokes in our soul an unrestrainable desire 'to break out of the chains of our fall'[26], and surrender entirely to the God of light and love, who comes to give life and not death. Then the voice of the Lord will resound in our heart: 'My son, give me thine heart'[27] and the same will proclaim, 'Thou art my son, this day have I begotten thee.'[28]

Through His living word the Lord Jesus sowed an 'incorruptible seed' and by the grace of His Spirit He granted us the gift of adoption, giving birth to the Church and making us children of His Resurrection. The victory of Christ over the last enemy, death,[29] is accomplished in our deep heart and there the triumph of the Orthodox faith also takes place. In other words, grace will imprint upon our heart the image of the Lord Jesus and will make us heirs of His victory over death.

Let us give thanks to God, my beloved fathers and brethren, Who has given us this period of Great Lent stirred up by His grace, in order to help us to find our deep heart and to enter into the living presence of Christ, risen from the dead. Christ, the Bridegroom of the Church, knocks on the door of our heart seeking the perfect union of our soul with His Holy Spirit. Every time that we draw nigh and enter into the wondrous presence of the Lord Jesus is our own Easter. Let no one who has faith remain outside of the bridal chamber of Christ, but having lawfully experienced the spiritually beneficial period of Lent, as a time of renewal and a landmark of grace, may we all feast an eternal Easter.

[1] See Prov. 17:16 (LXX).

[2] Ps. 33:15.

[3] See Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), We Shall See Him as He Is, trans. Rosemary Edmonds, p. 84; 196.

[4] Ps. 64:6.

[5] See Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), On Prayer, trans. Rosemary Edmonds, p. 11.

[6] Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), Saint Silouan the Athonite, trans. Rosemary Edmonds, p. 10.

[7] 1 Peter 3:4.

[8] See Archimandrite Sophrony, We Shall See Him, p. 174.

[9] We Shall See Him, p. 194.

[10] See Eph. 4:14.

[11] Cf. Heb. 6:8; 1 Peter 1:23.

[12] Saint Gregory Palamas, The Triads, 1, ii, 3, p. 43.

[13] We Shall See Him, p. 90.

[14] Archimandrite Sophrony, Saint Silouan, p. 471.

[15] Cf. Acts 26:23.

[16] Saint Silouan, p. 194.

[17] Gal 6:14

[18] Saint Silouan, p. 294.

[19] We Shall See Him, p. 115.

[20] 1 John 5:19.

[21] John 4:14.

[22] 1 John 4:4.

[23] Cf. John 10:18.

[24] John 1:16

[25] Matt. 5:8.

[26] We Shall See Him, p. 22.

[27] Prov. 23:26.

[28] Ps. 2:7, Heb. 1:5; 5:5.

[29] 1 Cor. 15:26