

FORGIVENESS SUNDAY
“The night is far gone, the day is at hand”
Cheesefare Sunday
By Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev
March 1, 1998
Moscow, Church of the Holy Greatmartyr Catherine

“*The night is far gone, the day is at hand*” (Rom. 13:12). With these words of the apostle Paul, which we heard today at the Divine Liturgy, the Church leads us into Great Lent. Before it begins we call on everyone to forgive and to ask forgiveness from those who we have willingly or unwillingly offended.

What is forgiveness?

To forgive someone is sometimes easy and sometimes it is very difficult. As a rule, it is easier to forgive everyone who is not among our immediate circle of acquaintances. It is much more difficult to forgive those few people who are near us. Perhaps there is one person who is like a *thorn in the flesh*, like an *angel of satan* (2 Cor. 12:7), who poisons our life. Sometimes we say: “I am prepared to forgive everyone except for one person, who has done too much evil to me.” However, until that time when we forgive that one person, who stands on the path between us and God, blocking our access to God because we are not reconciled with him - until then the night for us will not be far gone and the day will not be at hand.

Concerning the night — this is when we remember offenses against us, when the worm of remembering evils gnaws at our heart, when the memory of the damage done does not allow us to sleep in peace. And the day — this is when we are at peace with everyone and ready to forgive even those people who wounded us so deeply, who so deeply offended us, that we do not have the human strength in order to make peace with them. In those instances, the Church calls on us to ask God that He would make a miracle, transfigure our soul, and give us the strength to forgive those who have offended us who, according to human standards, we don't have the strength to forgive on our own.

Today, on Forgiveness Sunday, we are expected to forgive those whom we have offended and caused evil. We are guilty before many — before each other; before our neighbors. Often, people in the same family, for years, cannot make peace with each other. It also happens that people working together in the same place do not speak to each other for a long time and don't greet each other, because they are unable to make peace with each other. But for as long as there is no reconciliation, the night will not be far gone, and the day will not be at hand. If we are unable and incapable of recognizing how we have offended other people, then let us ask God to reveal to us what it is that we said, or what it is that we did, that makes it necessary for us to ask forgiveness from our neighbors.

We ask forgiveness not only from our neighbors, but today we also ask forgiveness from God himself, because we have not lived as He has commanded; because the power of God is not revealed to the world through us; because being Christians, by our acts we often behave worse than those who do not believe in God, worse than pagans; because God's love does not pour out from us to our neighbors; because we are unfaithful to the Divine commandments and because there is an abyss between how we are and how we should be. For all of this we ask forgiveness from God.

Today we are not only called upon to ask forgiveness from God but to “forgive God” for everything that, according to our human standards, seems to be unjust. Isn't it true, that at the moment of some kind of catastrophe, some kind of downfall or ruin, at that moment, when something like that happens, with which we are unable to be reconciled, we ask God, “Where are You? How can You allow this?” An example could be if someone close and infinitely dear to us were to die in the prime of life, unexpectedly, as if God “snatched” him from us without warning. Having endured such a shock, a person can withdraw from God and harbor a grudge against Him, having lost trust in Him. Then, a person begins to think of God not as a merciful and loving Father, but as a Ruler Who is cruel, capricious and unpredictable in His actions. In

place of love there is terror. It happens that the wound lingers for years and the shadow of mistrust of the person towards God remains. However, for as long as we do not make peace and reconcile ourselves with everything that God has done in our relationship with Him, no matter how bitter or painful, for as long as we do not say like Job: *“The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord”* (Job 1:21), — the night will not be far gone and the day will not be at hand.

Let us consider that our earthly life, from the human perspective — is completely not the same from the Divine perspective: we do not see our life the same way that God sees it. Often, the Lord expects from us much more than we expect from ourselves. It is for this reason that God tests us in ways that seem cruel and unjust, but in actual fact are enlightening, beneficial and salvific.

Let us consider as well, that our earthly life is given to us only once: we don't have the ability to first live through it as if it were like a rough draft, and later on to live the final copy. Everything that we do not succeed in doing today, we will not be able to do forever. Thus, we are called upon to reconcile with each other and with God today. And then already today our life will be transfigured, already today the sun will shine for us, and the night will be far gone and the day will be at hand..

Translated by Archpriest Peter Olsen