

4TH SUNDAY OF GREAT LENT ~ ST. JOHN OF THE LADDER (CLIMACUS)
The Healing of a Boy with a Mute Spirit
Mark 9:17-31

By Archpriest Peter Olsen,
St. Basil's Russian Orthodox Church, Watervliet, NY, April 14, 2024

Who is the Devil, and who are the demons, and where do they come from? The account of creation is found in the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis. Everything that God created is listed in great detail, but we do not see the Devil in this list. In the third chapter of Genesis someone appears who is called "the serpent," who tempts the first human beings, and they succumb to this temptation. Although he is not called the Devil, we understand that the serpent was the Devil. The theology of the understanding of the Devil is based on Holy Scripture, and was developed by the Church Fathers during the era of the Ecumenical Councils. The theology states that the Devil was once one of the angels and that he was good. Having free choice like all of the angels, he chose evil, fell from heaven, and became God's adversary. Along with him, a certain number of other angels fell the same way, and they are who we refer to as "the demons." The meaning of the name "Devil" is "Liar," or "Deceiver."

We listened to the account today in the holy Gospel about a boy who is possessed by a demon and is healed by our Savior. At first the Disciples try to cure the boy, but they are unable. The most important part of healing is not merely the physical health of the body, but health of *both* soul and body. In other words, true healing means salvation, and salvation includes the soul and the body. It is impossible for us to be saved without having faith and without praying. When the Disciples later came to Jesus and asked Him why they were unable to cast out the demon, He replied that "this kind cannot be driven out by anything but by prayer and fasting." Now we are given the complete list of the three essential components without which it is impossible to defeat the Devil ~ faith, prayer, and fasting.

The Disciples having failed to cast out the demon, the father of the boy now kneels before our Savior and says, "If you can do anything, have pity on us and help us." When the father says "if you can," this is an indication of his lack of faith. Naturally Jesus has power over the demon and can easily cast the demon out of the boy. However, Jesus' love and mercy is so great, that he does not only want physical healing for the boy, he wants both the boy and the father to be saved. I have already explained that three essential requirements for salvation are faith, prayer, and fasting. When the father says "if you can" to Jesus, there is a problem, because the father is indicating that he has a weak faith. Jesus encourages the father to have faith by stating that all things are possible to him who believes. The father responds by stating "I believe! Help my unbelief!" Only after the father makes this proclamation does Jesus heal the boy.

This is a lesson for all of us. Faith, prayer, and fasting. Having reached the 4th Sunday of Great Lent, hasn't our Lenten activities up until now consisted primarily of these three things: faith, prayer and fasting? Is there anyone among us who can say that they already have sufficient faith and does not need to have a stronger faith? Can't we all sincerely pray like the father of the boy, "I believe! Help my unbelief!" When it comes to prayer, can't we all honestly say that there is room for improvement in our prayer life? And finally the question of fasting, Isn't it the same thing with fasting as well, can't we all say that we can do a better job of fasting? The Holy Gospel has given us an illustration today of what happens when our faith is weak, or when we don't pray or fast. This Gospel reading is not meant to criticize anyone, judge anyone, or make anyone feel bad about themselves. Quite the opposite. I think that we should first thank God for the faith that we *do* have ~ we wouldn't be here today if we did not have faith. When we thank God, let us not thank Him with pride like the Pharisee, but let us thank Him with humility and repentance, like the publican. We should thank God for the prayers that we *do* say ~ aren't we praying here in church today? And fasting, shouldn't we thank God for whatever way we keep the fast? And if we don't keep the fast at all, then let the purpose of today's Gospel reading be for us an inspiration and encouragement to begin fasting. Does it make sense to deprive ourselves of the benefits that can be received by fasting? And having thanked God for our faith and for the prayers that we have said, now let us be inspired and encouraged by today's Gospel to develop a stronger faith and to develop a better prayer life. Just like the father and mother who want to see their children do the things which are good for them, our heavenly Father also wants to see us do what is good, because we are all his children and he loves us.

Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev) said the following in a sermon: "The three weapons we have – faith, prayer, and fasting - defeat the demons around us, of which there are many. They may not be as visible as they were in ancient times, when demons possessed people, when possessed people walked around

the cities, shouting in different voices. Now the demons have learned to act differently. They influence a person through the mass media, through the Internet, through various soul-corrupting propaganda, through the fact that sin is legalized, raised to the norm, and through much more. These demonic attempts are especially dangerous for young people who are not yet strong in the faith. That is why we always pray especially hard for children and young people. That is why the Church should make special efforts to ensure that children and young people do not stray from God, do not succumb to the influence of demonic forces, and maintain a strong faith that will be useful to them for the rest of their lives until a very old age.” 1

Now, more than ever, we need faith, prayer, and fasting. Amen.

1. From the website for “The Russian Orthodox Church Department for External Relations” (in English). Excerpt from a homily given by Metropolitan Hilarion, “Many things in a person’s life depend on faith,” August 29, 2021.

