

Kindling Holy Zeal

In this article, Fr. Jeffrey encourages us to keep bright the fire we received at Pascha!

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice. Let the whole world, visible and invisible, keep the feast. For Christ is risen, our eternal joy." (From the 1st Ode of the Paschal Canon)

The sheer brightness of the feast of Pascha is something that everyone remembers; the way the darkness of the Church, long before the rising of the sun, is rapidly overcome by waves of light. The Church is bright, the hymns are bright, and our faces are bright.

I recall telling a friend once after Vespers on the Sunday of Pascha, that, for once in my life, I found it impossible to be unhappy.

But by Tuesday of that same week, I felt differently. All that joy was more than I could stand for any length of time. The intensity of Holy Week, its pleasing and graceful tautness of soul and body, slackened, and I was like a flabby string on a violin. No more than a few days earlier I had found it impossible to be unhappy, and now it seemed impossible not to be somewhat sad, or worse, indifferent. I wondered where all the brightness had gone, or if, perhaps, it was only an illusion?

But we know that the light of Christ is one that never wanes. Clearly, if I had found myself engulfed by a shadow, it was not a fault of His. Every Sunday throughout the year is a manifestation of that same unwaning stream of Paschal brightness and joy into our lives, but we, as I was only days after Pascha, are often unable to receive it. We waver, even as the Lord continues to offer light and life for the life of the world.

And it seems that if progress is to be made for us in abiding in that joy and life, then we have to learn to remember and build upon the efforts of the Fast, so that we can begin to move from glory to glory, rather than from glory to disgrace, or from brightness to shadow.

So I have reflected on one aspect of spiritual life that we are taught by the fast - the need for zeal - and offer it for the reader's consideration.

Throughout Great Lent we are called to be watchful, to be alert, to shrug off the weight of sleep. That is, we are called to manifest some zeal in our lives when it comes to seeking after God, some fervor, some passion; and to actively oppose anything within ourselves that would snatch away His gifts from us.

St. Isaac of Syria illuminatingly describes zeal as a watchdog attribute of the soul. If a dog has gotten hold of a steak, we know what will happen if we try to tear it from his mouth. Furthermore, if even a bird flies by overhead to disturb our yard, or a man passes by on the street, a watchdog immediately howls in protest. We have this same vigilance, and watchful character within our souls, but oftentimes it is turned, like the

dogs, towards guarding the food in our mouths, or various pleasures of the body and nothing more. But St. Isaac suggests that this aspect of our soul can and should be directed towards spiritual life. So that any perverse thought, any slip into stagnant sleepiness, would be greeted by snarls and howls of protest from within ourselves. Further he puts forward two ways that zeal comes about in the soul; 1) by fear of losing what we have; 2) by increasing our longing for more brightness.

Fear of Losing What We Have

This is the healthy fear that the hymns of Holy Week inspire in us: the constant mindfulness that all could be lost or gained in a moment. Judas is in attendance at the luminous mystical supper and yet in a moment is darkened and betrays the Lord, and he is ultimately unable to overcome his despair. The thief on the cross, condemned for his sins, in a moment enters paradise. And Cassiani, unlike Eve, who ran and hid herself from the footsteps of the Lord in paradise, goes to anoint the feet of God made flesh, and in that moment receives forgiveness. We have to hold on to the moment of grace, to be afraid, knowing that while no one can take it away from us, we just may give it up by negligence; like Judas, captive to the love of money; and like the scribes and Pharisees, asleep in the false-security of their pride. When we bring these characters constantly before our mind it evokes in us a saving fear that produces zeal, watchfulness, and a jealous guarding of the brightness of the feast. So we increase this saving zeal by considering that each day is the day of salvation, that there may not be time to turn back if we go to sleep in sin. While we have the light, we should be active in it, pursuing the Lord and not slackening. Indeed, St. Isaac says, "This [fear] is divine, it is a good anxiety, and its affliction and agony are from God's providence." (Ascetical Homilies, 55)

Increasing Our Longing

"Now the second cause of strengthening and enkindling the dog [of zeal] is when desire for virtue increases in the soul. For the more this desire increases in the soul, the more natural zeal for virtue becomes inflamed." (St. Isaac, Ascetical Homilies, 55) To increase our desire we need only recall our first love. We need to remember the light that emerges from the tomb, and how our soul was filled with such sweetness by its rays; to recall that while virtue appears hard, whenever we have embraced it we have found it to be a joy in the end; while on the other hand, sin appeared sweet in the beginning but ended in suffering. We reclined in sin and found ourselves pinned by its heaviness to our couch. We withheld our cash from the poor, but bill collectors took it away anyway; and a deadening, rather than quickening, anxiety gnawed at our soul. But the Lord comes to us and says, "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest." That is, all you who are weary and worn down by the course, heavy, and sluggish pleasures of sin. Come, take up the cross and turn your zeal towards following me, for, "my yoke is easy, and my burden light."

Let us remember how He first loved us, and His love will kindle holy zeal in our hearts, enabling us to hold firmly to the resurrected Christ, our eternal joy.

+Fr. Jeffrey