

## Cheesefare Sunday

“For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Matt. 6:21)

Dear brothers and sisters!

With these words the Lord addresses not only His disciples and apostles, but all those who listen to His teaching. With these words He wants to reach every human heart, the heart of every one of us, so that we not only listen to or read His teaching, but also act on His words.

Cheesefare Sunday opens the door to the Great Fast. After it, we begin a forty-day spiritual journey to the feast of the Resurrection of Christ. So today, we are entering a time of spiritual action, through which we seek to heal our relationship with God, with others, and with ourselves. This is why Cheesefare Sunday is also known as Forgiveness Sunday in our Byzantine Tradition.

The Great Fast is a time of general reconciliation and forgiveness. Christians apologize and forgive each other. The word “forgive” is used 43 times in the Gospels, including the Savior’s words on the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” Each time we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we say not only “Our Father,” but also, “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Not only today, but throughout Lent, and indeed throughout our entire life, forgiveness is a condition of salvation: “If you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

What is the original meaning of the rite of forgiveness that we celebrate today? In the biography of Saint Mary of Egypt written down in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, we learn about Zosima, a monk living in a very strict monastery near the Jordan River and indirectly about the Lenten practices of monks in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. It is in fact through Zosima that we even know of St. Mary’s life in the desert, for it was Zosima who encountered her in the desert one Lent while he himself was praying and fasting in the desert. Mary asked him to bring her the Most Holy Eucharist each year on Holy Thursday, so that she could partake of the Holy Mysteries. It was on his third visit to her that he found that she had died, and he buried her body.

But why was it that Zosima was wandering around the desert rather than praying in his monastery? It was a custom in this monastery in which Zosima lived, that in the first week of the Great Fast, after the liturgy, all partook of the Immaculate Body and Blood of the Lord and

ate sparingly some fasting food. Then all gathered in the church, and after prostrating themselves in humble prayer, the monks said goodbye to one another, and each one bowed and asked the abbot for a blessing on his coming penitential exercises.

The monastery gates were then opened, and the monks, singing the psalm “The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom I will fear,” went out into the desert beyond the Jordan River. Only one or two monks would remain in the monastery, not to protect property, for there was nothing to steal, but so that the church would not be without worship. Each departing monk took with himself only a tiny amount food as each thought appropriate for his own bodily needs. One might take a little bread, while another some figs. Some took dates or water-soaked wheat. Some took nothing with them, eating only the roots of desert grasses.

After crossing the Jordan, everyone went off in different directions and knew nothing of each other’s activities, about how the others fasted or what spiritual exercises they undertook. If one of the monks saw that another was approaching him, he quickly went the other way and continued alone in constant prayer and fasting. Thus, the monks fasted throughout Lent and only returned to the monastery the week before Pascha, in order to celebrate the Solemn Entry of Jesus Christ into Jerusalem. When the monks arrived back at the monastery, none of the brothers asked the others how they had their spent time in the desert or what they had done. Each had as his witness only his own conscience. Such was the nature of this penitential season for these early Christian monks.

So, dear believers! Tomorrow, the first day of the Great Fast, is a time of grace in our lives, a time of repentance, a time of reflection on our own lives and souls. We must strive to avoid offending each other, for in the eyes of God such is the best kind of fasting. Let us repent of our sins, beat our chests like the publican, and go to Christ like the prodigal son. Then Christ will enter our hearts as He once entered the house of the publican Zacchaeus. “Behold, I stand at the door and knock,” says Christ. Let us open the door to Him, not lock Him out, “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”