

SERMON - Lent is Approaching, Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee, February 9, 2020

Lent is approaching, and we have already entered the cycle of preparatory Sundays before the beginning of Great Lent. Are we preparing for Lent? Are we changing our mindset and gearing our thoughts and plans for Great Lent, or are we still just going about our lives right now as business as usual? I would invite all of you to start preparing for Lent right now. Right now is a good time to start planning your menu. It would be a good idea if you thought now about when will be the last time that you will purchase meat and dairy products and start purchasing vegetables, fruits and vegetarian fare. The first week of Great Lent we have services in church every day. Like a racehorse in the gate anticipating the start of a race, we should begin the race running at top speed. Start planning now to see which services you will make a real effort to attend during the first week of Lent, and every week thereafter, and during Holy Week as well. There is no better time than now to look at the calendar and make our plans. Right now we should already be thinking about Confession and we should already have an idea of when we plan to go to Confession. Don't put it off until the very last week or the very last minute, or perhaps not even go at all. Our Lord taught us the need to pray and to fast. After His baptism, He ascended the mountain, secluded himself in solitary silent prayer for forty days and ate nothing. When the disciples could not cast out the demon from the demoniac, Jesus reveals to them that "this kind cannot come out except by prayer and fasting." When St. Paul was baptized and became a Christian, he spent three years in Arabia before he went to Jerusalem (Galatians 1:18). St. Paul, like Jesus, spent his time in prayer, fasting and repentance, preparing himself for the ministry to serve Christ. Why all this prayer, fasting, silence and repentance? The body is meant to be a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). If we overindulge and pamper the body (overeat, indulge in drunkenness, eat a lot of meat and fatty food, do not get enough exercise or physical activity and become lazy), then our spirit and the light of Christ within us becomes dulled and remote. We are more inclined to sin, having overindulged our carnal passions, and the ability to resist temptations to sin becomes practically impossible. The sharpness of our mind becomes dulled, and it is very difficult to understand and see the truth. On the wall in the *trapeza* (monastic refectory) of Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville are inscribed the words of St. Isaac the Syrian, "Words are tools of this life, but silence is the mystery of the age to come." We will not find God in noise and distractions. We will find God only in peaceful quietude filled with thoughts of prayer and contemplation on the word of God. During Lent, put away the video games and shut off the TV and the ipod, or whatever it is you and your children use to listen to music. Lent is not the time for parties, dancing and celebrations. Lent is the time for quietness, prayer and fasting. When Pascha comes, then the time for celebrating will come.

Great Lent isn't the only time during the year that we should be practicing this. Every fasting period in the church we should be doing the same thing. Most Wednesdays and Fridays in the year are fast days, and on those days we should do the same thing as well. In addition, whenever we plan to receive Holy Communion, we should spent the evening before by preparing ourselves with prayer and fasting and already entering into the right mindset and spirit to receive the Body and Blood of our Savior. Non-fast days do not give us a green light for overindulgence. We should always practice Christian moderation in all things and at all times, as well as Christian modesty and piety. My first day at Iona College, the freshman class was told that we would get out of college what we put into it. I never forgot those wise words. Brothers and sisters, we will get out of Lent only what we put into it. If we put in little or nothing, then we will benefit little and get little or nothing. If we put in our whole selves, then the prize will be great and we will gain much. Brothers and sisters, the time of Lent is a gift from God for our salvation. Let us not disdain or squander this sacred gift and this sacred and special time of the year. Let us keep Great Lent in a serious and truly sacrificial way with our eyes on the prize, so that when the time comes, we can with the utmost joy and spiritual benefit greet each other with "Christ is Risen! Indeed He is Risen!" Amen.

