

SERMON - 4th Sunday of Great Lent - Jesus heals a possessed man, April 7, 2019

In today's Gospel on the 4th Sunday of the Great Fast we hear about a boy who is convulsed with a demon. The boy's father asks the Lord to cast the demon from his son. Jesus replies by saying, "If you believe, all things are possible to him who believes." The father replies with tears and says, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief!" St. Theophan the Recluse comments, "Who can boast of perfect faith, and who, therefore, does not need to pray, 'Help, O Lord, mine unbelief?' If only the full force of faith were in us, our thoughts would be pure, our feelings holy, and our deeds God-pleasing. Then the Lord would heed us like a father his children, and no matter what came to our heart—and what comes to a person in this state could only be pleasing to the Lord—we would receive everything without refusal or delay." Therefore, brothers and sisters, it is abundantly clear that none of us have such an audience before God that our thoughts are pure and whatever we ask of God proceeds from a pure heart and is answered immediately by the Lord. We all have instead weak faith and an impure heart and it behooves all of us to increase the strength of our faith. We do this by asking the Lord to help us with our unbelief and lack of faith. In other words, we increase our faith by prayer. The Lord further reveals, in this Gospel, not only the necessity and power of prayer, but the necessity and power of fasting. Prayer and fasting go hand in hand, and you cannot have one without the other. If you fast but do not pray, or if you pray and do not fast, then your attempts to increase the purity of your mind and heart are in vain. The attempts of the disciples to cast out the demon from the boy are powerless and futile. The Lord tells the disciples that their attempts are lacking in power because "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting." The mere desire of the disciples and their verbal attempts to cast out the demon have no power because they do not accompany their attempts with prayer and fasting. The disciples, therefore, have no power, and their minds and hearts have not been cleansed and purified. Instead of having pure minds and hearts, their souls are muddled by the passions and sin. Prayer and fasting is a continuous cycle in the life of the Christian, because it is a lifelong struggle to purify our hearts and minds. St. Seraphim of Sarov tells us that the Christian who does not pray or fast is no Christian at all. Great Lent *par excellence* is the time when all Orthodox Christians increase their struggles and increase their prayers and fast more strictly than at any other time during the year. Through increasing prayer and fasting the filth within us is revealed. Only by praying and fasting in a serious and steady manner do the cobwebs and shadows fall away from the eyes of our hearts and only then can we see ourselves for who we really are. It is a startling revelation when the truth of who and what we are is revealed to us, because without prayer and fasting we have a distorted and completely false self-image. It follows, therefore, that when we have sufficiently prepared ourselves by self-examination accompanied by prayer and fasting that the next step is to go to Confession, repent and receive forgiveness from the Lord. Only then can we make a fresh new start. That is why it is the practice for every Orthodox Christian to go to Confession during Great Lent, and not only during Great Lent, but during every Fast, and not only during every Fast, but as often as we would dare to approach the Holy and Precious Body and Blood of our Lord in the Holy Mystery of the Eucharist. The boy who has a demon symbolizes each and every one of us. We are all possessed by a multitude of demons. When we do not struggle in a spiritual way, we are not even aware of the demons within us but accept them as natural and normal. When we pray, fast and repent, then not only are the demons within us revealed to us, but they become powerless and are driven away from us. Until we can see and reject the demons that have taken hold of us, we cannot have a pure heart or a pure mind. The Great Fast that we are currently in is a great gift and mercy to us from God. The best way to thank God for this gift is to take advantage of it and the opportunities given to us by it. May God help and inspire all of us to do so for the salvation of our souls and for true union with Christ our Savior. May we all reap the wonderful and joyous benefits that await those who love God and do everything in their power to know God and to unite ourselves with Him, our one true God, our one true love, our one true desire. Amen!